



Why We Need a New Vision for BC's Forests

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Abstract

Changes in the health of British Columbia's forests, the market for forest products and public attitudes towards forest land use and conservation have changed the ecological, economic and social context for forest management in BC. It is time for a broad public debate and the development of a new, shared vision for BC's forests that can inform new forest policies and improve the health of BC's forest ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.

. More than 90% of BC's forests are owned by the public. These forests are an endowment that has supported generations of British Columbian's, including First Nations since time immemorial. Historically, indigenous peoples maintained productive habitat for herbs, berries and game in the drier parts of BC by igniting low intensity surface fires that reduced fuel accumulations and kept forests open. During the settlement period, these traditional burning practices fell away and were replaced by wildfire suppression and commercial timber harvesting. In BC's forests, the legacy of these changes in land use have long-lived and in some cases unintended consequences, some of which are just becoming apparent. For example, the maturing of extensive areas of lodgepole pine combined with warming winters lead to the outbreak of the native mountain pine beetle which has damaged more than 16 million hectares of forest. This is more than five times the size of Vancouver Island. These forests will need to be regenerated in a manner that promotes future ecosystem health and range of future economic opportunities. Climate change will continue to stress our forests and wildfires such as the FireStorms of 2003, 2004, 2009, and 2010, will become more difficult to control and will become an even greater threat to rural communities.

In addition to these ecological and climatic changes, the political and economic context for forest management has changed radically in the past decade. Appreciation of the high conservation value of BC's remaining old-growth forests, recognition of First Nations rights, changes in lumber markets and expansion of urban populations into forested lands increase the complexity of forest management. While timber harvests may be declining, the pressure on BC's wildland is increasing. It necessary to plan and consider the cumulative impacts of micro-power generation and transmission, oil, gas and mineral development, cattle grazing, trapping, hunting and harvesting of timber, biofuels, and non-timber forest products. This comes at a time of declining revenues from timber harvesting and government cutbacks in staffing of the natural resource ministries. Professional foresters, biologists and engineers design and implement conservation and stewardship plans and we need to recruit and educate a new generation of skilled professionals to replace the growing number of retirees. However, it is not sufficient to have professional resource managers. In designing conservation and stewardship plans, our professionals need clear and informed direction from the owners of the resource, the public, and their representatives in government. Professional decision-making must be grounded in up-to-

date inventories of forest land condition and informed by up-to-date science concerning ecosystem processes.

Government revenues from timber harvest wax and wane with market cycles, and decline where non-timber values of forests take precedence – we need a new model for financing forest stewardship on public forest land that reflects the true costs and benefits of managing the forest land base. Forests provide critical ecological services including clean water, clean air, carbon sequestration, conservation of biological diversity, wilderness areas and scenic vistas, venues for recreation, fuel, food, medicines, and a broad range of economic opportunities. The value of these services can be estimated by considering the cost of replacing them with alternatives; in other cases products or services can generate revenues, in others they simply enrich us spiritually and culturally. There is also a price to be paid for poor forest stewardship. Lack of forest fuel management in forests adjacent to communities can lead to uncontrollable wildfire. Poor management of wilderness recreation or lack of maintenance of roads can lead to erosion and floods that damage public land and private property. When they reach high populations, native forest pests such as mountain pine beetle can move into, and damage urban forests and amenity trees.

BC needs a new vision to guide forest conservation and management. For too long provincial forest policy has focused on sustaining timber harvests and timber revenues, and forest stewardship has depended on the health of the timber industry. It takes more than a healthy timber industry to maintain revenues from forest lands and to support community stability. It takes healthy forests with diverse ecological conditions, and forests that provide diverse economic opportunities. It takes a policy framework for public land conservation and management that promotes ecosystem health, and supports a broad portfolio of economic activities, while maintaining the forest endowment for future generations.

The last time there was a broad public dialogue on forest policy in BC was during the Pearse Royal Commission in 1976. Since that time, there have been round-tables and regional planning tables and some real improvements in forest policy and practice. But we have not had a province - wide dialogue that includes all stakeholders. It is time for a broad discussion that engages rural and urban communities, First Nations, professionals, academics, students, conservationists, recreationists and resource users. We need to work collectively to envision a future forest condition, and a set of policies and funding mechanisms that resolves land rights and responsibilities, and that takes account of the full spectrum of values and opportunities that BC's forests and wildlands provide to British Columbians today, and tomorrow. We need to work toward a vision that sustains our forests as a source of wonder, pride and economic wellbeing.

At the University of British Columbia, Faculty of Forestry, our mission is to “provide the citizens of British Columbia and the world with knowledge of how their forests grow and change, how to conserve and manage forests and create products to contribute diverse economic, social and spiritual benefits to communities, in ways that respect nature”. Our Faculty is joining with other institutions in BC to host a series of public workshops and we invite you to share your views.