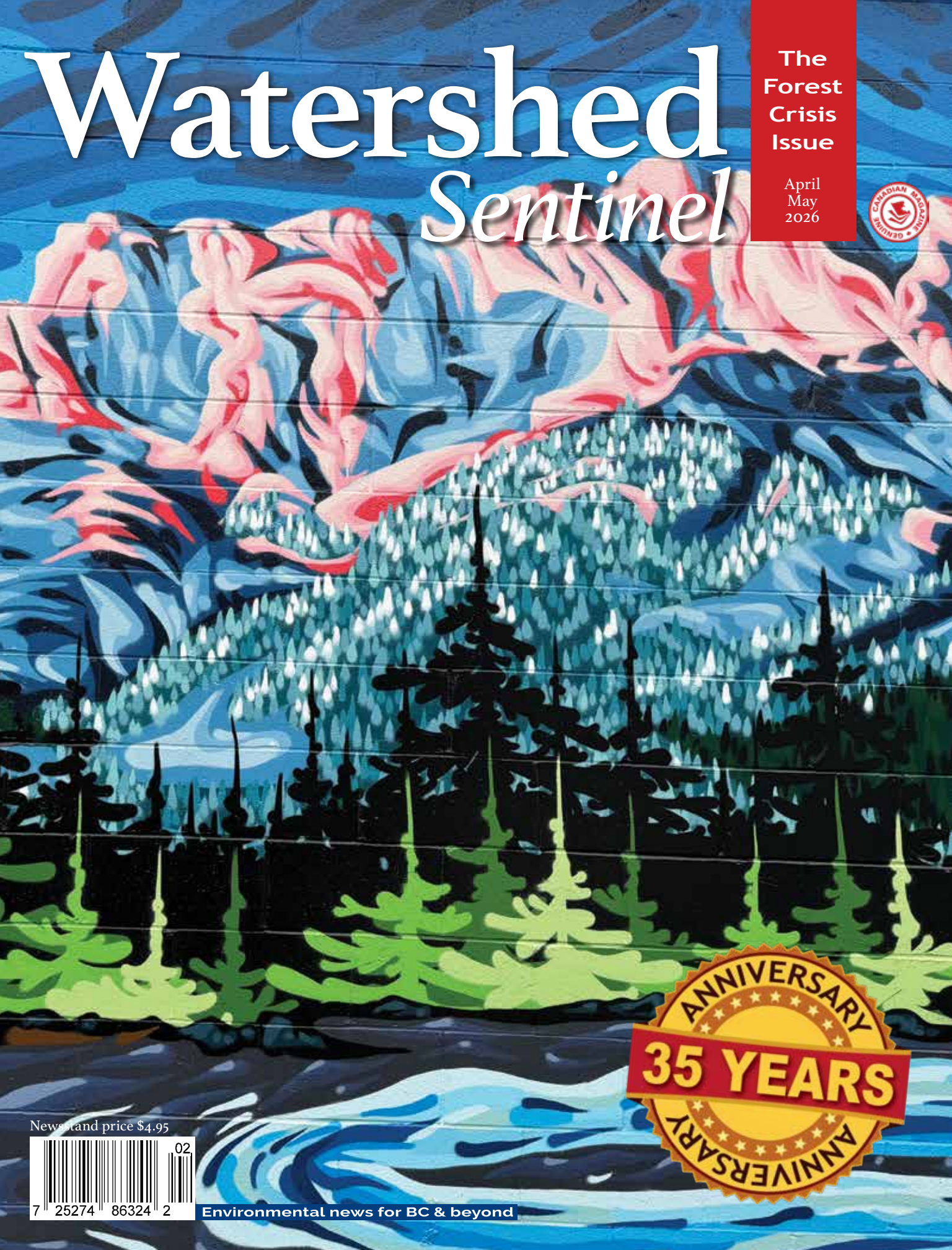
Watershed Sentinel

The Forest Crisis Issue

April May 2026



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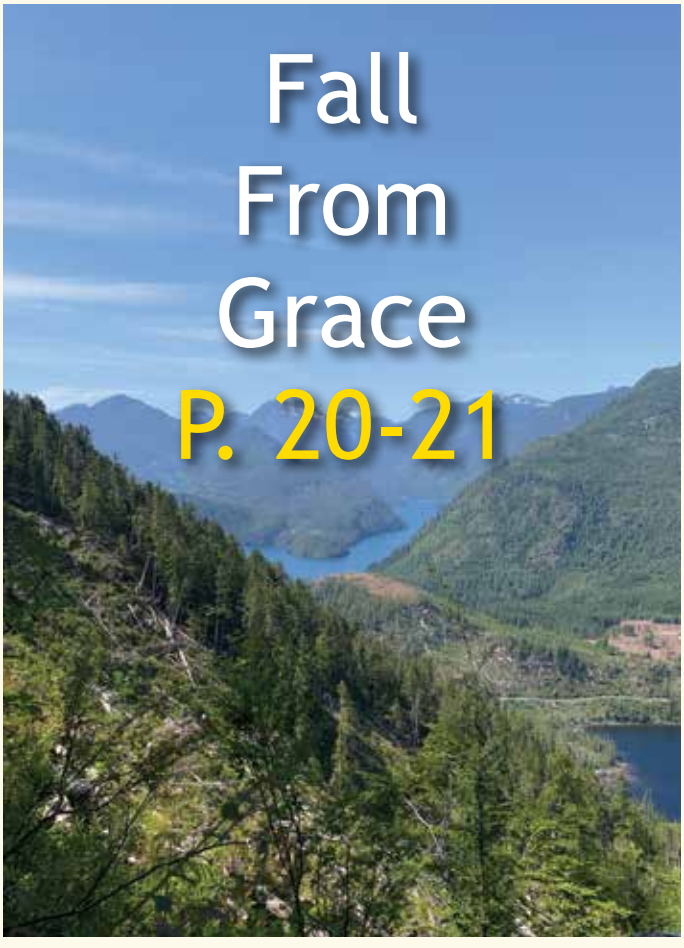

Watershed Sentinel

April | May 2026

Vol. 36 No. 2

Features

Fish Farm Defeat

North Islanders are celebrating a court ruling that upholds the government's right to phase out ocean fish farms.

Forest Falldown

BC's timber barons logged centuries of forests in a few decades, and now we're left with the consequences. The forest industry was built for a world that no longer exists. In this issue, our writers explore the current crisis and future solutions.

Content

Cover Credit

Mural in Parksville created by Lantzville mural artist Dan Martens

www.danopolis.ca

Instagram: @danopolis

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Watershed Sentinel

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Back to the Forest

Spring is here, bringing with it another season of conflict between clearcut destruction and forest defense protests.

Let's start with Fairy Creek (Ada'itsx). On March 21, World Forest Day, BC's forest minister approved Teal Cedar's clearcut logging of ancient yellow cedars above the creek where 1,100 people were arrested in a years-long civil disobedience campaign. Nearby in the Walbran Valley, chainsaws and feller-bunchers are set to continue laying waste to huge old-growth trees.

On northern Vancouver Island near Sayward, We Wai Kai First Nation is seeking permission to gut a massive swath of primary forest on steep north-facing slopes at Hkusam Bay on Johnstone Strait. Further north, BC Timber Sales has sold the marbled murrelet cutblock on Tsitika Mountain to small-time operators West Coast Log Salvage, over the objections of Ma'amtagila people, Pacific Wild, and many others.

People resort to blockading logging operations because legal means are ineffective. We can't vote our way out of the old-growth forest crisis, and petitioning the courts gets us nowhere. Forest policy is made by corporate donors and lobbyists to serve their interests. Blockades are the poor people's injunctions, an emergency response to prevent irreparable harm.

News flash: if you have to arrest 1,100 conscientious objectors in order to do business, give it up; you've already lost.

—Zoe Blunt, Sayward BC, March 2026

Celebrating 35 Years Strong

Happy Earth Day! Congratulations all around – after three and a half decades, we're stronger than ever. *Watershed Sentinel* is BC's oldest independent environmental magazine. Thank you for being part of bringing these stories to the world!

The secret to our success: Community support makes it all possible! We're so grateful for your subscriptions, donations, articles, and assistance. We want to know what you think! Keep your notes and letters coming. We're here for the long haul.

Don't miss the New Forest Act roadshow! Coming to a town near you in May and June. The New Forest Act proposes an entirely new framework for protecting, restoring, and harvesting timber. For more information, see *www.boundaryforest.org/new-forest-act-roadshow-2026-info/*

Editorial correction: The previous editorial ("When News Breaks," *WS*, February-March 2026) mistakenly referred to leaders forsaking the rule of law. To clarify: our intention was to highlight leaders who abandon ethics, morality, and humanity to justify the murders of unarmed civilians by police and armed forces.

Colombia declares Amazon off-limits

"Alliance for Life"

Colombia has declared all of its share of the Amazon rainforest a Renewable Natural Resources Reserve, closing the door to new large-scale mining and hydrocarbon projects across 483,000 square kilometres of tropical forest. The announcement came during the environment ministers meeting of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization at COP30, where acting environment minister Irene Vélez Torres described the move as Colombia "taking the first step" and invited neighboring countries to join an "Amazon Alliance for Life."

—www.ecoticias.com
February 26, 2026

Michigan goes after oil giants

"Cartel" Lawsuit

Michigan has launched an antitrust lawsuit against BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, and the American Petroleum Institute (API), accusing them of operating as a "cartel" to impede a transition to clean power and transportation. The filing states: "For decades, defendants have conspired with each other to forestall meaningful competition from renewable energy and maintain their dominance in the energy market." According to the complaint: "In the world that would have existed but for defendants' conspiracy, EVs would not be a fringe technology or a luxury alternative. They would be a common sight in every neighborhood – rolling off assembly lines in Flint, parked in driveways in Dearborn, charging outside grocery stores in Grand Rapids, and running quietly down Woodward Ave."

—www.commondreams.org
January 23, 2026

Chlorpyrifos raises Parkinson's risk

Pesticide Danger

A new UCLA Health study suggests long-term exposure to the pesticide chlorpyrifos may dramatically raise the risk of Parkinson's disease. Researchers found that people living in areas with sustained exposure had 2.5+ times the likelihood of developing the disorder. Lab experiments reinforced the finding: animals exposed to the chemical developed movement problems, lost dopamine-producing neurons, and showed the same toxic protein buildup seen in Parkinson's patients. Chlorpyrifos has been widely applied for decades. Despite a 2001 ban on residential use and further restrictions in 2021, the chemical continues to be used on a variety of crops in the US and remains common in other parts of the world.

—www.sciencedaily.com
March 16, 2026

Greenpeace must pay $345 million

Punitive Damage

A North Dakota judge has ordered Greenpeace to pay $345m in damages to pipeline company Energy Transfer, stemming from the 2016-2017 Standing Rock pipeline protests – a figure the environmental group contends it cannot pay. The jury found Greenpeace USA liable on all counts, including conspiracy, trespass, nuisance, and tortious interference. Energy Transfer intends to appeal the reduced damages, calling the original damages of $404m "lawful and just." Greenpeace USA interim general counsel Marco Simons said the case is far from over and expressed optimism about the group's planned appeal. "These claims never should have reached a jury," he said.

—www.theguardian.com
February 25, 2026

Colorado wants to control neonics

Hope for Bees

Colorado lawmakers have introduced a bill that would prohibit the use of crop seeds coated with neonicotinoids unless the buyer obtains a certificate from a government-approved verifier certifying that the use of the treated seeds is "necessary and appropriate." Neonicotinoids seriously harm birds, bees, butterflies, and the food web. If passed, the SEED Act would make Colorado the latest US state to place restrictions on neonicotinoids. New York, Vermont, Ontario, and Québec already have similar restrictions in place.

—www.thenewlede.org
February 2, 2026

Methane estimates fall short

Gas Emissions

A new study from McGill University found that methane releases from natural gas extraction and distribution could range from 23% lower to 316% higher than standard measurement systems show, raising new questions about how countries can measure and meet their ambitious targets for reducing methane emissions. Lead author Sarah Jordaan said while accurate upstream reporting is important, the combustion component – not accounted for in standard measurement systems – can be as much as 80% of the total emissions of this climate super-pollutant.

—www.theenergymix.com
February 16, 2026

Letters

Break Big Oil's Grip on Government

Thank you for reprinting the public education service from Environmental Defence (*Watershed Sentinel*, Summer 2025). I learnt a lot about "Who's Bending the Government's Ear? Top Five Most Active Fossil Fuel Lobbyists." Perhaps some might find these names recognizable: Enbridge, Suncor, TC Energy, Pathways Alliance, and Imperial Oil.

I was surprised by "Who in Government is Listening? Top Five Ministries Lobbied by the Fossil Fuel Industry." Natural Resources Canada held 250 lobby meetings in 2024, and Environment and Climate Change Canada came in second! The others are Privy Council Office, Finance Canada, and the Prime Minister's Office. Lobby meetings with elected representatives in the Conservative Party by far outnumber those with other politicians, but there are still a significant number of lobby meetings with Liberal Party MPs and ministers (and even a few with the NDP).

And these are just the lobbyist-initiated meetings. Government-initiated meetings are not tracked!

—Cecilia Wang
British Columbia

The Watershed Sentinel welcomes letters
but reserves the right to edit for brevity, clarity, legality, and taste.
Anonymous letters will not be published.

Send your musings and your missives to:
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BC Hydro's Monopoly Pricing Rights

From 2010 to 2024, BC Hydro was building a very expensive dam on the Peace River to generate power that was to be used at natural gas pumping stations and for the liquefaction plant in Kitimat.

Up to 2014, BC residential customers were required to pay $73.89-$92.57 per GWh. From 2015 to 2022, they were required to pay $100.43-$120.47 per GWh. Measured annual consumption was 17,593 GWh in 2010 and only 19,440 by 2022. An increase in annual residential customer consumption of just over 10% was paralleled by a +62% increase in cost per unit of electricity.

Revenues per GWh from trade customers (not BC domestic customers) varied from $29.50 per GWh in 2012 to $83.11 in 2023, mostly at less than what BC residential customers were paying. Volume of GWh sold to other than BC customers varied between 20,985 GWh in 2024 to 36,574 GWh in 2017.

When I did some work for former BC Hydro president Norm Olsen, it was clear that the purpose of Hydro was to provide *only* BC customers with very affordable electricity. That was before Enron.

Now, BC Hydro behaves more like a commercial corporation that is blessed with the advantage of having monopoly pricing rights over 4 million citizens and their businesses. A solution to this predicament would be to corporately separate BC domestic customers from non-domestic customers who have been "free riding" on the backs of BC citizen customers.

—Erik Andersen
British Columbia

The Leading Edge

Thanks. Your magazine is usually on the leading edge for most environmental issues. I read it cover to cover.

I appreciate having such an excellent information resource. I make sure our local library gets a copy from my bundle.

—Dave Duncan
Smithers, British Columbia

"Protect What We Love"?

I know that the English language is totally inadequate to articulate the shift in consciousness that is needed now.

The above quote, although popular and a "bridge" statement, continues the separation between the "lover" and the "loved." (*Watershed Sentinel*, Feb–March 2026)

What is needed is a catchy phrase that leads us towards our understanding of being totally embedded in the "loved," with no distinction between ourselves in all of our beautiful, raw, and varied forms.

New words are constantly being added to our vocabulary, invented or, sometimes questionably, appropriated from other languages or cultures. Now is the time for clearly articulating, in English, a new consciousness.

—Chris Bruels
Merville, British Columbia

Habitat prevails over highway plan

Goldstream Win

Environmental concerns and First Nations opposition have stopped a plan to widen the TransCanada Highway through Goldstream Park, at least for now. The Ministry of Transportation said the plan would not proceed, and it is seeking additional analysis of environmental factors before any future decisions are made. An earlier environmental assessment found the construction would result in "permanent loss" of salmon and amphibian habitat along the Goldstream River. For three years, Tsartlip First Nation elder Carl Olsen and hundreds of others have protested in the park against the "high environmental and cultural costs" of the project.

—www.timescolonist.com
February 6, 2026

A drop in a trillion-litre bucket

Tailings Mess

A joint statement by Keepers of the Water and four other groups calls Alberta's tailings cleanup announcement "a very small drop into a 1.7 trillion litre bucket, and not a serious attempt to clean up an industry with billions of dollars of toxic liabilities." The Alberta government's declarations about using new technology to reclaim toxic tailings and reduce emissions are contradicted by its promises to expand production, while the sheer scale of the existing problem dwarfs the $47 million pledged for the remediation effort. Alberta's press releases highlight water recycling, but industry's figures show use of fresh water is rapidly increasing.

—www.keepersofthewater.ca
March 6, 2026

New West joins climate lawsuit

Suing Big Oil

The City of New Westminster has joined 11 other municipalities in signing onto a class-action lawsuit for climate-related costs. 28 New West residents died during the 2021 heat dome, BC's highest death toll per capita. Climate-change-related flood control will cost the city an estimated $150 million in coming years. New West joins Burnaby, Cumberland, Gibsons, Nelson, Port Moody, Pemberton, Qualicum Beach, Sechelt, Slocan, Squamish, and View Royal in committing to a future lawsuit against Chevron, Exxon Mobil, and other global oil companies. The lawsuit will offically launch when a lead plaintiff is identified and sufficient funding is committed.

—www.suebigoil.ca
February 24, 2026

BC abandons BearSmart program

Bears in Limbo

BC's highly successful BearSmart program is now "in limbo," unadministered and unfunded, according to reports and government correspondence. The 15-year-old bear safety program is credited with dramatically reducing human-bear conflicts and the number of bears shot by conservation officers. Two government ministries acknowledged in an email that the program is no longer accepting new applications, nor is it apparently conducting audits or responding to requests from the public and other levels of government. This move comes as the Province considers opening a black bear hunt in the Lower Mainland at the request of berry farm owners.

—www.biv.com
February 12, 2026

Farmers call on feds to reverse cuts

AgCan Closures

Budget cuts at Agriculture Canada have eliminated seven agriculture research facilities and 665 employees, 12% of the agency's workforce. The National Farmers Union has denounced the cuts as "disastrous," and NFU vice president Phil Mount said cutting $154 million from the budget will cost Canadians much more in the long term. Two of the research farms set to be closed, in Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, were established in 1887, and two others are more than 115 years old. The losses include historic sites, brand-new purpose-built facilities, and the lands they stand on.

—www.nfu.ca
January 27, 2026

Appeals court upholds toxic listing

Plastics Ruling

The Federal Court of Appeal has ruled that the government acted lawfully when it designated plastic manufactured items as "toxic" under Schedule 1 of the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* (CEPA). A coalition of health and environmental groups joined as interveners in support of the Canadian government's efforts to fend off industry-led attempts to overturn the listing. David Suzuki Foundation, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, Environmental Defense Canada, Greenpeace Canada, and other groups were part of the successful intervention. The CEPA listing gives the federal government the tools it needs to make regulations to prevent and control plastic pollution, from manufacturing to use, storage, transportation, final disposal, and recycling.

—www.ecojustice.ca
January 30, 2026

Backyard GMOs

Genetically modified seeds now being sold to home growers

by Fionna Tough

One year ago, the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN) warned of the new threat of "backyard GMOs" — genetically modified salad green seeds marketed to home gardeners (*Watershed Sentinel*, April-May 2025).

But instead of salad greens, it turns out the first GM seeds sold for planting in Canadian backyards are GM tomatoes.

Until now, the only Canadian-grown GM vegetable was GM sweet corn, and those seeds are only available in big quantities for large-scale growers. Most of Canada's GM crops – corn, soy, and canola – are grown for processed food ingredients and animal feed.

Until January 2026, small growers were largely insulated from the impacts of patented seeds and the risks of GM contamination. But then a small US biotechnology company started selling a limited quantity of GM tomato seeds online.

The new GM tomato seeds – marketed as "The Purple Tomato™" – are not clearly identified as genetically modified, and home gardeners should take note. Backyard genetically modified organisms could be a new source of GM contamination through our seed and food systems.

Inherent risks and unknown effects

As CBAN reports, releasing GMOs into our food system and environment is an ongoing experiment. The processes of genetically engineering plants and animals can have unintended effects. GM contamination of indigenous corn varieties in Mexico resulted in unexpected traits being expressed in the plants, jeopardizing local food security. Potential risks from eating GM foods have not been fully investigated, and there is no scientific basis to conclude that all GM foods are safe. GMOs have already driven the evolution of weeds and insects that are resistant to the toxins meant to control them.

A purple trial balloon

The new GM tomato, approved last year, is an attempt to break open the market to GM fruits and vegetables following the failure of the Flavr Savr™ tomato, which was taken off the North American market in 1997. The Purple Tomato™ was engineered with genes from snapdragon flowers to increase the plant's anthocyanin

production. Anthocyanins are flavonoids that give blueberries, eggplants, and some existing tomatoes their vivid colours.

Health Canada says that the GM purple tomato has anthocyanins in the same range as these other, existing purple foods, including some of the other purple tomatoes already on the market. Nathan Pumplin, the CEO of the biotechnology company Norfolk Healthy Produce, says it is "a fun product" because it has a deeper purple colour inside and out.

The GM tomato is a niche product but it could nonetheless have a major impact. The company Norfolk Healthy Produce was set up just to sell this product, as a test of consumer tolerance for GM produce and an attempt to open up a previously untapped target market for the biotechnology industry: home gardeners.

Unlabelled GM seeds

According to the latest consumer poll from October 2025, 83% of Canadians want mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods. This level of support has stayed consistent since 1994, and yet there is still no labelling law in Canada.

This lack of mandatory labelling extends to GM seeds and means the GM purple tomato seeds and seedlings are not clearly labelled as genetically engineered. The packets display the word "bioengineered" in the product slogan, but the lack of clear labelling puts the onus on customers to do their own research if they want to purchase non-GMO seeds and seedlings.

Most major seed companies that serve home gardeners have non-GMO commitments. However, garden centres may lack clear sourcing policies for non-GMO seeds or seedlings.

We do not yet know how these companies will enforce their intellectual property rights in gardens across the country.

Threats to seed savers

Although tomatoes are self-pollinating, the risk of contaminating non-GMO and heritage tomatoes remains serious because pollinators can carry GM pollen from yard to yard. If tomatoes are just the first of many GM garden seeds, the risks to our seed supply and to neighbouring farms will increase as more types of GM seeds enter the market.

"Selling genetically engineered seeds to home gardeners is reckless and could jeopardize our ability to provide customers with organic and other non-GE choices," said Mel Sylvestre of Grounded Acres Organic Farm in Gibsons, BC. "If widely planted ... these GE seeds pose an unnecessary contamination risk that could threaten heritage seeds and our tradition of seed saving."

The threat of GM contamination is also important because the new gene sequences are corporate property. Companies control GM seeds through patented gene sequences, and we do not yet know how these companies will enforce their intellectual property rights in gardens across the country. For example, The Purple Tomato™ is patented, but the company encourages people to save, replant, and share the seeds from the GM fruit, as long as they don't sell the fruit, seeds, or plants. This restriction is in the terms and conditions on the seed packets, but the company owns the rights to the patented gene sequence in the seeds no matter where it shows up or how it got there.

Kim Delaney, founder of Hawthorn Farm Organic Seeds in Mount Forest, Ontario, is one of many seed producers opposing the release of GM garden seeds. Delaney already offers organic purple tomato varieties like Dancing with Smurfs, that were purposefully bred for the same trait now being marketed in The Purple Tomato™.

This new risk to seed savers has organizers of annual seed exchange events on high alert. Seedy Saturday events began in the 1990s to keep seed diversity alive, protect heritage seeds, and respond to increasing corporate control. The events center around the growers sharing and swapping seeds from their own gardens. Event organizers may need to vet their vendors to make sure they are not selling GM seeds.

In December 2025, over 160 farmers in BC and Ontario signed a declaration opposing the sale of genetically engineered vegetable seeds in Canada. Kim Delaney declared, "We should reinforce our local seed systems and reject genetically engineered seeds from US and multinational biotechnology companies. Canadian seed sovereignty should be a priority for all levels of government."

Fionna Tough is an outreach officer at the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network. To learn more and take action, visit *www.cban.ca/SeedsAction*.

Fish Farm Phase-Out

North Islanders celebrate ruling to protect wild salmon

by Zannia Kidd and pawa haiyupis

In January 2026, the Federal Court of Appeal upheld the federal government's decision to phase out open-net salmon farms in the Discovery Islands. The court dismissed an appeal by Mowi, the world's number-one supplier of farmed Atlantic salmon.

The ruling reinforces the government's authority to act cautiously when ecological risks are uncertain – a decision that will have major benefits for wild salmon, Indigenous communities, and the future of aquaculture in British Columbia.

The court's decision

The case, *Mowi Canada West Inc v Canada (Fisheries and Oceans),* challenged the federal government's 2020 decision not to renew salmon farm licences in the Discovery Islands.

Since 2020, aquaculture companies – led by Mowi – launched multiple appeals, winning some early procedural rulings.

The court has now ruled the fisheries minister has authority under the *Fisheries Act* to decline renewals and apply the precautionary principle, allowing protective action where activities could cause ecological harm. This marks a huge win for wild salmon and strengthens the legal footing for Canada's planned 2029 phase-out of marine open-net salmon farming.

Joy for wild salmon returns

"My initial reaction was happiness – joy. I was very, very pleased that the decision to close the farms was upheld," said 'Nam̱gis hereditary Chief Ho'miskanis Don Svanvik in response to the ruling..

For Svanvik, the decision carries benefits far beyond feeding the community. "It's almost a rite of passage, teaching work ethic, and all these intangibles that come with it," he explained, highlighting how wild salmon have long shaped community traditions and a shared sense of responsibility across his nation.

He said the decision is straightforward. "We do have evidence, and fish farms are absolutely harmful to wild salmon."

Still, he acknowledged that the legal fight may not be over: "There's still concern because the industry has deep pockets."

Precautionary principle

The ruling centers on the precautionary principle, letting regulators prevent serious environmental harm even without full scientific certainty. The Court confirmed ministers may act when risks include ecological collapse or impacts on Indigenous rights.

"It's common sense that we be precautious, we shouldn't be taking a chance," Svanvik said. "We do have evidence."

Svanvik said the Court's reasoning reflects what many salmon-dependent communities have argued for years: "The one absolute in this whole context is that there's no more fish farms in a significant portion of the outmigration route."

In 2022 they expected 9,000 fish, but that expectation was doubled. "When last year's fish went out, the farms weren't there," Svanvik said, "The baby sockeye were able to swim through the Discovery Islands in 2023 without the farms in the way, and they were able to come home."

"It's simple," Svanvik explained. "More fish got out, so more fish came home – it's incredible."

"It's not only the precautionary principle," he added. "This is a principle of looking after the environment and looking after the species."

"I don't want to imagine what it would be like to have no more salmon, it would be devastating to the earth."

Ecological context

The Discovery Islands are a maze of narrow waterways between northern Vancouver Island and the mainland, through which millions of juvenile Fraser River salmon migrate each spring along one of the Pacific coast's most important routes. "The Discovery Islands are the passageway for all kinds of fish," Svanvik said.

Studies show elevated levels of sea lice near open-net salmon pens in BC. "It was a labyrinth of fish farms where fish were trying to get through," Svanvik said.

"In my lifetime, salmon came back like clockwork," he recalled. "There was a time we had pretty much all the fish we needed."

In recent decades, those predictable returns faded. "A few decades ago I remember saying we could wait until August to get all the fish we need," he said. "We can't say that anymore."

For communities that rely on salmon, the changes have been profound. "It's part of who we are," Svanvik said. "We all have a responsibility to ensure the survival of wild salmon."

Looking ahead

The benefits for wild salmon are already being felt and celebrated after the removal of the farms, with fish "coming back almost instantaneously," Svanvik notes.

For Svanvik, the long-term goal is clear. "We're stewards," he said. "We have a responsibility to ensure there are salmon for us and our grandchildren."

Looking ahead, he hopes wild salmon populations will recover to the levels he remembers from earlier decades. "Back in the seventies and eighties they came back like they had for millennia," he said. "That's what meaningful success would look like."

Zannia Kidd (Zan) values more-than-human relations, collaborating through shared work connecting people, places, and waters.

pawa haiyupis is an environmentalist from the Ahousaht Nation. She is a consultant residing in unceded c̓uumʕas territory (Port Alberni).

Sunshine Coast Trail

Traversing old growth and clearcuts in a changing region

by Jasper Pryor

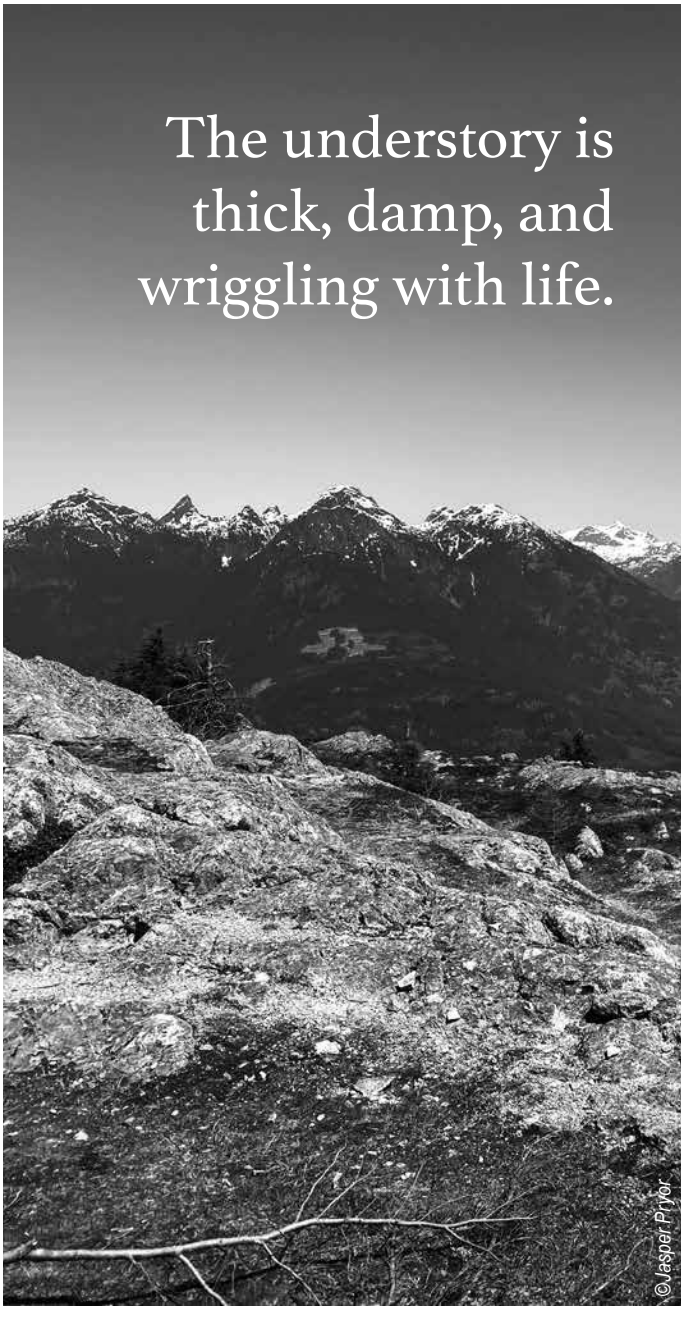
The ferry journey to Powell River from Comox is already enough to make this trip worthwhile. Spectacular mountainsides cloaked in thick, undulating forests backed by sharp peaks rise out of a still sea. As the sun begins to set, otters slip in and out of the water close to the ferry terminal.

It is easy to become instantly enamoured with this place. The following day, I was lucky to see a humpback breaching again and again, propelling its huge body in a joyful dance. Despite the challenges facing the natural world, abundant life still holds on, demanding a place in our hearts and in our shared future.

Most journeys along the Sunshine Coast Trail (SCT) start with the groceries and accommodation available in Powell River. For thousands of years, this has been the home of the Tla'amin First Nation, and in the history of this place we can see the ebb and flow of the many different ways of life that have existed in BC. This trail was created in 1992 in an effort to improve access to and preserve the remaining pockets of old growth in the area.

The current settlement is still defined by the pulp and paper mill established by the the Powell River Company in 1912. This huge industry brought people from across the world and produced massive quantities of newsprint, fed by the timber from surrounding forests. Western Canada's first pulp and paper mill at its height was a significant employer. With newsprint produced here feeding the global market, significant infrastructure such as the Powell River dam was constructed to support the industry's output. With declining demand for printed media, the end was inevitable, and in 2021 the mill closed indefinitely.

Over the past five years, the area has seen a sharp uptick in tourism, particularly driven by the SCT as it gains fame as Canada's longest hut-to-hut walk. According to research by Sunshine Coast Tourism, the region surpassed 3 million visitors and $50 million in accommodation revenues in 2024. Much of this tourism is driven by the growing popularity of outdoor recreation in the region. The current "Connected Coast" plan for a separate cycle path running from Sechelt to Langdale is gaining traction



– another sign of the area staking a claim as a leading hotspot of green tourism. This burgeoning non-extractive economy presents an opportunity for an alternative future that values forests for the life they hold, rather than the sum of their parts.

The SCT begins in Malaspina Park under old-growth cedars and firs. The understory is thick, damp, and wriggling with life. It was a special moment when I saw a black bear with her two cubs. As I stood and watched, the cubs looked back with curiosity before ambling into the ferns. A little further along, a barred owl calmly observed me with the aloof air that owls somehow all seem to possess. Vast trees appeared in groves mercifully saved from the saw by the impassioned campaigning of those who treasure this place.

Protected until their natural end, these trees will support countless life cycles. The space they leave behind will be home to the next generation, fed by their decaying matter. The chance to experience old growth is increasingly rare in this heavily logged region of BC. It's an experience that many will pay for, and cherish their whole lives. I will always remember the muffled thud of each footstep on the springy forest floor and the sense that I was just another animal thinking of food, water, and shelter.

The forest felt like it would never end, but seen from the sky, it's just a thin sliver surrounded by a patchwork of clearcuts. From the steps of the sturdy, well-made hut at the peak of Tin Hat Mountain, the forest looks as though some voracious woodworm has rampaged in every direction. It's a hard sight after the blissful peace of the dense canopy of Malaspina.

During this walk, temperatures sat at around 30°C, but in the deep forests it was far cooler. Crossing the clearcuts, at the mercy of the sun, every last drop of moisture was drawn out. In the areas where the path thins, with open cutblocks to either side, warm air punctured the shade and the understory was shrivelled and sparse. Undoubtedly, there will be some animals that thrive in these open spaces, but I noticed a marked decline in sightings of everything from squirrels to nuthatches.

As deeply as I wish that these old forests could be protected simply because they deserve to be, the reality is more nuanced. This is an economy built on extraction. Rewiring an entire system is an enormous challenge. Beyond the discourse of employment, there are intangible factors such as cultural and familial ties to the logging industry. Ensuring that the growth of regenerative tourism is not just a flash in the pan requires the kind of long-term thinking that is currently happening on the Sunshine Coast.

The growth of small businesses can take up the economic slack and allow more forest to exist for itself, rather than as a crop.

Balancing the still hugely-profitable logging industry with a rising eco-tourism sector presents a range of challenges and opportunities. As has been seen elsewhere, eco-tourism can bring its own problems, as local people find themselves forced out in favour of short-term rentals and rural infrastructure struggles to manage the influx of people.

In the best case scenario, these two industries can dovetail in a way that sees all critically important habitats protected without dividing communities in the short term or becoming reliant on narrower sources of income. Ideally, the natural growth of small businesses along the Sunshine Coast, from craft beer to high tech, can take up the economic slack and allow more forest to exist for itself, rather than as a crop.

The popularity of the Sunshine Coast Trail presents an opportunity to the region, and possibly a blueprint for other areas seeking to protect their remaining stands of ancient forest in a way that can benefit an entire community. As I laid my hands on an ancient Douglas fir, touching the deep divots drilled by generations of sapsuckers, I thought about my hope that this tree will outlive me and witness a new era of natural bounty.

Jasper Pryor is a young writer focused on the environment and climate. He has a passion for wilderness that he hopes to share with others.

The Beaver's Gift

Wildfires, Indigenous knowledge, and restoration

by Britney Supernault

Back in May 2023, my small Métis community of around 300 people, East Prairie Métis Settlement, was devastated by a wildfire.

Located in Treaty 8 territory, our community – also known as Pahkan-Wacis in Cree – is rural and has only one highway in and out. The Grizzly Complex fire was actually three fires that converged on my community. East Prairie burned for weeks, leading to an 80% loss of our forest and 14 families left houseless.

As Indigenous people, our connection to the land is immeasurably vast. The forest is not just the backdrop to our lives, but instead, an extension of our relations, of ourselves, our *Wahkohtowin*.

To lose 80% of our forest is to devastate generations of my community. We hunt, pick berries, and gather medicines in the forest. Our children and young ones learn how to hunt, trap, snare, and live in relationship with our four-legged relatives in the forest. Many of our stories begin and end with the forest.

This kind of climate trauma echoes through an alarming number of Indigenous communities. In 2025, more than 45,000 people from 73 First Nations were evacuated from their communities due to the risks posed by wildfires, and one in seven First Nations were impacted by wildfires. Considering that more than 480 Indigenous communities reside within the boreal forest, these figures are expected to rise as our winters become shorter and summers get hotter and drier.

So, where do beavers fit into all of this?

Beavers and wildfire mitigation

To the colonial eye, there isn't much to beavers beside their proclivity to build dams that seemingly disrupt ecosystems and damage private land.

However, for many Indigenous groups, like the Cree, beavers are heralded as wise creatures. Their long front teeth teach us how we are supposed to use our gifts for the betterment of the community. Beavers need to use their teeth to chew wood, drag lumber, and build dams, or their long incisors become overgrown and a nuisance. By doing so, they serve other plants and animals while stewarding the density of surrounding forests.

For scientists, beavers are marvelous engineers – their dam systems lengthen the amount of time minerals and water stay in an area, which improves water quality, increases carbon storage capacity, and nurtures lush vegetation that remains green, even in times of drought. The wetlands they create host a myriad of creatures by increasing habitat complexity and biodiversity.

When beavers build dams, they're not just plugging up waterways. Instead, they are transforming the entire hydrological system, creating networks of underground canals that feed and thoroughly hydrate the surrounding land.

Fire takes the path of least resistance – while it will jump over a stream, it won't burn through wetlands. These create natural firebreaks within forests, which mitigate the spread and lessen the overall severity of wildfires. Not to mention that the work of beavers in clearing trees for their dams thins out dense brush, slowing the spread of wildfire. Lastly, beaver wetlands provide a refuge for wildlife escaping from the heat and flames.

Beavers' long front teeth teach us how we are supposed to use our gifts for the betterment of the community.

The sheer impact of beavers and their ability to build dynamic ecosystems begs the question: how have these ecological giants flown under the radar for so long?

Just as colonial tactics to starve out Indigenous groups led to the decimation of bison herds, the introduction of capitalist monopolized trade via the fur trade led to the eradication of beaver populations in North America. Colonialism has caused immeasurable ecological loss that is largely understudied – before we could study the impacts of beavers and bison in their natural habitats, they were gone or deemed insignificant.

Beavers against climate change

After the wildfire, I was told that the forest would recover when the Beaver Clan returned – and later, as a climate activist and writer, I found echoes of this sentiment in my research. The same benefits of beaver engineering that foster lush, green vegetation also enhance climate resilience.

After fires, scorched soil can become hydrophobic, which prevents water from sinking into the water table while increasing the amount of runoff and sediments flowing downstream. This degrades water quality and can lead to fish and aquatic plant populations dying off. However, when dams are present, they act as filters, catching debris and minimizing the amount of sediment and pollutants moving downstream.

This does not mean every fire-impacted landscape should be retrofitted with a dam. Beavers belong in specific areas.

This is where Indigenous knowledge comes into play. Hearing our stories and knowledge around beavers – their roles and where they live – helps inform where beaver populations should be restored and where they shouldn't. Indigenous people are scientists whose catalogue of observations has been collected and refined over millennia, passed down generation to generation through oral storytelling practices.

We have a few beaver dams and wetlands in East Prairie, and I can't help but wonder at how interconnected their dam systems would be if the fur trade hadn't decimated 95% of their population.

While I doubt beavers would have necessarily saved all of our forest or prevented the destruction of fourteen family homes in my community, I do believe they could have greatly minimized the widespread devastation of the fire, which was exacerbated by drought-like conditions following a short winter.

Based in Edmonton, Britney Supernault (Cree Nomad) is a writer, climate activist, social media personality, and author of the Amazon best-seller *Hey June*. *www.thecreenomad.com*

A Marsh Worth Saving

A labour of love to protect and restore Armstrong's wetlands

by Claire Majors

In the heart of my hometown is a bog. Or is it a swamp? Growing up in Armstrong, I didn't give it much thought.

A monoculture of ten-foot-tall cattails formed a barricade impenetrable to the eye, and even as an idealistic teen forming an identity around saving the planet, I never asked about this local ecosystem.

But since then, I've learned about the value of wetlands. Sustaining biodiversity through habitat creation and mitigating inundation by acting as sponges are examples of the many roles they play. Akin to kidneys, wetlands filter toxic pollutants out of the water, and under the right conditions, they can act as powerful carbon sinks. Sadly, urban development, agriculture, forestry, invasive species, and climate change have created a perfect storm of erasure, leading to a loss of about 90% of low elevation wetlands in the Okanagan and Similkameen regions.

What lies beneath Armstrong's pavement was once a land filled with water-loving vegetation. It was cleared in the 1870s for market gardens, but over the past 50 years, much of what was farmland has been preloaded to support housing developments. As the town planted more subdivisions on the wetlands, the water table rose, as did residents' concerns.

In 2017, Armstrong experienced major flooding that caused extensive damage and forced residents to evacuate. One citizen paying close attention was Jill de la Salle, a longtime resident and retired schoolteacher. When she learned that a large parcel of privately owned wetland

(one of the last surviving pockets in the downtown core) was designated for housing development, she knew she had to act.

"I didn't know too much about the superpowers of wetlands when I first started," de la Salle admits. "I just felt that piece of land needed to be conserved because it was beautiful and was home to so many birds and frogs and so much a part of Armstrong." In 2018, her daughter urged her to form a society, and she founded the Armstrong Wetlands Association (AWA).

"We were lucky to have a combination of experts and people who are concerned citizens join the group," de la Salle says. This initial group included biologists who had worked for the Ministry of the Environment as well as local artists who had advocated for the wetlands for years. Once the board was formed, members pooled their skills and began developing a restoration and enhancement plan.

De la Salle's intention was to protect the privately owned wetland, but after years of efforts, it just wasn't happening. So, given that even a small step in the right direction holds value, the association focused on a one-acre city-owned parcel. Fortunately, the city was on board, and the Okanagan Street Wetland Enhancement project was launched.

The project's first phase was an environmental impact assessment in 2023 that resulted in a thorough report detailing all flora and fauna present. The assessment concluded that creating a pond and a hummock would "enhance the biodiversity of the parcel, provide critical wildlife habitat, and benefit the community both aesthetically and ecologically." AWA got to work on making it happen.

Eventually, in January 2025, volunteers triumphantly excavated a pond on the site, with AWA biologists and a cultural monitor from Splatsin Nation supervising. The hummock formed from the excavated soil was planted the following spring with native grasses, trees, and shrubs.

The work of preserving wetlands is not simply a walk in the marsh.

Community education has always been one of AWA's core tenets. Early in the project, local high school students put on boots and toured the site, learning about the proposed transformation and its benefits. Then, when the task of planting the hummock was at hand, several classes of secondary students volunteered their time and energy. On planting day, a daycare group spontaneously joined in.

"I believe that all the cheering and positive attitudes of everyone here will help the plants to survive and grow," de la Salle told the crew as she thanked them for coming. More community and student work bees have been organized to water the seedlings and to pull invasive plants.

The assessment recommended building a boardwalk and viewing platform overlooking the pond, complete with informational signage. If such a promenade had existed when I was in school, maybe I wouldn't have been so wet behind the ears about the merits of the marsh. (Yes, I've learned that it is a marsh!)

After land has been secured, sorting out money and bureaucracy are two of the greatest hurdles in this kind of restoration. Getting provincial permits for this project was expensive and time-consuming, but AWA secured a host of grants. Supporters include provincial, regional, and local donors, the BC Wildlife Federation, the local farmers' market, and local choir and theatre groups. The project cost about $43,000 so far, and building the boardwalk (the final phase) is estimated to cost another $120,000.

At this point, community connection has been revitalized, Nootka roses have taken root, and mallard ducks and muskrats have been spotted. De la Salle is hopeful that the yellow-headed blackbirds she used to see here will return too.

But the work of preserving wetlands is not simply a walk in the marsh. Diverse collaboration is key, and many hours must be spent securing permits, writing grants, and performing community outreach. And it's hard to make everybody happy. (Some neighbours were nervous about an increase in mosquitoes and drowning risks with the pond, which will be mitigated by bat boxes and warning signs.) There are guaranteed to be setbacks, but focusing on the joy and connection that this work cultivates goes a long way.

De la Salle hopes that "starting with this little piece, we can showcase what we can do," creating a groundswell of interest that reaches private landowners too.

Claire Majors is a settler and teacher on the unceded territory of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Kosapsum) and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples.

Tearing Down the Wall

Kus-kus-sum and our relationship with land and water

by Hazel Volk

In winter 2025, a barge carrying a crane moved slowly into the Courtenay River estuary to remove the last remains of the old sawmill. For weeks, 20-metre-long rusty steel pilings were wrenched from the mud one by one, marking the end of a 400-metre retaining wall that had kept the land apart from the water for 70 years.

The barrier is emblematic of a common coastal engineering practice known as "hard armouring," where rigid, permanent structures are built to protect shoreline properties and infrastructure from erosion, waves, and flooding. This corrugated metal "killing wall" – built to support a sawmill that operated from 1947 to 2006 – trapped juvenile salmon, leaving them exposed to hungry seals. The rush to make usable land destroyed many acres of prime habitat. Thousands of years of cultural-use history, including parts of an ancient wood stake fish trap fishery, were buried.

The restoration project started in fall 2017, when Project Watershed began fundraising and working with the K'ómoks First Nation and the City of Courtenay to purchase the old mill site from then-owner Interfor. K'ómoks First Nation named the site Kus-kus-sum, meaning "very slippery," to honour a nearby village of that name that existed before colonization.

By March 2021, the site was secured and demolition and restoration work began. Since then, volunteers have spent thousands of hours in the mud, restoring salt marsh habitat for dozens of species of fish, birds, and plants. Salmon were already spotted spawning in the new lagoons while demolition was underway. Even in its degraded state, the estuary supports important populations of great blue herons, Canada geese, loons, sandpipers, bald eagles, and trumpeter swans.

Beyond rehabilitation, the project highlighted how development leaves deep, long-lasting scars on the land when local ecosystems are treated as merely an obstacle to be tamed, controlled, and paved over. As communities learn firsthand the cost and labour involved in removing these scars, alternatives to hard armouring that leave natural habitats more intact begin to look attractive to municipal councils and planners.

For independent ecological advocate Vanessa Scott, Kus-kus-sum offers an opportunity to learn how to build with rather than against nature in future development projects. The problem, she suggests, lies in the colonial mindset that land exists primarily for human consumption.

Scott recognizes that in conversations with government officials, the natural world often has to be translated into economic terms to be taken seriously. As a volunteer with Project Watershed's Fundraising Committee who worked on the original Kus-kus-sum communications strategy, she saw firsthand how "eco-asset language was a foundation for investment by governments and the public." In short, when governments can formally recognize ecosystems on spreadsheets, much like roads and sewer pipes, they become more legally and financially committed to protecting them.

This framing "proves" ecosystems' usefulness to humans: they provide flood protection, absorb climate impacts, and save public money by replacing man-made infrastructure. While this kind of cold accounting loses something essential – the land is no longer valued because it is alive, but because it serves our needs – it remains a necessary concession to our current social reality. For now, Scott sees such frameworks as a strategic bridge or common ground on which to meet, allowing the natural world to enter spaces where decisions are shaped by budgets, legal obligations, and risk assessments.

Coming back to right relationship

Structures like the killing wall serve as a stark metaphor for the ways humans have created an illusion of separation from the natural world through control, force, and domination.

With the wall now dismantled, the land and sea have come back into their original relationship. Are we also being asked to soften, reconnect, and reconcile with the natural world? In the bigger picture, including ecosystems in decision-making is not enough on its own if the deeper relationship remains unhealed. A real par-

adigm shift asks us to question outdated values that shape how we inhabit the Earth and belong to it.

Ultimately, this is what Kus-kus-sum teaches us. As Courtenay Mayor Bob Wells said at a milestone gathering in January, "It's not just about removing the wall. It's about restoring the relationship with the land, the river, and one another." Returning the 8.3-acre site to Indigenous stewardship once restoration is finished reminds us that some relationships should never be broken.

The Kus-kus-sum site will be fully returned under legal ownership to the K'ómoks First Nation, while the rest of the estuary will see the Nation gain shared legal authority and a consent-based role in all major decisions, through a modern agreement with the Province designed to keep the estuary healthy and protected. Currently, the estuary is managed by a mix of stewardship community groups, Indigenous land guardians, and local government officials.

K'ómoks Chief Nicole Rempel, who sees caring for the area as an "inherent duty," explained: "K'ómoks First Nation believes in partnerships, particularly with like-minded groups that share a similar vision." Caitlin Pierzchalski, Project Watershed's Executive Director, added that the project is succeeding only because of "widespread community support."

In the end, we protect what we love. When people regain a sense of responsibility toward the land and a sense that they belong to it, life returns – not just in the places around us, but in how we understand our relationships to the human and more-than-human world. The collaboration between the Nation, volunteers, and local organizations at Kus-kus-sum shows that the community's heart is already there.

Forest Falldown

Brace yourself. These stories paint a picture of BC's forest industry undergoing catastrophic contraction.

Falldown, in industry jargon, is a shortage of timber supply that occurs after accessible, high-value forests have been cleared, but young and replanted forests have not yet grown up to marketable size.

This shortfall is what the industry is facing now. It's become clear that the old *Forest Act* was created for a world that no longer exists. Timber barons could have found ways to make the industry sustainable, but instead they logged centuries of forests in a few decades, and now we're left with irreparable consequences.

In these pages, we have an eyewitness account of professional foresters flouting environmental rules in the field. We have well-researched articles about Washington State's rules on protecting old growth; BC's failure to heed decades of warnings from its own experts; the tragic costs of watershed collapse – and the urgent need for a new *Forest Act*.

Sentinel Educational Foundation

Mural by Dan Martens @danopolis

The Impossible Dream

BC's latest forest crisis is a wake-up call for all of us

by Zoe Blunt

All reports suggest BC's forest industry is in crisis. Everyone from provincial ministers to the Truck Loggers Association are saying BC's forest industry is spiralling into economic disaster.

After decades of mismanagement, it's no surprise. It's been an era of abandoned promises and violence against forests, rivers, people, and wildlife. There's no way to know how long future generations will suffer from the impacts of wrecked watersheds.

Unfortunately, the Province's solution is more of the same: more old-growth logging, more clearcuts in already-devastated watersheds – and not for the benefit of local communities. Provincial delegations are chasing overseas trade agreements in a desperate bid to keep raw log exports flowing at the expense of the value-added economy at home. The Province treats logging-dependent communities like they're expendable.

We can also expect corporate leaders to demand more government bailouts and fewer environmental and labour regulations – measures that, over time, will only make the crisis worse.

Papering over the cuts

In late 2025, a leaked report revealed timber harvest plans that were based on inflated forest inventories and hopelessly optimistic future growth models in northern BC. Industry experts noted that foresters routinely draw up logging plans based on impossible models. They fail to account for forests lost to massive wildfires and drought. Regrowth projections assume saplings will grow in ideal conditions that we can't depend on in the future. They can't log what isn't there.

At the same time, industry is pushing hard to log what's off-limits. Forest protectors have seen this before, on rare occasions when company foresters visited contentious cutblocks. I've heard them admit that their maps didn't line up with reality and that their logging plans were based on aerial photos decades out of date.

We've spoken with planners who simply failed to note groves of giant cedars that should have been protected from logging. We've ground-truthed maps that wilfully omitted wetlands, fish-bearing creeks, heritage trees, and bear dens. Once these places are logged, they're gone.

A new system is urgently needed to replace the arrogant pretense that we can grow forests faster and better than Mother Nature. That we could log millions of acres per year and never run out. The illusion has faded and reality has set in. Now we know we can only work within the constraints of soil, water, and time.

The shift

A cultural, social, and political shift is happening. Not everywhere, not all at once, but the massive acceleration of clearcut logging has provoked an equally massive backlash. Public opinion has turned against the destruciton of primary forests.

This is what Premier David Eby meant when he said, "There is no longer a social license from British Columbians" to log old-growth forests.

As we learn how ecosystems thrive on networks of roots, fungi, moss, and lichens, we find to our surprise that trees are not solitary; they live in communities. But instead of applying this knowledge, industry and the Province steamroll right along, treating forests like nothing more than commodities to be extracted.

Until we change the system, ancient trees in BC are marked for destruction. Old-growth deferrals are quietly lifted so companies can swoop in and cut them down. Old Growth Management Areas and Wildlife Management Areas are unceremoniously erased from the map. Now our Forest Minister is calling for "active management" – industrial logging – in parks and protected areas.

If you know and love giant trees, my advice is to hug them while you can. If they're not already in parks or protected areas, they can be taken. And before long, we may have to fight for the ones we thought were safe.

Fall From Grace

What I learned working as a forester on Vancouver Island

by Emily Milne

Growing up on Vancouver Island, I spent my summers hiking, fishing, and camping. My feet were always filthy from days spent barefoot, and my fingers always stained red from the raspberries in my grandma's garden.

My family often reminded me how lucky I was to grow up in a place where mountains were near, oceans were endless, and forests were lush. I wanted to take advantage of this natural beauty, so in the summer of 2023, I applied to be a forester.

The interview was vague. My boss told me, "It's best to let you do the job before I describe it to you." I was curious and intrigued – mostly by the money and the notion of being among the trees all day – so I took the job.

I packed a bag lunch, put on spiked rubber boots, and headed out. Every morning, I flew in the helicopter, and from above, I saw hundreds of hectares of barren land like I'd never seen before. In my mind, cutblocks were abstract. I knew logging companies cut down trees, but they did it for a reason: for toilet paper and lumber. Now, something shifted inside me. It was alarming to see diverse and vibrant forests completely devoid of life. But I steadied myself, knowing I wouldn't be contributing to the destruction of forests; I would be saving them. This job felt too good to be true.

On my first day, I walked, crawled, and dragged myself 15 kilometres through thick brush and old-growth forest that would be logged by Vancouver Island's most notorious forest company; a company that claims to manage the forest responsibly, but logs so much old growth that less than 20% of Vancouver Island's stands still remain. But I was one of the good guys. My job was to catalog streams, map logging roads, and report natural habitats that needed to be protected from clearcutting.

I loved running my fingertips along the bark of an ancient fir and feeling the sun on my neck as it beamed through the tree canopy. On my first day, as I stepped out of the helicopter and into the forest, it was as close to divine as I had ever been. But it didn't last long.

My coworkers (all middle-aged men) had done this job for many years. They ran through impenetrable thickets like gazelles in the Serengeti, while I fell so many times my scraped knees matched the red huckleberry bushes. Still, I was determined to do the job well. I asked questions, memorized tree species, and

laughed at their unfunny jokes. But the novelty of being outside all summer was quickly fading.

One day, my coworker and I were surveying an area for old growth when I approached a tree that piqued my interest. I started the process of calculating its age. I inserted an increment borer tool into the tree as far as it could go, then pulled it out and began counting each individual ring. Each ring represented a year the tree had stood. When I reached 252, I knew I had stumbled upon an ancient tree.

I wound my measuring tape around the tree's circumference, concluding it was undeniably ancient. I stepped back and surveyed the tree from top to bottom, craning my neck to catch a glimpse of the top. Its branches curved and twisted and offered shelter for birds, while its underground root systems provided nutrients to its offspring. At its base was a bed of bright green moss where banana slugs, wood bugs, and earthworms lived. This tree was a mother. This tree was a home. The value of this giant was greater than I could understand, but I knew I was protecting it by reporting it to my company.

I told my coworker of my findings, reciting the tree's measurements. He laughed and told me I was surely mistaken. We walked over to the giant tree and he made his own "calculations" that were grounded not in facts, but in fabrications. He marked the tree as second growth, which gave it the green light to be clearcut.

I was certain of my findings. So, with my cheeks flushing with irritation, I insisted he measure again. He smirked, patted me on the back, and moved on to the next tree, while I stood dumbfounded. I was sick to my stomach. This beautiful, invaluable tree would be cut down, and there was nothing I could do about it. I could not save this tree. I was not one of the good guys.

The rose-coloured glasses fell off my face and landed in the mud.

After this, it became clear my job was not to protect old-growth trees and preserve animal habitats, but to mold my findings to fit what logging companies wanted to hear. Overflowing streams were transformed before my eyes into dry gulches. Peeping birds in their nests turned into nothing but masses of sticks and moss.

Turning a blind eye took its toll on me. I grew weary and the rose-coloured glasses fell off my face and landed in the mud.

Old-growth forests are worth more alive than they will ever be cut down. They store carbon, regulate watersheds, prevent landslides, and sustain ecosystems that cannot be replaced by replanted trees or "managed" forests. A 250-year-old tree is not timber waiting to be cut down. It gives life and nutrients to its offspring, shelters species, cools streams, and stabilizes a climate that desperately needs a protector. Once it's gone, no amount of monoculture replanting can replace it.

Companies like this one claim to practice sustainable forest management, while relying on measurements and assessments that disappear old growth on paper before the ancient trees are cut down in practice. The forest is not protected, but reclassified to fit a for-profit narrative.

That summer, I became a forester, believing I could protect the forest I loved. I left understanding how naive that belief was. There is no clean conscience in an industry that depends on the destruction of old-growth forests and wildlife habitats while calling it "responsible management." I watched as ecosystems were misclassified, streams written off, and ancient trees labeled otherwise so they could be logged. I was hired to participate in that system, and I could no longer pretend I was on the right side of it.

Emily Milne is an aspiring educator who grew up on Vancouver Island. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, hiking, and exploring British Columbia's nature.

Talk and Log

BC betrays its own promises to protect old-growth forests

by Tobyn Neame

Old-growth forests in British Columbia hold a prized position in our collective imagination. Our relationships with these places define our regional identity.

We often picture them as valleys of towering cedar and Douglas fir with sunshine filtering down through diverse canopies, and salal and huckleberry stretching up to the light. But old growth also includes high-elevation forests of slow-growing subalpine fir and mountain hemlock, rooted to the sides of cliffs, weathering avalanches and wind, and old northern stands of unassuming boreal white and black spruce that have supported lichen and caribou for centuries. In rainforests, old growth is defined as stands averaging 250 years or older. In drier forests, the threshold is 140 years.

These are all complex, ancient ecosystems that do not regenerate on human timelines. But they are still being logged.

Ecosystem distinctions matter because industrial forestry has focused on high-productivity valley-bottom forests with the biggest trees, richest soils, highest biodiversity, and greatest carbon storage.

We've been here before

The conflict over old growth in BC is cyclical. In the 1990s, mass arrests took place in Clayoquot Sound. Thirty years later, blockades at Fairy Creek became the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history. And then last year, more blockades erupted in the Walbran Valley.

The message from government and industry is the same every time: forestry has changed, sustainability is improving, and lessons were learned. But on the ground, old-growth logging continues. There's a name for this pattern: "talk and log."

The Old Growth Strategic Review

In 2020, the province released the Old Growth Strategic Review, authored by two independent professional foresters. The report made 14 recommendations and called for a fundamental shift in forest management. The authors urged a move away from the timber-first model toward one that prioritizes ecosystem health and respects Indigenous rights and title.

Key elements of the OGSR included immediate deferrals of logging in the most at-risk old-growth ecosystems, transitioning to ecosystem-based management, shared decision-making with First Nations, transparent monitoring and public reporting, and economic transition programs for forestry workers and communities already destabilized by decades of overcutting.

The authors warned that without rapid action, the rarest and most productive old-growth ecosystems could be lost before new planning frameworks were in place. Publicly, the provincial government accepted all 14 recommendations. But none of them were fully implemented.

The following year, the Province convened the Old Growth Technical Advisory Panel (OG TAP), which mapped all remaining old-growth forests and determined the most at-risk areas.

In 2021, the Province announced temporary logging deferrals in selected areas, but many of the best valley-bottom forests – those most likely to be logged – were not included. Furthermore, in several cases, deferrals were later lifted or modified.

The structural shifts envisioned by the OGSR, including legally-binding biodiversity thresholds, ecosystem-based management, and a clear end to logging endangered old growth, have not yet materialized at scale. The timber supply framework, cut-level determinations, and tenure system remain largely intact.

Process without protection

The Provincial Forest Advisory Council was convened in 2025 to provide independent advice on the future of forestry in BC. Its mandate included examining how to balance ecological sustainability, economic stability, and community well-being. The result was yet another iteration of the provincial talk-and-log cycle.

When the PFAC released its final report, it emphasized the need for economic diversity, collaborative land-use planning, and improved monitoring. But the report stopped short of recommending immediate protection for the most endangered

old-growth ecosystems. It didn't set firm conservation targets or timelines to end logging in high-risk forests, or call on industry to transition to sustainable models.

Instead, the PFAC leaned toward more study and more dialogue; specifically, another review, nearly identical to the OG TAP. When will the Province stop documenting old-growth loss and instead work to protect it?

What's left and what's at risk

The rarest and most productive old-growth ecosystems, particularly valley-bottom coastal forests, represent a tiny fraction of the original landscape. They are also the most commercially valuable, the most accessible, and the most vulnerable in the absence of hard caps and legal safeguards.

Government reports emphasize that 80% of old-growth forest in BC is not currently at risk of logging. However, much of what remains is high-elevation, low-productivity (small, slow-growing) trees in remote areas, and/or is already within parks or protected areas.

By contrast, the 20% still at risk for logging likely includes most of the high-productivity old growth – the tall, low-elevation trees that store the most carbon and support the greatest biodiversity.

A question of values

Ancient forests are not renewable on human timelines. A 500-year-old cedar cut today will not be replaced for centuries. The web of lichens, fungi, insects, soil microbes, and hydrological systems built over millennia cannot be replanted.

Through protests and demands for consultation, communities demonstrate that old growth matters. Scientists have documented the stakes for biodiversity and climate stability.

The unresolved question is not whether change should happen; it's whether BC will move from talk to action before the most valuable old-growth ecosystems are lost forever.

Tobyn Neame is the Forest Campaigner at the Wilderness Committee.

Old Growth in the USA

Washington shows that protecting ancient trees is simple

Cedar cut by Teal Cedar on Edinburgh Mountain in 2025

Massive old-growth cedar tree found in 2025 in a Western Forest Products cutblock near Grant Bay, west of Quatsino Sound.

by Joshua Wright

"Surely old-growth logging won't be happening in five years." That was my belief in 2020, when I was a 17-year-old activist who — almost by accident — helped initiate the Fairy Creek blockades and the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history.

The Fairy Creek blockade arose at the peak of the climate movement, inspired by groups like Extinction Rebellion and activists like Greta Thunberg. In that moment, it seemed inevitable that the old paradigm of forestry in BC would not last. Today, that old paradigm seems more entrenched than ever, with old-growth deferrals getting canceled across the province and an NDP government more focused on short-term economic development than long-term sustainability. Canada's pledge at the 2022 Global Biodiversity Conference to protect 30% of land and water by 2030 appears dead in the water. Minister of Forests Ravi Parmar recently claimed that old-growth logging will "always be a part of [BC's] forest sector." (I need not explain the impossibility of that statement.)

At this moment, the prospect of true forestry reform in BC seems bleak. But Washington protected its state-owned old-growth forests 20 years ago and maintains a thriving forest products industry today. How did they do it? And what can Washington's success teach us about BC's forestry predicament?

It might shock you to learn that, despite its dismal reputation on the global stage when it comes to the environment, the US actually has stronger environmental laws than Canada.

In the 1990s, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) found itself in a similar position to BC Timber Sales, with a degraded land base from which less and less old growth was available to log; ecosystems on the brink of collapse; and the loss of social license for logging old-growth forests.

In 2004, the Washington State Legislature convened an independent panel of scientists to inventory and protect old-growth forests on state trust lands managed by the DNR. These state trust lands are analogous to Crown lands; they are publicly owned and managed by the state for revenue production. The DNR's expert panel established three criteria for determining whether a forest stand qualified as old growth. Central to this definition was origin: stands had to pre-date 1850, i.e. to have existed prior to widespread European settlement. In addition to age, stands were required to meet specific structural characteristics associated with late-successional ecosystems and to encompass a minimum area of two hectares.

Under this framework, old-growth patches under two hectares would remain available for harvest. However, the DNR created an additional safeguard requiring that any individual tree exceeding five feet in diameter be protected as an individual "leave tree." This provision ensured protection for the largest and most ecologically significant legacy trees, even in smaller or fragmented patches. To implement the policy on the ground, the DNR established a certification process for foresters to become "old growth designees," trained to identify qualifying characteristics in the field and delineate the boundaries of old-growth stands prior to timber sale planning.

This system is not perfect, but it resulted in the protection of approximately 29,000 hectares of old-growth forests in Western Washington, including every ancient forest on DNR-managed lands. It protected these forests while the DNR continued to generate hundreds of millions of dollars and over half a billion board feet of timber annually from its second and third-growth forests. Had DNR failed to implement an old-growth policy, the agency likely would have clearcut all of its remaining old-growth forests within a decade, and the DNR would've been forced to transition to second-growth. Instead, the state legislature had the foresight to take action before old-growth forests had entirely disappeared from the land base.

Until recently, federal lands in the US benefited from additional layers of protection that, while not entirely ending old-growth logging, significantly curtailed it across much of the country. The *Endangered Species Act* has been the most powerful legal tool for old growth conservation in the US, effectively safeguarding nearly all remaining old-growth forests on federal lands in Washington, Oregon, and California to protect the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet.

BC, though it presents itself as environmentally progressive, does not have an equivalent *Endangered Species Act*. It also no longer has a viable population of northern spotted owls. That's not a coincidence.

Federal lands in the US also benefit from the Roadless Rule, which was created in 2001 under Clinton and is currently being dismantled by the Trump administration. This rule directed the US Forest Service to inventory all remaining roadless areas and prohibits most new road construction within those areas. The rule has protected nearly 24 million hectares of public land across the country, including some of the last remaining intact valleys in the lower 48 states, and millions of hectares of old growth in southeast Alaska.

The rapidly-dwindling mountain caribou herds in British Columbia's interior depend on large, contiguous roadless areas for their survival. Their decline reflects the ecological consequences of the Province's failure to adopt comparable landscape-level protections for roadless areas.

What does this mean for BC? Next time you hear the timber industry fear-mongering about the impact of a decline in old-growth logging, remember that old-growth logging is going to come to an end one way or another. The only real question is: Will BC have any old-growth forests left when that happens? And will the Province help communities that depend on old-growth logging transition to a value-added, second-growth forestry sector – or will it just abandon those communities when the boom is over?

Old-growth logging is going to come to an end one way or another.

Forestry watchdog Joshua Wright works to protect native forests through advocacy and citizen science. He is the director of the documentary *Eden's Last Chance*.

Reality Check

When the framework no longer fits the forest

by Jennifer Houghton

In December 2025, Domtar announced it would permanently close its pulp mill in Crofton, on Vancouver Island, ending nearly seven decades of operation and eliminating about 350 jobs.

The company's stated reasons were blunt: weak global pulp pricing and a lack of access to affordable fibre in BC. The mill had already received provincial and federal support in recent years – including an $18.8 million funding package in 2023 to modernize its production – but those efforts were unable to sustain operations.

For North Cowichan, the closure isn't an abstract "sector adjustment." Domtar has been the municipality's single largest taxpayer, contributing about $5 million a year in property taxes, that fund services whether a mill is operating or not. Beyond the payroll, the shutdown lands on the people who make a living around the mill: logging contractors, truckers and mechanics, tug and barge operators, chip suppliers, and the smaller businesses that live off the rhythm of coastal forestry.

Crofton is part of a broader pattern: shrinking harvest, mill closures, and a wood supply that no longer matches planning projections. The closure illustrates the downstream consequences of a deeper planning issue.

The overreporting problem

BC's forest economy is still governed by a number most residents never see: the Annual Allowable Cut, a government-set logging quota, determined region by region, that is meant to reflect what the land base can sustain.

In practice, the AAC is only as reliable as the modelling beneath it. Timber supply reviews use the Vegetation Resource Inventory, growth-and-yield models, and future harvest projections to estimate how much merchantable timber exists and how quickly it will regenerate. If those inputs are inflated or overly optimistic, the resulting AAC is inflated as well.

A recent independent evaluation of the Mackenzie Timber Supply Area provides a striking example. The report found that wildfire impacts were underestimated in the base case used to determine the AAC. Since 2020, only 2,220 hectares of wildfire were predicted in the model, while more than 55,000 hectares actually burned, with an additional 92,000 hectares potentially rendered inaccessible. The authors state this modelling ap-

proach is not unique to Mackenzie and is "most likely being applied across the majority of the province's regions."

One indicator is the widening gap between projected supply and actual harvest. The Province's aggregate AAC remains in the neighbourhood of 62 million cubic metres, yet the actual harvest has dropped to about half that amount.

Provincial forest revenues have followed the same trajectory. Revenue fell from $1.885 billion in 2021/22 to $690 million in 2022/23 – a drop of 63% in a single fiscal year, reflecting both price shifts and declining harvest volumes. The modelling assumptions – particularly around growth, disturbance, and accessibility – appear increasingly misaligned with ecological reality.

When harvest exceeds growth

In forestry, "falldown" describes what happens when harvest levels exceed the forest's long-term growth capacity. Dr. Patricia Marchak in *Falldown: Forest Policy in BC*, defined it as the difference between the current rate of cutting and the lower long-term harvesting level that must eventually prevail once mature timber is depleted.

Falldown isn't accidental; it's embedded in timber supply projections. Base cases often show a period of relatively stable harvest – the plateau – followed by a step down when earlier cutting reduces the inventory of mature stands and younger forests are not yet capable of replacing them at equivalent volume or value. In other words: when more timber is cut in the short term than the forest can regenerate, future allowable cuts must drop.

Communities and companies plan around the plateau years: mills operate at capacity, contractors invest in equipment, and municipal budgets reflect expected tax revenues. That apparent stability can persist long enough to appear normal.

But when falldown hits, capacity is stranded. Mills close. Companies shift investment to jurisdictions with cheaper fibre and more predictable supply, including the southern US. Workers are laid off. Provincial stumpage (tax) revenue declines.

This is not a cyclical downturn tied to markets; it is a structural contraction following decades of policies that prioritized maintaining harvest flow within modelled limits. When those limits prove unrealistic, the adjustment is unavoidable, costs are borne by communities built around unsustainably high throughput.

Falldown isn't accidental; it's embedded in timber supply projections.

Economic signals the system ignored

Since 2000, more than 100 mills have closed in BC, and approximately 60,000 forestry jobs have been lost. Forestry now accounts for less than two per cent of total provincial employment – a sharp departure from its historic role as a dominant regional employer.

On parts of the coast, raw log exports continue, with millions of cubic metres shipped overseas rather than processed domestically. In the Interior, much of the remaining production is oriented toward commodity-grade dimension lumber – a lower-margin, volume-dependent product sensitive to global pricing cycles.

Programs intended to support value-added manufacturing remain small relative to total harvest. BC Timber Sales allocates 0.7 to 1.1 million cubic metres annually to smaller manufacturers – about three per cent of the provincial cut.

The mismatch is structural. The system remains organized for high-volume throughput, yet the fibre base has shifted. Log quality has declined in many regions. Haul distances have increased. Smaller mills are frequently outbid for supply. This reflects design inertia – a framework built for high-volume throughput operating in a landscape where ecological and economic conditions have changed.

Legislative rigidity

Over decades, BC's many forestry reviews and technical panels have identified weaknesses in inventory accuracy, disturbance accounting, and climate-risk integration. Yet the core legislative structure remains unchanged.

The *Forest Act* continues to centre on volume allocation through the AAC. The Chief Forester must consider economic objectives alongside ecological and social factors. In practice, this means unrealistic harvest-flow projections are embedded in timber forecast models.

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⇦*Reality Check continued*

Forest policies frequently refer to "sustainability," but the term is not defined through any measurable ecological thresholds tied to verified forest condition or watershed function. Timber Supply Reviews remain model-driven. When assumptions prove unrealistic, factors within the framework are adjusted, but the overall architecture that prioritizes projected harvest flow is left unchanged.

As a result, decision-making remains oriented toward maintaining volume, even as ecosystems suffer. Government and industry conversation emphasizes market diversification or export strategies, rather than reassessing whether projected volumes align with ecological reality.

The structural alternative

The New Forest Act (NFA) proposes a different starting point: redesigning governance rather than trying to adjust harvest targets within the existing structure.

The proposal is organized around three priorities:

- Ecological integrity
- Community-based decision-making
- Stable community economies

At its centre is a spatial planning model known as Protect-Restore-Harvest (PRH). Under PRH:

- Primary forests would be designated for protection.
- Degraded landscapes would be prioritized for restoration, including road decommissioning, hydrological repair, and long-term stand recovery.
- Harvest would be limited to previously logged or roaded areas, and calibrated to verified ecological growth rates rather than maximum projected yield.

The economic framing is deliberate. Harvest levels would align with verified forest condition. Incentives would shift from maximizing cubic metres logged to maximizing value derived per cubic metre. Restoration would be treated as a public function, not a byproduct of extraction.

The proposal also recognizes forests as critical public infrastructure – systems that regulate water, store carbon, stabilize soils, and protect communities from flood and wildfire risk. In that framing, forest governance becomes comparable to watershed infrastructure management: the objective is long-term function, not short-term throughput.

> This is not a cyclical downturn tied to markets; it is a structural contraction.

The proposal reflects the view that stability depends not on sustaining historic harvest volumes but on recalibrating governance to ecological and economic limits. The New Forest Act BC Roadshow will present this framework in June to communities across the province, as a structured alternative to reactive contraction.

Design vs collapse

The Crofton closure will be recorded in financial statements as a response to market conditions and fibre constraints. Those factors are real. Commodity prices fluctuate. Trade disputes and input costs escalate. But when closures recur across regions and decades – when harvest declines, revenues contract, and capacity is withdrawn – the pattern demands a broader explanation.

At that point, it becomes a question of system design. A framework built around projected abundance now operates in a landscape defined by disturbance, reduced productivity, and limited fibre access. Falldown is not an anomaly; it is the structural outcome of earlier assumptions meeting present conditions.

The choice facing BC is whether to redesign forestry law around ecological limits and long-term stability, or to continue managing contraction reactively and ineffectively as falldown accelerates.

Forestry in BC is not failing because markets changed. It is collapsing because the assumptions embedded in its governing framework no longer match ecological and economic reality.

Jennifer Houghton is Campaign Director for the New Forest Act project at the Boundary Forest Watershed Stewardship Society.

When Watersheds Fail

Who pays for BC's rising flood costs?

by Lynne Fedorick

When floodwaters surged over the banks of Dove Creek and Tsolum River in the Comox Valley recently, roads buckled, culverts failed, and hundreds of acres of Vancouver Island farmland disappeared beneath brown water.

The flood caused devastating property damage and the evacuation of hundreds of residents and farm animals. A few hours north, the only highway connecting the town of Gold River with the rest of the world fell away under a torrent of water from the hillside above. The washout severed a vital lifeline to coastal communities, isolating residents and disrupting the transport of critical supplies.

Both events were triggered by an atmospheric river – a phenomenon that climate scientists say we should expect to see more often in coming years.

A torrent of costs

The frequency of flood events like these has increased over the last decade, with staggering financial impacts. According to the Insurance Bureau of Canada, flood events in the Fraser Valley in 2024 resulted in $74 million in damages.

But that total pales in comparison to the flood damage in 2021. That year, extreme rainfall overflowed creek beds and gushed down mountainsides, creating a muddy torrent that flooded every major route between the Lower Mainland and the rest of Canada. It submerged Fraser Valley farms under three feet of contaminated water. The resulting damages added up to $8.7 billion. Of course, the costs to families and workers who lost their homes and/or livelihoods is incalculable.

Rain falling on clearcuts

It's not just rainfall that determines the scale of destruction. In a province shaped by steep terrain, intense precipitation, and a century of industrial forestry, hydrologists are examining the role of clearcut logging on the severity of flood events.

Clearcut logging is not new; it's been the preferred harvesting method in BC forests for over a century. However, both atmospheric rivers and clearcut harvest areas have expanded significantly in the last 20 years. In 2005, the typical cutblock was 20-30 hectares. By 2020, commercial clearcuts ranged from 350 to over 3,000 hectares. Evidence suggests that depending on slope orientation, these larger cutblocks correlate with increased frequency and scale of catastrophic flooding.

Emerging research

Forest management practices play a much bigger role in flood events than previously considered, according to a 2025 study led by UBC forest hydrologist Dr. Younes Alila that examined long-term streamflow records in coastal BC watersheds. In addition to changing climate conditions, researchers looked at factors such as cutblock size, slope orientation,

and historical data on watershed hydrology and flooding.

"This research challenges conventional thinking about forest management's impact on flooding," Dr. Alila said. "It matters not only how much forest you remove, but also where, how, and under what conditions."

Conventional flood models rely on the simple assumption that when X per cent of trees are cut, there will be Y per cent more water runoff. The UBC study found that such models fail to account for extreme and erratic flood patterns that emerge after landscape disturbances.

Forest harvesting doesn't just increase average flood levels – it can reshape a watershed's entire hydrological system, making rare catastrophic flood events

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⇦*When Watersheds Fail continued*

much more common. The most concerning finding is that this effect lasts for more than 40 years as forests rebuild their water retention and filtering ability.

Slope orientation surprise

"We found seemingly minor landscape factors, like the direction a slope faces, can make or break a watershed's response to treatment," said the study's first author Henry Pham, a doctoral student in UBC's faculty of forestry.

Their research found that slope orientation has a significant impact on how watershed basins shed water, particularly after cutblocks are harvested. While the impact of landscape disturbance is negligible after cutblocks are harvested on south-facing slopes, north-facing watersheds receive less direct sunlight and retain more moisture. Clearcuts on north-facing slopes were connected to floods becoming 4 to 18 times more frequent. Average flood sizes increased by 47-105% in these areas.

When forests are removed

Healthy mountain forests act as hydrological regulators, filtering and directing water into natural watershed routes. Tree canopies intercept rainfall. Root systems stabilize slopes. Healthy soils absorb and slowly release water, reducing the speed and volume of runoff entering streams.

When forests are extensively clearcut, particularly on steep terrain, several changes occur:

- Root decay results in soil erosion, reducing slope stability
- Soil compaction from heavy machinery reduces infiltration
- Road networks interrupt natural drainage routes
- Evapotranspiration (water surface evaporation + soil moisture evaporation + plant transpiration) is reduced

Cumulatively, these processes disrupt how water moves over and through a watershed, resulting in greatly increased streamflows when extreme rainfall occurs.

A disturbed landscape

The recent Comox Valley flood provides a sobering example of how disruption of natural drainage systems can combine with extraordinary rainfall to cause widespread damage on both a public and private level. As a single event, it flooded homes, waterlogged agricultural lands, and damaged roads and culverts.

The upper watershed feeding the valley has been shaped by decades of forestry

activity, including clearcut harvesting and road construction on steep slopes. Progressively dated photos on Google Earth reveal the removal of thousands of hectares of forested area on adjacent mountainside over the last 20 years.

While no single cutblock can be blamed for a flood, cumulative watershed disturbance may alter how quickly water moves downhill during intense storms. Municipal officials now estimate that recovery and infrastructure repair costs run into the millions. These costs are borne by taxpayers.

Vulnerable infrastructure

When a section of highway near Gold River washed out, it cut off access to remote Vancouver Island communities and halted traffic for days. Debris flows and saturated slopes overwhelmed culverts and destabilized embankments. Steep coastal terrain is inherently prone to landslides during extreme rainfall. But road density and altered drainage patterns compound that risk. Satellite photos from Google Earth show a recent clearcut stretching for hundreds of hectares across the steep mountainside directly above the Gold River Highway washout.

In remote communities with limited infrastructure redundancy, a single washout can disrupt emergency response, supply chains, tourism, and local economies. Again, reconstruction is funded publicly.

Governance and cumulative effects

British Columbia's forestry framework regulates individual cutblocks, reforestation obligations, and environmental protection measures. However, critics argue that cumulative hydrological impacts are not properly integrated into planning decisions. Hydrological thresholds, such as limits on total disturbed area within a watershed basin, are not uniformly applied. Road deactivation and slope stabilization efforts vary.

Indigenous-led stewardship models in some regions emphasize watershed integrity as a primary management objective. Such models offer alternative governance approaches that prioritize long-term hydrological resilience over short-term timber yield. With the existing climate pattern of intensifying extreme rainfall events, cumulative effects matter more than ever.

Land-use policies

Extreme floods are fundamentally driven by meteorological forces. Atmospheric rivers will continue to bring intense rainfall to forests and clearcuts alike. However, there is little doubt among hydrologists that cutblock orientation and size contribute to the frequency and intensity of flooding. Land-use policies must take this into account as as part of emerging climate-change adaptation strategies.

Treating mountain forests as timber supply areas no longer aligns with evolving climate realities. Incorporating watershed resilience into forest planning – through harvest limits in sensitive basins, road decommissioning, and protection of high-functioning forest stands – could reduce long-term public costs. Clearly, such measures won't eliminate flooding altogether. But they are likely to reduce the frequency and scale of floods.

> Should the public continue to absorb the financial consequences of flooding?

"As climate conditions shift, understanding those dynamics is becoming increasingly important," Dr. Younes Alila said. "We hope industry and policymakers will take note of our findings, which show that it matters not only how much forest you remove but also where, how, and under what conditions."

How much risk is too much?

Current climate models leave no doubt that storms will continue to intensify. However, we have the power to change how watersheds are managed before the next atmospheric river arrives.

This brings up an unavoidable policy question. Should the public continue to absorb the financial consequences of flooding? Presently, taxpayers and insurance policy holders foot the bill for flood damage, while forest management companies continue to rake in profits from Crown lands. In a province where coastal geography is defined by mountains, rain, and forest, there's no debate about whether storms will come. It is about whether we will continue to intensify their impact by failing to adopt forest management practices that address this fact.

Lynne Fedorick is a Canadian journalist and freelance writer whose work has been featured in a variety of international magazines.

Love and Extraction

Why forest protectors are putting their safety on the line

by Sidney Coles

BC's ancient forests are rapidly disappearing. While politicians continue to stall and skate over their commitments to protect them, chainsaws continue to rip through giant tree trunks on Vancouver Island.

In response to this crisis and the police violence they face, forest defenders who want to protect the last remaining old growth are arming themselves with the power of love for the land. From Meares Island to Clayoquot Sound and Fairy Creek, they have been portrayed as radicals and freaks obstructing economic development. But really, they're all about a passionate connection to the forest world.

But it's difficult to thrive under threat.

Forest company Teal Cedar holds a permit to log cutblock 8027 on road GR8003D near Fairy Creek. The company won a 2021 injunction against protesters who set up camps to prevent logging on Tree Farm License 46 in the Fairy Creek watershed. They bought the rights to the license in 2004 and are looking to recoup millions in lost revenues incurred over the two-year blockade that saw 1,100 protesters arrested.

High-value old growth could help balance its ledger.

Forest advocate Joshua Wright said this logging "would see ancient yellow cedar forests felled just 30 metres from the watershed and would disrupt the largest unprotected, high-productivity old-growth complex remaining in the region." His field research shows some trees in that cutblock are over 1,000 years old.

Sorrow and violence

Six Nations Mohawk musician Logan Staats was arrested in December 2025 for participating in an active blockade in the Walbran. He feels the weight of these potential losses. "I have a deep sorrow that I carry," he says. "I think that this land is actually in agony and being tortured and screaming and begging for help."

Just before his arrest, Staats called out to roughly forty RCMP officers that arrived in the upper Walbran Valley to arrest the forest defenders, "I'll die for these lands, will you? I pray for you. I pray for your children." It wasn't a taunt, he says. It was "an appeal to their hearts."

In his efforts to defend the land and the Landback movement across Turtle Island, that appeal received mixed reactions. "I've seen some RCMP actually take pleasure and find glee in these sorts of interactions," Staats recalls. "They're smiling, laughing and joking. Then you can see every once in a while, there's one of them with a little bit of what looks like humility in their eyes. But anytime I've tried to just to touch that part through conversation and dialogue, it's just automatic shutdown."

Officers from a special unit of the RCMP violently arrested Staats and 13 others on Wet'suwet'en territory during the 2021 standoff against the Coastal GasLink pipeline.

> "There's a kind of ache in your heart."

Created in 2017, the RCMP's Community-Industry Industry Response Group unit was intended to provide strategic oversight in addressing energy industry (gas and oil pipeline) incidents and related public order, national security, and crime issues. Critics of the unit, now renamed the Critical Response Unit, argue it's being used as private security for resource extraction. For forest defenders, there's no love lost. From 2019 to 2022, the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission received 573 complaints about C-IRG's militarized approach.

Millions of hectares lost

According to the 2020 Old Growth Strategic Review, 11 million hectares of old growth remained in British Columbia in 2021. Since then, nearly five per cent – 510,000 hectares – has been logged, burned in wildfires, or removed entirely from the forest land base. More than half of the 2.6 million hectares identified as the most at-risk forests were still without deferrals as of February 2025.

These numbers are not abstractions. They represent the imminent loss of ecosystems that regulate our climate, buffer floods, and provide habitat for at-risk and endangered species unique to BC. Without committed deferrals for the most at-risk forests, any chance of meaningful protection for old growth diminishes. Once they're logged, these forests won't return in our lifetimes, if ever.

While the Province has funded multiple plans – the OGSR, the 2024 Old Growth Action Plan, the 2023 Nature Agreement, and more – forest defenders see little evidence of the promised paradigm shift. Citing "diminishing trust in ecological, economic, and forest management outcomes," the Provincial Forestry Advisory Council's 2026 report says its recommendations "represent a philosophical shift ... ensuring that decisions are guided by the needs of the land and its people."

The willingness of land defenders to put themselves in harm's way comes from how they feel about what they're protecting and their relationship to it. Raven, a prominent figure in the 2021 Fairy Creek blockade, told the *Watershed Sentinel* they always had a connection with nature, but the experience at Fairy Creek was different. "The forest gave me a sense of calm, that sense of resilience, a sense of unconditional love. Being in those trees allowed me to continue that movement."

Motivated by connection to land, forests, and the diversity of life, Staats describes the ache that lingers when he leaves the forest. "Once you're in these spaces, when you're pulled away from them, there's a kind of ache in your heart."

Lucero Gonzalez, a campaigner for Southern Mountain Caribou, frames the task clearly: "Our job is to challenge the systems that oppress both the land and people, in the pursuit of building a world where love for the land and each other thrives."

Sidney Coles, PhD, is a journalist and human rights advocate, and lives in Victoria on the traditional territory of the lək̓ʷəŋən people.

The Urchin Eaters

The sea otter's saga of reciprocity and restoration

©Kedar Gadge

by Ben Wickham

Early one June morning, at a small campsite on the rocky beaches between Port Hardy and Port McNeill, I saw my first sea otter. The tide was high, waves pounded the shore, and about a hundred metres out a small furry shape bobbed in the surf. My daughter spotted it first, shouting out: "A seal!"

But when it rolled onto its back, paws folded on its chest, we realized what we were seeing: a creature that, not so long ago, had vanished from these waters. A ghost returned to haunt its ancestral home, not in the thousands of old, but as a solitary sentinel. The otter drifted just offshore, grooming its fur and diving beneath the waves in its hunt through the kelp forest for the food that sustains it, completely unaware of the layers of history that converged in that moment. The quiet persistence of a species once hunted to near extinction, the human greed that erased it, and the slow, uncertain work of restoration that brought it back.

Sea otters belong to the weasel family, yet they are the only members who live almost entirely at sea. One of the few non-human species known to use tools, they crack open shellfish, especially urchins, using stones that they carry in folds of fur. They float together in playful rafts, highly social and endlessly curious. Without blubber to insulate them, they rely on the densest fur in the animal kingdom (up to one million hairs per square inch), and it was that very adaptation that nearly doomed them.

In the territories of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples of northern Vancouver Island, including the Kwagu'ł and 'Namgis Nations,

the ocean has long been understood as a living realm governed by law and story. Marine beings, including sea otters, appear in oral histories and crest imagery, not as curiosities but as participants in a shared world of reciprocity. Stewardship of these waters was not incidental; it was structured through inherited systems of responsibility and seasonal practice. The coming of Europeans to these waters – first in the form of explorers, then traders, then colonizers – cut through that harmony like a ship through still water.

Looking out into the remote strait with Malcolm Island in the distance, it's strange to think that for more than a century, these waters were silent. The kelp beds stretched unbroken, heavy with urchins, the sea empty of the small, bright faces that once bobbed along the waves. In 1778, when Captain Cook sailed these coasts, he saw "bay after bay of rugged forest, high cliffs plunging into grey sea, the waves breaking over hidden kelp beds beneath."

When Cook's crew traded their sea otter pelts in China, they found them to be worth more than gold. Vancouver Island's coasts soon became part of a violent trade network. British, Russian, and American ships descended, and the otters, once numbering in the hundreds of thousands, were hunted to the brink. Places where the otters were said to float "as thick upon the water as kelp" grew empty. Without otters, sea urchins devoured the kelp forests, and what had once been a web of abundance collapsed.

In 1969, government biologists released twenty-nine sea otters into Checleset Bay near Kyuquot Sound, in Nuu-chah-nulth territory on the outer coast of Vancouver Island. More followed in Kyuquot and Nootka Sound over the next three years. Translocated from Amchitka Island, Alaska, they were returned not to a wilderness, but to waters that had once held them in abundance. As those first sleek heads rose hesitantly from the water, those watching from the decks witnessed something miraculous: refugees returning to an old home that they had never seen.

As a keystone species, sea otters play an outsized role in shaping the environment they inhabit. Over the following decades, protected by government policies, the otters multiplied. In response, the urchin population declined, and the kelp forests the urchins had been eating rebounded. Species diversity also rebounded as fish, shellfish, and seabirds thrived.

But restoration, in the Anthropocene, is rarely simple.

For members of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations on Vancouver Island's west coast, the return of sea otters has meant fewer shellfish. At a June 2025 Nuu-chah-nulth fisheries forum, as reported by *Ha-Shilth-Sa*, Ahousaht representative Keith Atleo (Kiista) said "Our diet has been impacted by sea otters … A lot of our young people don't know the taste of sea urchins."

Some Nuu-chah-nulth community leaders are urging Fisheries and Oceans Canada to consider allowing a co-managed, regulated harvest of otters – not as a revival of the fur trade, but as a stewardship practice meant to balance species recovery with traditional food sovereignty and cultural survival. "Sea otter harvesting was … about managing and protecting a food chain," said Cliff Atleo of Ahousaht First Nation in a 2025 interview with *Victoria News*.

Back on the Island's northeast coast, we watched as the otter stayed with us for nearly an hour. My daughter lost interest, as children do, and the tide began to draw back, pulling the animal farther out to sea, a drifting symbol of what was broken and what might still be mended. Not everything can be restored; you cannot swim again in the ocean of your youth. But given time, space, and care, some things can heal.

As we packed up our camp, the tide slipped all the way out, and the otter vanished beyond the horizon. Still, when the wind rises and the surf goes calm, I like to think of it there in the kelp, somewhere, mending what we once broke.

Ben Wickham is a writer from Nanaimo, BC with a background in education and public service. His passions for writing and nature come from his father and mother respectively.

Wild Times Rules of the Road

by Joe Foy

I have found when travelling through some foreign lands (as my wife and I are doing now) that a lack of rules-of-the-road can make a place feel more free, but also much more dangerous.

Interurban road systems that lack speed limits, crosswalks, illumination, signage, traffic lights, or guardrails can quickly turn congested, even deadly. Freedom doesn't always make you free. Sometimes rules are required.

BC's so-called forest management feels a lot like that. Decades of giving forest companies more and more freedom to mow down more and more old-growth forests has ended in a timber supply collapse. There are still trees on the mountainsides, but in many regions, they are not of an age, size, quantity, quality, or location to support fish, wildlife, or a profitable timber industry anymore.

Most of the former timber giants no longer operate in the logged-out forests of southwest BC. Some have imploded, like the once-gigantic MacMillan Bloedel. Others have moved to regions that still have forests to plunder. What's left now is mostly the bottom feeders, smaller forest companies often subsidized by BC Timber Sales – a government agency that bankrolls logging roads and lays out cutblocks in what remains of the abused and battered forests.

Along the lower Fraser River, old lumber mill sites have been bulldozed and the land used for condos. This has been going on for decades. Salmon canneries went through a similar wipe-out decades ago. Now some of the last lumber mills are closing down and people are noticing. Out in the mountains, fish and wildlife populations are closing down too, for the same reason as the mills. Logging companies with too much freedom have wreaked unchecked havoc for too long.

Squamish log sort yard, 1987

Spotted owls have been nearly pushed out of their home in their Lower Mainland forests, with most surviving owls now residing in cages at a captive breeding facility in Langley. Faint hope lies in releasing captive owls into federally mapped critical habitat that is still being logged under permit from the Province.

Herds of southern mountain caribou have been hounded to extinction because of the ongoing chainsaw massacre of their forests while the feds drag their heels. In the coastal temperate rainforests of the Pacific shore, a seabird that nests in old-growth forests – the marbled murrelet – has disappeared from many former BC haunts due to over-logging.

Unique races of salmon have been wiped out by the logging in rivers like the Chilliwack – their loss masked by salmon hatcheries that pump out weaker salmon sourced from other streams.

Loss of mills and species are two disasters rooted in the same cause. Too much has been cut too fast in BC's lawless lands.

And now BC's forest minister is floating solutions. He proposes to give BC's remaining forest companies even more freedom by cutting "red tape." He has mused that perhaps in the future, government will no longer have to sign off on individual cutblocks before logging commences.

Here's a novel idea. Instead of giving logging companies free reign, how about the minister actually starts us on the path of forest recuperation by putting time-tested rules and guardrails in place?

Joe Foy is the protected areas campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

Thank You!

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