



TJ Watt  
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Dear Garry Merkel and Al Gorley,

I am writing today as the owner and operator of Big Tree Tours Ltd. My company operates out of the small town of Port Renfrew and offers guided trips to see old-growth forests and some of the country's biggest trees - where they still remain. Without big trees, I can't do my job. Big Tree Tours has been in operation for the last 5 years, in which time I've seen interest & demand skyrocket. So much so that I can't possibly fulfill the full number of requests for tours that I receive.

People are travelling to Port Renfrew from far and wide to see attractions like the Avatar Grove, Big Lonely Doug, the San Juan Spruce, and the Red Creek Fir, and no matter where my guests are from, their reactions are always the same. They're humbled, speechless, and in absolute awe of what they see. At the end of the day, many tell me that not only was the old-growth tour the highlight of their time in Canada, but one of the most incredible experiences in all their travels.

The other reactions that inevitably come up, however, are those of shock, horror, and sadness as they learn of how little old-growth remains (96% of the valley bottom old-growth forests on southern Vancouver Island have been logged) and that, where unprotected, it is still being cut down. Like me, these guests understand the need for wood products in our lives and aren't opposed to logging in general, but strongly feel that it should be done in a more sustainable manner, in second-growth forests instead of old-growth.

The town of Port Renfrew has become a great example of how a struggling, rural, resource-based community can reinvent itself. For over a hundred years, logging was the mainstay here, employing thousands while it steadily cleared the vast majority of the grand forests that once grew in the San Juan and Gordon River Valleys. In the 1980s, with old-growth supply running low, the mill shut down and the town went into a steady decline for the next two decades. Fast forward to 2010, with the ultimately successful campaign to protect the Avatar Grove and later, the highlighting of Big Lonely Doug, and people are now returning - in huge numbers.

The Port Renfrew Chamber of Commerce has fully embraced the idea of 'big tree tourism' and has branded the town as the 'Tall Trees Capital of Canada', much to the benefit of local businesses. Millions of tourism dollars are now flowing into the small coastal community. The restaurants are full, rental cabins are booked, real estate is booming, and local people can find full-time employment year-round once again.

This highlights, in real terms, what studies have now shown: that protecting & promoting old-growth forests can be beneficial not only to the environment but to the economy as well. On any given weekend in summertime, 30-40 cars can now be seen parked at Avatar Grove with people from all over the world coming to see the big trees and in turn, spending money in town. This appetite for a unique wilderness experience is insatiable as most of the rest of the developed world lost their old-growth forests centuries ago. This 'big tree boom', in my opinion, still only scratches the surface of what's possible for Port Renfrew - and all communities on route to old-growth forests for that matter - should these forests be safeguarded.

Despite this massive potential, old-growth logging carries on to the tune of over 10,000 hectares each year on Vancouver Island alone. Many of the finest remaining ancient groves continue to be logged, extinguishing their potential to provide alternative, long-term, sustainable economic opportunities.

There are many places that I would like to expand my tours to - old-growth forests like the Eden Grove on Edinburgh Mountain, the Castle Grove in the Central Walbran, spruce groves in the San Juan Valley, or the Jurassic Grove along Highway 14, just to name a few - but their fate remains uncertain.

The need for 'certainty' and 'balance' is so often expressed by the forestry industry and I couldn't agree more – but from a conservation standpoint instead. I need certainty that the next time I arrive at one of these unprotected groves, it will not be cut down. And balance. To visit the San Juan Spruce or the Red Creek Fir, one must drive first through an hour of second-growth stands and clearcuts just to access the two remaining monumental trees. I think that clearly speaks to the imbalance that already exists on the landscape.

A fundamental shift is needed, *and quick*, in the way we view endangered old-growth forests and the values we prescribe to them.

Therefore, I am recommending the following policy changes to ensure the survival of unprotected old-growth forests and the growth and sustainment of tourism industries that benefit from their protection:

### **1) Develop an Old-Growth Forest Protection Act**

The BC Government should develop a science-based, legislated plan that includes targets and timelines for protecting old-growth forests in all forest types based on best available science.

### **2) Support Conservation Financing Solutions and Economic Diversification for Rural & First Nations Communities**

Many rural & First Nations communities, like those in Port Renfrew, make significant revenues from old-growth logging, yet lack a range of alternative economic development opportunities that would support their local economies into the future and allow them to transition away from old-growth logging, should they wish to. In order to protect old-growth forests on a large scale in BC, the provincial government should fund *conservation financing* solutions to support First Nations sustainable economic development as an alternative to old-growth logging, similar to the \$120 million provided to nations in the Great Bear Rainforest.

### **3) Support a Sustainable, Value-Added Second-Growth Forest Industry**

While most of the Western industrialized world is logging 50-to-100-year-old stands, including second and third-growth forests, the status quo of old-growth liquidation is still underway across much of BC. By strengthening forest practices regulations and reducing the excessive rate of cut (i.e. implementing longer rotation ages), BC can achieve sustainable, second-growth forest industry. At the same time, if the BC government were to promote policies that support greater processing and value-added manufacturing of second-growth logs in the province, the total number of forestry jobs could be sustained and even increased in the province while old-growth logging is quickly phased out.

### **4) Immediately Declare a Moratorium for Old-Growth Hotspot Sites to Create a *Solution Space* while Long-Term Solutions are Developed**

Some old-growth forests are considered to be greater conservation priorities than others. These include stands that are more extensive and intact, have high cultural significance for First Nations, consist of rare forest types, are of high significance for wildlife and species at risk, are located in drinking watersheds of

local communities, are particularly grand, and are of particular importance for recreation and tourism. To avoid a 'talk and log scenario', I recommended the BC government declare a moratorium for old-growth hotspot sites, thereby creating a *solution space* to determine the future regarding the possibility of long-term protection through legislated provincial conservancies or parks.

I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TJ Watt', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

TJ Watt  
Owner/Operator  
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Below are a few testimonials from my guests:

“That was really something special! To be honest, I was crying tears of joy later that afternoon in Port Renfrew... Big thank you for showing us the big trees – the absolute #1 main attraction of our Canada Tour!”

— *Line & family, Denmark*

“THANK YOU for our Big Tree Tour in August. It was the most wonderful part of our trip to Vancouver Island, a piece of the country that we had never seen before. We were so impressed with these most incredible forests, seascapes and landscapes, you made it an extraordinary experience for us. You are so knowledgeable and we truly enjoyed learning from you. It was a pleasure to meet you and hike with you!”

— *Ilyana & Nahúm, Ontario*

“A tour with Big Tree Tours is an absolute MUST! It will change your view of the old growth forests and the need to save those few remaining fabulous ancient trees. AND it is a great way to spend a relaxing and yet invigorating day in the rain forest.”

— *MaryAnn, Ontario*

“I came to Vancouver Island to explore the big trees and remaining old growth forests as I did in other regions of the world. The first day TJ lead us to the wonderful Avatar Grove near Port Renfrew, at this time threatened by logging, but now protected through his efforts. This grove, full of giant trees, is really a spectacular natural wonder. Then we made a trip on unpaved roads to two of the most magnificent and largest trees of the world - the Red Creek Fir and the San Juan Spruce. TJ was very helpful, friendly, and authentic. He stands for what he is fighting for - the protection of the remaining old-growth forests in BC. I have decided to come back and to go on another Big Tree Tour with him soon.”

— *Wolfgang, Germany*

