



The Controversy Over Old-Growth Forests

By Jim Girvan

An old-growth forest means different things to different people and the definition of what it is can rarely be agreed upon. To some, old-growth forests are the ones with the name that tugs on the heartstrings like “Chanterelle Forest”, “Avatar Grove” and even the “Great Bear Rainforest.” Each of these unique old-growth forests were named by environmental groups pushing an anti-logging agenda. To others, old-growth refers to forests greater than 250 years of age that provides a valuable source of globally demanded fibre that supports jobs and the economy in BC.

Regardless of the definition or the names, BC’s coastal old-growth forests are valuable and their management is important to a broad cross section of stakeholders. To be clear, we are not about to log the last stand of old-growth as we are often lead to believe. In fact, BC has already protected a significant majority of its rainforests and old-growth.

According to the BC government, 55 per cent (1.78 million hectares) of the province’s 3.2 million hectares of old-growth forests are protected in parks and wilderness areas. On Vancouver Island, that amounts to about 520,000

hectares of forest that will never be logged, or more than two-thirds of the old-growth timber on Vancouver Island’s Crown land.

It is also important to note that protected old-growth areas have seen a considerable increase over the past decade at the expense of the working forests and the coastal allowable annual cut, which have seen declines. In 2015, the government established 567 additional old-growth management areas within five landscape units of the Sunshine Coast Natural Resource District, an area that covers 18,421 hectares, representing



about 13.6 per cent of the 134,993 hectares of Crown forested land base in those landscape units.

In 2016, the *Great Bear Rainforest Forest Act* was enacted, which provided for the designation of new special forest management areas that prohibit commercial timber harvesting activities over an area of 6.4 million hectares, including one-quarter of the world's coastal temperate rainforest. With the new measures in the land use order and legislation, 85 per cent of the forest will be protected and only 15 per cent (550,000 hectares) will be available for local, job-supporting logging.

Most recently in July of this year, an additional 98 hectares of the Coastal Douglas-fir ecosystem was protected in 19 land parcels near the communities of Bowser, Qualicum Beach, Nanoose Bay and Cedar on Vancouver Island, and on Galiano and Salt Spring islands.

Despite this continued increase in protected old-growth area, a June 2018 CBC article wrote about 223 international scientists who urged BC to protect its provincial rainforests. The scientists warn that BC's rainforests are at risk of disappearing without urgent protection. Their letter "specifically called for protection of primary forests (old-growth forests that have never been logged) and intact forests (forest isolated from human activity)." They also suggest, "instead, the province's wood fibre needs should be satisfied by logging in second-growth forests, rather than in primary or intact forests."

What is most concerning about this warning is the misconception this plea has created for the public about how much of BC's old forests are already protected, and the importance of timber harvesting in BC, specifically in our rainforests and primary forests.

Let's explore this.

BC is the most sustainably managed forest region in the world. The province has more forested land under third party environmental certification than any other country and the industry harvests only 0.3 per cent (27,000 hectares) of the coastal forest's 8.5 million hectares per year.

The current proportion of the harvest from coastal second-growth forests has risen steadily over the last decade from about 5 per cent of the harvest in 2000 to about 50 per cent of the total harvest today. This increase in second-growth harvest has coincidentally led to a continued reduction of old-growth area harvested, a trend which is forecasted to continue for several more years until a complete second-growth harvest may be possible. This shift is reducing our reliance on old-growth harvest as additional second-growth areas come to maturity and as a measure to offset old-growth areas that have been protected from logging.

Today, our forests currently support 140,000 total jobs in BC through timber harvesting and manufacturing forest products. Unnecessarily ending old-growth logging would lead to significant job loss, stymie investment and put forest dependent communities in serious jeopardy.

If the goal is to reduce (or eliminate) old-growth harvesting and at the same time guard against job loss and a reduction in forest industry economic output, the fundamentals of volume yield per hectare of land harvested must be considered. Typical coastal old-growth sites can yield as much as 1,500-1,800 cubic metres per hectare whereas second-growth sites yield approximately 400-600 cubic metres per hectare given they are harvested at younger ages. This means that to support the existing forest industry in the absence of old-growth harvests, significantly more second-growth land base would need to be harvested annually to provide the same volume of logs and support today's level of employment. While we are moving towards this eventual goal, we simply do not have sufficient second-growth area today with which to support the industry.

In a July CBC interview, David Elstone, TLA executive director said, based upon research undertaken by the TLA, "if the available supply of old-growth forests were to suddenly disappear on Vancouver Island, it would result in the closure of (up to) four sawmills, at least one pulp mill, and spell the end of the cedar shake and shingles industry in BC." This outcome would be as a result of the significant drop in the annual allowable cut supported by existing second-growth only. While we are moving towards a sustainable second-growth industry, if we do not want more mill closures and job loss, continued old-growth harvest is needed.

However, old-growth logging is not simply about supporting the allowable cut. Old-growth logs have inherently higher value than second-growth logs and they are sought after globally for their fine grain and applicability to high-end building products.

As the current government works with stakeholders to revitalize the coast and create more jobs (see page 28), it is the old-growth logs that are sought out by the plethora of artisans and secondary wood manufacturers across BC, and it is those very companies that create the highest number of jobs per cubic metre of logs consumed; for example, a Vancouver Island flooring, timbers and

architectural wood components manufacturer that uses about 4,000 cubic metres of old-growth timber annually and employs about 25 persons. That equals 160 cubic metres per job, which compares very favorably to the BC average of about 960 cubic metres per job (2015 statistics). The government therefore has to be cautious in finding the right balance in forest policy that allows for

old-growth harvest and this high level of job creation.

Using Douglas fir as an example, the value of old-growth logs is clear. Using market-based log prices in place earlier this summer, old-growth logs can bring between \$350 per cubic metre for lumber quality logs and \$700 per cubic metre for high-end grades. By comparison, second-growth logs range between \$120 and \$200 per cubic metre. As a result, elimination of old-growth logging would not only reduce employment, but the inherent value in the industry would be reduced as well causing a ripple effect to the BC coastal economy.

Despite the risk, in September 2016, the Union of BC Municipalities passed a resolution calling on the BC government to amend the 1994 Vancouver Island Land Use Plan to protect all of the remaining old-growth forests, an initiative previously passed in April 2016 by the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities (AVICC). Ironically, at the same UBCM convention, a resolution was passed asking that “the methodology by which the allowable annual cut is determined and approved by the Chief Forester under the *Forest Act*, be re-evaluated so that stable, long-term employment be assured.” These two conflicting resolutions demonstrate that the relationship and reliance of the BC coastal economy on the harvest of some old-growth and job creation is not clear to everyone, least of all those who do not live in rural communities.

The same can be said of the environmental group, Ancient Forest Alliance, who suggests the elimination of old-growth logging is needed to ensure sustainability of the resources and to “protect BC’s forestry workers, who need government leadership to ensure a sustainable, second-growth forest industry if they are to have a future.” It is clear they were not aware of the significant negative implications of an old-growth ban on coastal AAC and jobs.

As with any valuable resource with competing demands, a balance must be struck to ensure an equitable benefit to all. To date, successive BC governments have adopted this philosophy by striking a balance in what lands are protected and what lands support the working forest as the industry transitions to a second-growth regime. As of today,



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the timber harvesting land base in BC consists of 22 million hectares or 23 per cent of BC, while parks and protected areas along with special management zones comprise approximately 29 per cent.

Old-growth forests provide value to the environment, recreation, wildlife and those forest workers whose livelihoods rely on it. A ban on harvest is no more palatable than complete inclusion in the timber harvest land base. A continued balance in provincial forest policy must ensure all stakeholder needs are met. 🌲

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