

# THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE OF OLD-GROWTH LOGGING

By Ian MacNeill

When it was released last year, the provincial government's Old Growth Strategic Review did not call for a moratorium on old-growth logging, but you did not have to be a meteorologist to see which way the wind was blowing. The report, *A New Future for Old Forests*, called for increased Indigenous involvement, more stringent compliance, updated targets and guidelines, the addressing of "immediate threats" in old-growth areas deemed at risk, as well as updated classification and inventory measures, among others. It led to the government "deferring" logging on 335,000 hectares of land. Predictably, conservationists said the measures did not go far enough.

What the report did not talk about much were the socioeconomic impacts further curtailment of old-growth logging would have on communities that rely on forestry for survival and where

old-growth timber makes up a significant part of the harvesting basket. These include First Nations communities that are developing forestry operations in their traditional land and see them as a way of promoting social and economic independence.

In fact, there seems to be a built-in assumption in the report that sooner rather than later old-growth logging will cease and communities that rely on forestry will "transition" to other activities. What these other activities might be is left unclear, leaving people like Ucluelet Mayor Mayco Noel feeling somewhat frustrated. "It's fine to have studies like this, but government also has a responsibility to come up with clear, consultative transition plans to get to their magic spot instead of just making bold statements," he says.

Communities are already getting squeezed by the inclement weather affecting

the forest industry, just ask Mackenzie Mayor Joan Atkinson. "Things aren't going well right now," she says, pointing out that three of the town's four mills are currently "in curtailment", and the job count is down from a normal of 650 to roughly 275 today. "We have the most skin in the game," she says. "If Canfor doesn't come back it will be a blip on a spreadsheet for them, but for us it will be devastating."

Devastating for several reasons, not all of them obvious. Financial hardship leads the way, obviously. The tax revenues flowing from the mills keep the town solvent, and residents need the jobs to pay their bills and put food on the table, but unemployment has its own insidious impact over and above dollars and cents. Studies show that crime and addiction rates tend to inch upward in lockstep with the unemployment rates, while at the same time shops and schools close,

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social relationships breakdown, and generational roots are severed as people give up and move away.

And while there is no shortage of discussion about how expensive housing costs are in urban centres like Vancouver, living in rural BC is hardly economical. High housing costs in urban centres like Vancouver and the rise of cybercommuting possibilities for many types of work are encouraging some city dwellers to cash out and move to smaller towns. "My house has increased in value last year by 9 per cent," says Ucluelet's Noel. "Others in the region have gone up by as much as 20 per cent." Additionally, food costs are often higher, a consequence of less competition and higher transportation costs.

What is frustrating for forestry professionals like Mike Copperthwaite, general manager of the Revelstoke Community

Forest (RCF), which is owned by the city of Revelstoke, is that critics of old-growth logging don't seem to understand that British Columbia has some of the highest standards in the world when it comes to forest management. "Everybody wants wood," he says. "But if it doesn't come from our world-class managed forests where we have so many rules and regulations, it's going to come from jurisdictions that don't have these rules."

He also points out that while 70,000 hectares of RCF's 120,000-hectare land base is treed, fully 50,000 hectares of that basket has already been set aside and will never be logged. "I have this conversation with people here all the time," he says. "I feel like they don't get it. Most of the old growth is protected, and if we have to stop logging it altogether, then we'd cease to exist as a company." What would also come to an end are the jobs

for residents and revenues that flow into city coffers.

Ironically, what access recreational users have to the backcountry is made possible largely because of logging. It is the logging companies that build and maintain the roads leading into the old-growth forests recreationists pine for. In the Revelstoke area, logging allows access to the spectacular Keystone Standard Basin, renowned for mountain biking and hiking. "We encourage people to go there, but if the logging stops the road will be deactivated and there won't be any access," he says.

Mayor Gaby Wickstrom of Port McNeill on Vancouver Island says eliminating old-growth logging would have a staggering impact on the northern Vancouver Island community. "If there was no more old-growth logging there would (Continued to page 38)



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be about a 50 per cent reduction in the cut," she says. "Imagine being a farmer and suddenly being told you can only use half your land."

She also takes issue with the argument that unless old-growth logging comes to an end, there will be no old-growth forests for future generations to enjoy. "On the north island, 76 per cent of old growth is outside the timber harvesting land base. It has been set aside for parks and eco-reserves, so to say there will be no more old growth is simply not true."

In the modern age of social media, it would be a mistake to assume that this is simply a fight between urbanites and people who live in small communities that depend on forestry for jobs and revenue. Powell River on the Sunshine Coast was built on forestry, but today the town is increasingly the home of "newer folks" with different ideas about the value of forestry, or the need to protect it going forward, says Powell River Mayor Dave Formosa. "The dynamics are changing and it's getting difficult to gauge the will of the community," he says, pointing out that when the subject of old-growth logging came up at a city council meeting it led to a split vote, with council deciding to not take a firm position without further information. Or to put it more plainly, arguments about old-growth logging have the potential to pit neighbour against neighbour in the very communities that are affected the most.

Nevertheless, despite its relative decline, forestry remains vital to Powell River's economic prosperity. "The forest community is very important to us," says Formosa. "Our community forest has been a lifesaver, and it has poured funds

into things that represent important values for us. It has also helped the community embrace forestry, because they see the good it does. A community forest is a beautiful thing."

If there is one thing the strategic report emphasizes, it is the importance of getting information out to people who will ultimately vote to determine the future of old-growth logging, many of whom get their best views of them on television sets and social media websites. Providing some relevant information is John Walker, stewardship forester for the Williams Lake First Nation. He points out that forests age out, and when they do, nature tends to find a way to eliminate the old and make way for the new. Walker argues that the pine and spruce beetle epidemics were a result of too much old growth, and that the infestation was nature's way of "resetting" itself. He adds that current management practices allow forests to gather too many fuels, the results of which are forest fires poisoning the air for urban and rural residents alike and threatening the very existence of communities unfortunate enough to be in their path. "A stagnant forest is not a managed forest," he says. "Reacting, as we have been doing, instead of being proactive is not the way to manage."

Something Walker liked in the report was its insistence that First Nations play a more important role in forest management. "First Nations have been restricted from the land base for so long, but before the area was settled, they controlled it, they were doing forest management, and the ecosystem was thriving, so getting some of those values back and incorporating plant assessment, and hunting, is extremely important."

Dallas Smith, president and CEO of the Nanwakolas Council on Vancouver Island, personifies this kind of progressive forest management. He was a key architect of the Great Bear Rainforest agreements, and more recently participated in the inking of an agreement whereby BC forestry companies, including Western Forest Products and Interfor, as well as BC Timber Sales, agreed to abide by traditional laws outlined in the "Large Cultural Cedar (LCC) Operation Protocol." The new rules make it easier for First Nations to identify and protect cedar trees deemed important for cultural activities.

Despite his bona fides as a conservationist, he is also concerned about calls to eliminate old-growth logging because it comprises an important component of the nation's harvesting profile. "We work with companies and understand you can't have a ban on old-growth harvesting because it would cripple the industry at a time when we are just starting to get some skin in the game," he says, adding that in today's social-media driven climate of anti-logging opposition, "it is difficult to be a conservationist and grow economically."

There are social benefits to old-growth logging on First Nations' territory as well. "Families want dad to be able to have a job and live at home rather than be working up north in a mine," says Smith.

He looks forward to the increased consultation with First Nations the report calls for but is impatient for those consultations to begin. "The study paints a picture we knew had existed for a long time, but it does not discuss long-term solutions. And they did not talk to our chiefs, they just said we are going to defer activities in this area. In this day of UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People) and consultation they should be having discussions with us before making decisions."

The war of words about old-growth logging is not going to go away anytime soon. But discussions about the future of forestry in British Columbia need to be tempered with informed discussions about the kinds of impact old-growth logging would have on the people most affected and communities and First Nations that rely on forestry for their economic and social well-being. That is the best way to ensure a war of words does not turn into a war in the woods. 🌲