

BC Belongs to British Columbians

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March 9, 2012

The notion of Crown land and not selling off the forestland base goes back to the very beginnings of land¹ allocation and use in British Columbia. This principle of public ownership of BC's forest was firmly established by the House of Assembly prior to BC becoming a province: *we find the view presented and adopted that the selling and granting of large tracts of timberland to companies or individuals should not be entertained as it is socially injurious and detrimental to settlement*. When grants of land were proposed to attract investment in sawmilling, the response was: *we will offer licenses to cut timber only on unsold and unpreempted land*. Thus leases and licenses became the predominant forest tenure².

As a result of this remarkable and far-reaching notion 94%³ of British Columbia remains public Crown land. The province nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, by retaining the land base in public ownership, kept its options open to enable other public purposes to be met concomitant with timber production.

Citizens of BC could continue to enjoy the land, recreate on the trails, raft down the rivers, pick huckleberries and mushrooms, hunt wildlife and fish for salmon; while the monies generated from these leases and licenses would stay within government to build hospitals in our communities, provide education to our children and grandchildren and support art projects and theatre productions. What a grand and wonderful model - the government stewards the land for the benefit of the people. The notion of managing BC with a mind to its citizens and the future rather than selling the land or moving its responsibility to the private sector is a vision worthy of continued public support.

However the current trends being experienced in the field are disturbing and leave many people wondering whether the government of today has abandoned the concept of sustainability and the notion of 'stewarding the land for the future'. BC's Crown lands are being treated as 'government land' that the Province can do with what they want - with seeming little respect for public ownership, economic sustainability and the Crown's obligation to honor the claims of First Nations. The social contract is being broken with little or no public input and far-reaching harmful consequences to human health, future employment and certainty for our communities.

¹ For the purposes of simplification, in this paper 'land' refers to both 'land and water'.

² This paragraph and the two quotes are adapted from a paper that Dr. Peter Dooling wrote for the Parks Canada Centennial Symposium, 1987.

³ Of this 94%, 2% is fresh water. ~1% is federal crown land and ~5% is privately owned.

In particular, caring for the environment is almost completely off the radar of this provincial government. Not only has the Auditor General⁴ recently wrapped the government's knuckles: *"These forests contribute to employment, tourism and recreational opportunities, as well as generate significant revenue for government to finance public services. However, trends indicate that the future availability of timber will be smaller and less diverse, putting future revenue opportunities at risk"*; a recent report⁵ by four retired professionals clearly indicates that the budget available to the resource-related ministries has decreased by 52% in the last 10 years: *"there is growing concern, and some evidence, that government and industry are not devoting the level of funding and staffing to renewable resource management that is needed to meet those expectations and responsibilities. Many wonder if the province's magnificent natural resource legacy is receiving the attention it should"*.

In addition, the Forest Practices Board⁶ has outlined their growing concerns over the cumulative effects of resource use on Crown land by the forest industry, mining, oil/gas, and wind power: *"What seems to be missing is a well-structured, transparent process for deciding what to do and specifying how to do it."*

The government must address these concerns and reverse these trends by better managing our lands, biodiversity, forests, and water resources. We need a straightforward/common sense strategy that not only addresses employment, tourism and public recreation; but also focuses the financial and staff resources of government to foster ecological health, economic stability and quality of life for British Columbians now and into the future.

We don't want to be the generation that fetters the future of our Crown land by selling it for a song and squandering its resources. We don't want to be the generation that 'divests' the historic patrimony of our forests, salmon, rivers and wildlife to the degree that successive generations won't be able to reap the benefits of our Crown lands as envisaged in 1866.

Instead, we must be the generation that identifies what is wrong with the current trends and identifies solutions so that the future management of BC's Crown land is focused on a return to its citizens and its communities.

These changes have been slowly occurring for a long time, seem to have sped up over the last decade, and have happened largely without public knowledge. Indeed few British Columbians are likely even aware that nearly all the lands and water in the province are publicly owned. There is an urgent need to change our ways and build on this Crown land legacy in a manner that will ensure a healthy economy, a healthy environment and sustainable communities.

⁴ <http://www.bcauditor.com/pubs/2012/report11/timber-management>

⁵ Trends in Renewable Resource Management in BC, February 2012 is available on the Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities website: bcforestconversation.com.

⁶ Forest Practices Board Special Report #39, March 2011. Cumulative Effects: From Assessment to Management.