



OLD-GROWTH MANAGEMENT IN THE INTERIOR

In September 2020, the provincial government released its commissioned report, “A New Future for Old Forests” that provided an in-depth review of old-growth management in BC. Authored by two professional foresters, Al Gorley and Garry Merkel, the report does a good job in defining what old-growth forests are—despite the plethora of definitions being used—and their importance to environment and industry, while also focusing on the problems with current old-growth management practices. The report offered what seemed like reasonable, science-based recommendations to help move the discussion toward an agreeable solution to the issue of old-growth sustainability in BC, without ever mentioning the economics of what they were proposing.

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Gorley and Merkel’s report identifies the issues in assuming that old-growth management should only revolve around the preservation of old trees. “Not all old forest is the same, and old does not necessarily mean big trees” they explain and reference a site’s ecological importance as being one of the most significant factors in old-growth preservation. The assumption that old trees only grow on sensitive, ecologically valuable sites is widely misunderstood, and a province-wide blanket approach of protecting old-growth stands based solely on their age is a strategy that ignores all of the other site characteristics. Old-growth protection should be based on the ecotype, flora and fauna it sustains, the cultural importance of the sites, and a multitude of other values that are described in detail in the report; and it should be site specific.

In the BC Interior, stands with 140+ year-old trees may differ greatly from

those containing giant cedar and hemlock trees as found in the Ancient Forest Recreational site east of Prince George; to decadent sub-alpine fir stands that would have likely burned by now if it wasn’t for BC’s effective wildfire suppression. The two sites differ greatly in ecological significance and only the cedar/hemlock stand might warrant preservation.

Currently, the system of Old Growth Management Areas (OGMAs) in BC was formulated to “maintain intact old forests,” but Gorley and Merkel are quick to acknowledge that OGMAs “are applied inconsistently and sometimes ineffectively.” Rules regarding OGMAs in BC are also unclear, as many of these areas contain old trees, while others do not.

Environmental groups have complained that licensees are logging OGMAs, while in other cases OGMAs are maintained as “no-harvest” zones even if they have been devastated by insect, disease or fire. In their report, Merkel and Gorley observe that the confusion in OGMA management stems from unclear practices and strategies because “no review of the OGMA system has taken place since it was implemented more than 20 years ago.” In other words, does an OGMA lose its site characteristics and value if fire or disease kills off the trees? Should the OGMA boundaries be static or dynamic, only containing sites with old trees, or sites that could contain old trees? Gorley and Merkel raise similar questions in their report and acknowledge that clear operating procedures should be defined. They also recognize the need to identify and maintain the “working forest” so that if an OGMA is relocated to an area within

the existing timber harvesting land base, then that area must be replaced so as not to undermine a licensee’s ability to achieve its apportionment.

The report goes on to discuss other strategies for protecting old growth. They mention mimicking natural disturbance types in certain zones, meeting seral stage distribution targets, and applying alternative silviculture systems to help maintain the integrity of ancient sites. These strategies require a great deal more planning, and on-the-ground verification; however, Gorley and Merkel go on to acknowledge that the Province will need to “ensure that the stumpage system provides appropriate offsets to cover extra costs.” At the end of the day, logging contractors in the Interior could support old-growth retention as long as the report is not the catalyst to widespread erosion of the timber harvest land base without appropriate balancing of economic and social interest and the economic viability of the industry that supports their families.

Upon release of the review, numerous media outlets in the BC Interior and the rest of Canada went on to acknowledge that the document was a good first step. However, most could not help but include pictures of harvested trees, clear cuts and damning, unsubstantiated comments in order to create an air of controversy for the purpose of making their article more popular with their readers and to promote preservation of virtually all forests over 140 years old. Merkel and Gorley state that, “the confidence and trust of the general public is the biggest determinant in how much freedom government and industry have to manage our forests,” and when media prints biased articles containing little to no scientific backing or economic analysis, then they become a bigger part of the problem.▲

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