



Forestry: Sunset? Sunrise? Or Just Another Day?

“Some may try and tell us that this is the end of an era. But what they overlook is that in America, every day is a new beginning, and every sunset is merely the latest milestone on a voyage that never ends. For this is the land that has never become, but is always in the act of becoming.”

Ronald Reagan

PRESIDENT REAGAN WAS OBVIOUSLY REFERRING to America, not forestry, but it I think it applies equally well to our profession. “Forestry is a sunset industry!” I hear it loud and I hear it often. For more than two years now, we have seen the Canadian forest product sector mired in the midst of the worst economic conditions ever seen. Our friends and colleagues, our communities and our businesses are all reeling. Are times tough? Very. And we’re likely not through it all yet. But is forestry a sunset profession? Only if we let it be.

BC’s forest resources are truly the envy of the world. We have productive forest lands, an excellent climate and the best and brightest people to put it all together. (Yes, I mean you!) The part we’re currently having trouble with is connecting our resource to the global marketplace. For decades, BC produced the very best products in the marketplace and our industries, our profession and our province prospered greatly. But things changed. The world seems to want fewer of the things that made us so successful. Ask the leader of any dynasty, such as the New York Islanders (’79-’83), Edmonton Oilers (’84-’90), Detroit Red Wings (’95-’08), and they will confirm that the only thing harder than getting to the top is staying there.

What we need to recognize is that the true value of our forests is their ability to provide an extensive array of services/products to fulfill niches over time. If we view a forest stand as simply an inventory of cubic metres awaiting milling, we miss out on many other product streams. Perspective and the application of emerging technologies play a big part in identifying and accessing the true value of our forests. For example, 100 years ago we looked beyond lumber as the sole forest product and recognized the value of pulp within a stand. Sawmilling technology has improved significantly and the minimum piece size able to be processed into dimensional lumber has increased utilization. Emerging opportunities for biofuel will increase the utilization of a forest’s biomass even further.

As forest professionals, we need to be cognizant of the same opportunities. We need to gain perspective and be prepared to apply our skills, knowledge and experience in new arenas. Whether it’s new technologies, new markets, new ideas, etc. we must accept that what got us **here** won’t necessarily get us **there**. I think Wayne Gretzky said it best when he said, “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.”

So where is the puck going to be? Good question. I don’t know. But we’re seeing

increasing pressures on our forestlands and its associated values almost daily. Pressures to convert forest lands for development (mining, power production, transmission, urbanization, agriculture, etc.), pressures to preserve and conserve (ecological values, habitat values, scenic values, recreation values, water values, etc.), pressures to produce economic return from forest products (lumber, pulp, biomass, carbon credits, etc.). These pressures are consistent with what we likely all know deep down—our forests are important and valuable. However, the ways in which they are important and valuable, and to whom, will always change with time.

Understanding this dynamic assignment of value is where we must take an active part in determining whether we decide to let forestry be a sunset profession. Do we choose to cling to what we’ve always done and hope the world re-aligns to what it was? Or do we look further ahead and adjust our sails for what will be? Personally, I choose the latter. I think the future of forestry will still include much of what we’ve been successful with in the past, but it must also include some significant new thinking and some risk taking. It will be challenging and require investment in thought, action, time and money. It may not be entirely successful and it may even fail. But that’s how opportunity works. If it was easy, anyone could do it.

Our membership shares many qualities that will allow us to move forward; intelligence, creativity, integrity and resiliency are abundant. And I think we can all agree that we’re among the best at doing more with less. We bring a lot to the table—sometimes we just need some help in finding out which table we should sit at.

I encourage everyone to take a step back and broaden your perspective a bit. Start with the definition of ‘professional forestry’ in the *Foresters Act*—you might be surprised at how broadly our mandate applies and how it might highlight new and emerging opportunities you can participate in. 🐼