



The Culture of the Forest

Years ago, I was in Norway visiting with a colleague who had moved there after completing his forestry education at a BC post-secondary school. He was working with one of the Scandinavian universities and had also worked for the local forest land-owner cooperatives.

What I noticed was that there was a strong culture related to forestry in Norway—local literary heroes who had a strong connection to the forest; an open acceptance that land was to be managed first and considered private second; and a pervasive understanding that human activity was inextricably intertwined with nature.

Compare this with North America, where humans are considered as existing outside nature and the definition of wilderness invariably means the exclusion of humans. Of course, Aboriginal societies in North America are the exception to this definition as they have been part of the landscape since time immemorial.

In general, North Americans are missing a culture of forestry. As a society, we do not celebrate our forests as something to interact with and in. Instead, we are expected to sit outside, and say, “What a pretty picture... now Johnny, look, but don't touch!” Parental fears, a reduced number of parks and green spaces in urban areas and the lure of computer games have led some to speculate on the existence of Nature Deficit Disorder in children. It seems that there are more and more children who do not have regular contact with nature and have little or no understanding of how important forests are to our society.

I suggest that we need to work to change this. But how? Well, perhaps we can start with small steps—do what you can at home. One of the ways I have tried to do this is by bringing the forest into the lullaby that I sing to my daughter every night:

*Sleep child sleep
Daddy tends the trees
That Mommy planted so long ago
'cause Mommy and Daddy, we both know
That sweet dreams are what baby needs
So we planted the Dream Tree seeds*

*Sleep child sleep
Daddy tends the trees
That grow from the Dream Tree seeds
That Mommy planted for you my sweet
As the trees grow big and tall,
Sweet dreams from their branches fall.”*

Go outside! Take walks, have picnics, and just talk with children and friends about nature. When spending time in front of the television, look for programs that celebrate the natural environment. I'm sure there are many other ways that grow the culture of the forest—many of you are probably doing so in your own ways.

Aboriginal societies have strong links to the land and the forest. I often hear stories of the different ways they respected the forest and thanked the forest (either indirectly or directly) for what it provided, such as food, clothing, shelter and spiritual fulfillment.

Wouldn't it be great if, when we went into the forest to 'extract some value,' we spent a moment to contemplate how the forest, and our actions in it, help makes us all part of a strong society?

Thank the forest for all it provides, and recognize that we are part of it, not outside it. Be proud of our inextricable links with, and to, the forest. Communicate your pride and your stories in any way that works for you: poetry, storytelling, journalism, photographs, words, work, volunteering, dancing, painting, music, conversation.

That's the true culture of forestry. 🌲