



## **Importance of sustainable resources conservation and management to Aboriginal communities**

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### **Abstract**

**First Nations peoples in BC are the original land stewards of this region and although this role had drastically changed in the past century, in recent years the governments of Canada, BC and First Nations' are resolving past title and rights disputes and First Nations are providing a significant influence over land use decisions and management of resources in BC. Modern day methods of incorporating traditional knowledge into western science based models for management are required for collective benefit to our communities and the forests of this region.**

### **Current Status**

Current resource conservation and management is largely defined and based on European or western science knowledge and has dominated the decision-making process regarding lands and resources of BC since the late 1800's. Previous to this time the Aboriginal communities of this region were the primary decision makers regarding our forests.

History of and current exclusion and denial of recognition of title and rights has left First Nations communities entirely outside the process of land and resource use decision making. Furthermore, this exclusion of power has resulted in severe poverty conditions in First Nations communities that exist to this day.

In recent years First Nations have gained recognition of title and rights and efforts are currently being made to reconcile the past wrongdoings by finding respectful ways of incorporating aboriginal rights and title into the modern economies and governments of BC and Canada. Provincial, Federal and First Nations leaders have been developing accords, such as the New Relationship (March 2005), the Transformative Change Accord (Nov 2005) and the First Nations-Federal Crown Political Accord (May 2005) which are leading the way in terms of how our three levels of government can work together.

The current reconciliation process that is evolving includes land treaties, legal challenges to title and rights and since the early 2000's, has included interim accommodation agreements called Forest and Range Agreements (FRA), Forest and Range Opportunity Agreements (FRO), Strategic Engagement Agreements (SEA), and Reconciliation agreements. Most recently, the

renewal process for short term FRA/FRO's is in the form of a Forest Consultation and Revenue Sharing Agreement (FCRSA).

These recently developed agreements are allowing First Nations access to forest tenures, which is changing the landscape of forest management in BC. Since 2002 agreements have been signed with 168 communities and as of January 2011 the combined volume offered in these agreements is 11.7 million cubic meters per year. Although this volume has not entirely been put into tenure or harvested it does represent the opportunity of between 10 and 15% of BC's annual cut being held by First Nation's.

First Nation's involvement on provincial forest tenures has generated discussion regarding the stewardship values and management principles that First Nations wish to see incorporated into the decision making process. The opportunity to harvest under the provincial forest management regime is recognized as providing an economic opportunity and is furthering capacity. However, the core principles of stewardship can only be incorporated when tenure is area based and shared decision making incorporated for the territories of each first nation.

A significant gap in First Nations knowledge keepers exists due to cultural interruption over the years. As First Nations play an increased role in governance and operational decision making today, modern interpretations of traditional knowledge held by First Nations communities will be required. The move towards increased First Nations participation in decision-making will require interpretation of this knowledge.

## **Key Issues**

The key issues related to First Nation's participating in the forest sector of BC should be summarized under two structural areas: Governance as it relates to unresolved title and rights and jurisdiction over the lands and resources; and Business or economic development interests as it relates to building modern economies through forest sector employment and business development.

The Government of BC continues to make decisions on how forest lands are managed based on its assumed jurisdiction over the lands and resources. Although some modern treaties have been signed and many interim agreements are being used, it is in the best interest of all parties if reconciliation can be achieved so a new governance model can emerge.

Regarding the corporate side of the forest sector, it is clear that business interests are suffering the impact of Government-to-Government negotiations and uncertainty. Interim accommodation deals are helping resolve the uncertainty of title. However, these are short-term agreements that continue to put corporate interests at risk.

The current distribution of modern treaties and interim accommodation agreements that include revenue sharing (i.e. stumpage) and participation in tenure harvesting and associated business opportunities is significantly redistributing wealth of the forests to rural communities through out BC. This innovation in itself is something that can stimulate the forest sector for the benefit of all.

## **Recommended Action**

In order to continue moving forward with modern reconciliation of the long standing denial of title and rights both the Province of BC and the Federal Government of Canada need to renew their mandates on supporting previously signed leadership accords and put forward the resources that can positively move the principles of these accords forward. A meaningful recognition of title and rights needs to be incorporated into forest revenue sharing and shared decision-making. With an appropriate (government-to-government) level of reconciliation (i.e. revenue sharing and shared decision making) in place the entire forest community will benefit from rural revenue distribution and dramatically increased local input on resource management decisions.

Institutional capacity building by First Nations in organizations such as the First Nations Summit, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the BC Assembly of First Nations and sector specific organizations such as the First Nations Forestry Council and Aboriginal Forest Industries Council should be recognized and supported. This will lead to and develop increased participation by First Nations communities. The ability to capture and utilize the best current knowledge on how to manage resources will be greatly improved by combining the input, analysis and recommendations of both First Nations knowledge keepers and western science academics.