

New policies needed to save our forests

BY SUZANNE SIMARD AND KATHY LEWIS, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 8, 2011



A panoramic view of a B.C. Forest. (2008 file photo)

Photograph by: Handout, Special to The Sun

The administration and care of British Columbia's publicly owned forestlands - some 60 million hectares, an area larger than France - is unstable and in deep trouble.

The shifting of forest governance among three ministries in less than a year, following a decade of deregulation, has eroded forest stewardship and sustainable forest management in B.C.

Signs that we are losing our grip on stewardship are evident in declining forest health and in expanding understocked forests -also known as NSR (not satisfactorily restocked) -over an increasingly clear-cut and fragmented landscape.

Another sign is that public consultation over land-use planning has taken a back seat to efficiency of resource extraction from our forests. The public is largely disengaged from this sea change.

Forest professionals are the stewards of the publicly owned forests. But B.C.'s professional forestry association appears paralyzed by the rapid changes and foresters are finding it difficult to challenge entrenched forest policy and weakened forest legislation.

Looking back over the past decade, we see a steady erosion of stewardship principles. With the enactment of the Forest and Range Practices Act came "results-based forest management" and "professional reliance."

Results-based management is meant to improve science-based forest management practices on-the-ground, whereas professional reliance shifts responsibility for stewardship from industry and government to the individual forestry professional, purportedly with tough penalties for noncompliance. Has this resulted in more innovative and effective forest stewardship?

To answer this question, we can look at four examples from the two most important and impactful forestry activities on the land base: Logging and reforestation.

First, the vast sea of clear-cuts that is increasingly covering our province is reducing landscape complexity and affecting broad-scale ecological processes such as hydrology, carbon fluxes and species migrations.

Second, salvage harvesting practices to address the mountain pine beetle, amounting to bottom-line clearcutting, have resulted in the loss of the small underlying trees, midterm timber supply, and healthy forest complexity.

Third, disturbingly, scientists and foresters are observing that young simplified plantations of single-species have declining health due to insect, disease and abiotic damage, and this is projected to worsen with climate change.

Fourth, the area of NSR has increased dramatically in the past decade due to inadequate reforestation of harvested, burned and beetlekilled land.

This increase has negative implications for the future productivity, diversity and carbon-sequestering capacity of the land-base.

A number of government institutional changes over the past decade underscore these problems. Most fundamentally, there has been a precipitous decline in opportunity for public engagement in resource-management planning under the Forest and Range Practices Act.

Not only is there a lack of public consultation over timber harvesting, there is no meaningful assessment of the cumulative effects of multiple land-use tenures that overlap with forestry, such as for energy or water resources. Even within forestry, there is little mechanism or expertise for implementing stewardship for multiple forest values over large scales; instead, forestry is still largely practised on a block-byblock basis.

Additionally, with emphasis on economic goals and efficiency in awarding of resource-extraction permits in the new Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, there is a troubling lack of legislative process, policy or research in place to enable forest stewardship and protect environmental values.

Long-term forest stewardship and science-based forest management remain low priorities for this government. This assertion is supported by the neglect to maintain a current forest inventory and to monitor the efficacy of forest practices, activities considered elsewhere in the world to be fundamental to certified forest management.

Other indicators include the dissolution of the forest Research Branch, the slashing of funding for forest science, and the greatly diminished number of foresters charged with stewarding public land, monitoring compliance, and enforcing professional reliance.

"Results-based management" and "professional reliance," like forest certification, are only effective when backed-up by strong and efficient forest laws, policies and operating rules. In British Columbia, forest laws and practices are deregulated and weak. Therefore, we are failing to meet our own stewardship goals.

The potential costs of this failure are very high -including the loss of healthy and resilient forests, economies and communities -and these costs are expected to accelerate with climate change. We urge readers to voice their opinion on stewardship of their forests and to demand of the provincial government new forest policy and laws that will ultimately increase the resilience of B.C.'s environment and economy.

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