

BROADENING OUR UNDERSTANDING: FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL VALUES

By Ian MacNeill

We often hear the expression “cultural values” when attached to the way First Nations view and practise forestry, but what does it mean? To find the answer we spoke to members of First Nations’ communities in British Columbia. Here’s what we learned.



Larry Grant, Musqueam First Nation, Vancouver

To Larry Grant, a member of the Musqueam Nation and Elder-in-Residence at UBC’s First Nations House of Learning, the forest is a sacred trust; something we have the right to use and enjoy, but which we also have a duty to pass along to future generations for their use and enjoyment. “For me, cultural values means respecting the forest as a natural resource in its own state as well as for the many things that it gives us—wood for building our homes, clothing, utensils, medicine, food.” It’s also a sanctuary; an abode of peace and spiritual regeneration. “It’s a place of amazement where you can rejuvenate your spirit and sense of amazement,” he says. In the modern world, preserving it for future generations means acquiring a better understanding of it, and that means hit-

ting the books, studying ethnobotany and biochemistry, fisheries and geology. Fortunately, the opportunity is there for young people from First Nations to do all that. “The range of programs they offer in the faculty of forestry here at UBC encompass everything we talk about in terms of cultural respect for the forest,” he says, adding that with the pressures of development in traditional territories now is the time for young people to pick up the educational torch and carry it forward. “With the dams and pipelines and importance of water it’s vital that we all get involved,” he says.

Mic Werstiuk, Westbank First Nation, Westbank

Mic Werstiuk has spent his entire working life attached to the forest, whether it was as a young man doing silviculture contracting or later on managing the Westbank First Nation’s economic development company. He says there is obviously a business side to forestry, but you can’t lose sight of the eternal forest for the trees you want today. “We need to be successful, but success is also about incorporating your cultural values in the process.” That can mean many things, from identifying traditional-use areas to engaging in long-term planning that benefits the entire community. “As we go about our work we are always asking ourselves the question: what other values are here and how can they be incorporated into the process. “In some cases it might mean an area is off limits entirely because of its

cultural and historical significance, but that’s how you preserve your culture,” he explains, adding that he can only shake his head in disbelief when people say that forestry is a dying industry. “There are so many opportunities in so many areas, including biology, hydrology, engineering, planning management. Logging is the easy part,” he says chuckling. “People in our community used to have to go away for extended periods of time to find work, but the trees we grow here are just as good as they are anywhere else, maybe even better.”



Yvette John, Chawathil First Nation, Hope

Yvette John spends a lot of time in the forest. During the week she’s an archaeologist, inspecting forestry blocks in

areas slated for harvest in search of culturally modified trees or remnants of pit houses, ensuring that all signs of previous habitation are duly noted. “We find quite a bit,” says the member of Chawathil First Nation who is also known for storytelling, Salish weaving, spiritual cleansing, and the sweat lodge ceremony. When she’s not “watching what’s coming out of the ground” she’s just as likely to be in the forest as well, poking underneath the canopy for traditional food, herbs, and most especially, medicines—coltsfoot for colds, Solomon’s seal for bones, devil’s club for diabetes. When she finds them she often trades for other medicines with First Nations tribes throughout North America, most recently Hopi and Navajo in Arizona. When she does this she’s better known as White-Plume-Woman, meaning “close to the heart.” It’s a skill she treasures, in part because of its value to herself and her people, in part because she learned it the old fashioned way, from her mother, who learned it from her mother. “The forest is a provider,” she says. “On a spiritual level the forest allows you to become one with the land.” She likes to see young people take an interest in it on any level, knowing that to do so helps ensure the very survival of her people, their way of life. She’s encouraged that young First Nations are deeply interested in the knowledge she carries, which she’s happy to pass along in summer workshops. “Children are always looking for something,” she says. “The search sometimes gets distorted into addictions, but the answer to what they are looking for is in themselves, and the forest is where they can find it.”

**Stu Michel,
Upper Nicola Band, Quilchena**

For Stu Michel, forestry supervisor for the Upper Nicola Band, cultural values are about establishing a balance. “There are a lot of things to consider nowadays in forestry,” he says. “Obviously you have to make money, but you also have to consider the impact of what you are doing.” When deciding where to cut and how, he starts by trying to determine how what he is doing will affect the animals that live in the forest and the waterways that pass through it; it makes no sense to destroy rivers you rely upon for food, that the salmon that spawn in them rely upon for survival. “It’s important to understand what it’s going to look like after the logging part,” he says. “It’s about respect for the land. We’re constantly trying to straddle the cultural and forestry part; it’s a fine line.” Michel recently acquired his provincial survey accreditation and says he’s spending more time considering what comes next. “A lot has been logged off already so there needs to be more capacity to do silviculture,” he says because after all, the children born today and their children after them will need to find sustenance from the forest as well.

The TLA is focused on building mutually beneficial First Nations partnerships. We’re doing this by acknowledging rights and title and engaging First Nations leadership and their communities. However, another important aspect of relationship building is broadening our own understanding of First Nations culture. This is by no means the final word of First Nations cultural values but a place to start the conversation.▲

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