

INDIGENOUS BEST PRACTICES AND LEARNINGS: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

By Lennard Joe

Growing up in the Nicola Valley on the Shackan Reservation, it seems like only yesterday that I was envisioning a career in forestry but looking back I am surprised that it has been over 25 years. As a registered professional forester and graduate of the University of British Columbia with a BSc in Natural Resource Conservation, I am grateful for the friendships I developed during those early days within the learning institutions of college and university, as many of my colleagues became my network in the forest industry who play a part for Indigenous involvement and integration within the forestry sector.

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It is hard to imagine that Indigenous peoples had little to no involvement in forestry until the 1990s, but it is true in most cases throughout BC. Sure, we had minor opportunities in silviculture and harvesting operations but there was nothing in the form of tenures or fibre management capacity within the forest industry or ministry offices. While I was attending UBC, I recall coming home and sitting in the Tribal office with our administrator discussing what I was taking in school and we talked about the Band owning woodlots and the few silviculture slashing jobs that members were doing. That was when I realized we had very little presence in the forest industry and were doing very little to become more involved. One of the key missing elements was that we did not have the capacity to inject ourselves into acquiring tenures and becoming effective managers of the land within the bounds of the acts and regulations of the *BC Forest Act*.

Since the early 2000s, Indigenous peoples have become more present in almost every facet of the forest industry. The number of registered professional foresters and registered forest technicians

with Indigenous backgrounds is growing as more are being attracted to the industry. One of the main reasons is that forestry is an integral part of many of our rural communities and it provides great employment opportunities with long-term job security right in our backyard. Access to forest tenures has also increased, which has allowed Bands and individuals to invest in logging and hauling equipment.

Today, Indigenous peoples are heavily integrated within all aspects of the forest industry; we are investors and owners of large silviculture, harvesting and log hauling operations. Currently,

Indigenous peoples hold approximately 10 per cent or 7.7 million cubic metres per year in some form of a Forest and Range Agreement and are pushing for more. Some tie their volume to the Forest Consultation and Revenue Sharing Agreements (FCRSA) to generate additional income from stumpage revenue sharing with the Province. Indigenous peoples are utilizing this increased presence as a bridge to access opportunities that can be provided by the Province and industry in the form of fibre development, management and harvesting operations, and in exchange, the licensees create increased certainty to access and purchase Indigenous tenures at fair market prices to apply to their annual fibre flow to milling operations.

Past and recent court cases now recognize that Indigenous rights and values must be taken into account through forest licence tenure programs. Consultation with Indigenous Tribes and Bands is required, which has resulted in a referral process that is followed within each forest district throughout the province.

It is in the best interest of all parties to invest in one another and develop strong working relationships. The Province has been working hard on reconciliation and has developed a government-to-government approach with Bands and Nations throughout BC. Licensees and many Bands recognize the importance of relationships as it can bring about some measure of certainty to moving their allocated volumes as well as being able to purchase additional volume for their milling operations from Indigenous tenures. Like major licensees, Indigenous tenure holders have learned to use replaceable tenures as a form of currency on which they can borrow or attract investment and have recently advocated for an increase in tenure in order to secure more opportunities for success.

Fibre security by having long-term, replaceable tenures is not worth much if you don't have the certainty that you can get your volume successfully across a scale. This is true whether you are an Indigenous licensee who is a market logger or a major licensee who needs Indigenous consent to move your own volume to its milling facility. The reduction of the allowable annual cut (AAC) throughout most of the province in response to the mountain pine beetle epidemic has reduced the volume in many of the Interior forest districts, making every cubic metre of fibre valuable. Many rural communities throughout the province share in the risk of losing continual flow of fibre, which is the case for many Indigenous communities as well. With investment in the forest industry comes monthly payments on equipment and employee paycheques. Access to fibre has allowed many Bands and individual entrepreneurs to invest and take out loans and lines of credit to invest in capital and capacity for business opportunities.

Today, Indigenous leaders must make decisions that will maintain a balance between the cultural and environmental values of their people along with the economic requirements that contribute to the well-being of the community. It is not only businesses that require the forestry program to be successful; many Indigenous

communities rely heavily on its own source of revenue to be injected into its communities' health, education and other social programs.

All of our communities benefit from a healthy forest and a strong forest economy. Today, we can see Indigenous involvement at all levels in the forest sector. Indigenous voices are heard in many working rooms within government and industry organizations. The Truck Loggers Association (TLA), Council of Forest Industries, and the Province have invited Indigenous foresters to join them in developing solutions for long-term certainty of the forest industry. The Interior Logging Association, TLA and national forest certification groups such as the Canadian Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Canadian Forestry Stewardship Council have Indigenous board members who contribute to the richness and diversity of their organizations. And, the BC First Nations Forestry Council has continued to work tirelessly for its Indigenous body, for inclusion in the forest industry.

Over the years, Indigenous communities have developed a plethora of experience in the forest industry and hold the corporate knowledge of their traditional territories. Today, there is a lot of change happening in the forest industry; with reduced AAC there is less certainty of whether mills can sustain the reduction in volume. They are still adjusting to the AAC reduction and either require investments to become the "right size" to handle reduced volumes or shut down, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs. Indigenous communities who live within small, rural mill-dependent communities also feel the loss. Indigenous peoples hold the highest responsibility to their traditional lands because if anything goes wrong, they can't just pack up and move to set up a new business elsewhere. Therefore, it is in all of our best interests to find solutions for the well-being of our communities. Investing in Indigenous capacity is investing in local capacity that will not leave.

With rights comes responsibility. As the field levels out, Indigenous peoples are looked at as investors who also create an alternate source of fibre as they market their volume. Therefore, our social, economic and environmental well-being is tied to the health of our traditional lands and communities. As Indigenous capacity grows, so does the capacity of the BC forest industry. Today, there is still much work to be done. Indigenous knowledge is being incorporated into stewardship plans and will soon become measurable like all other values such as visual quality or old-growth management strategies. Tenure reform is a primary point of discussion between Indigenous and provincial governments as many of us still believe that there is an acceptable compromise that can be reached regarding the allocation of the AAC. In any case, Indigenous peoples are here to stay, and we recognize that we are all responsible for coming up with solutions to maintain a strong and healthy forest industry.▲

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