

Strategic Review of Old-Growth Management

Submission by Gregg Sheehy – December 17, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Old-Growth Strategic Review. I am making this presentation as a conservation-minded citizen concerned about the management of BC's old growth forests. I have some experience in conservation and forestry issues, though I certainly do not have the wealth of knowledge about BC forests as do the panel members. It is good to know that the province has engaged the services of experts such as yourselves for this important consultation.

As a bit of background, I am a retired environmental consultant who moved to BC from Ontario some four years ago. In the late 1970s, I did Master of Science in Forestry at the University of Toronto. For my thesis, I researched the ecology and management of certain nature reserves established in Algonquin Provincial Park to protect white pine stands. This included stands of very large old trees on sites that had never been logged. These stands could be considered old growth forest in the sense that they have been undisturbed for many years, contain large old trees, and are in a late successional stage. However, the large, iconic pine trees were really remnants of a pine forest being replaced over time by stands of nearly pure sugar maple. (There was no pine regeneration to speak of, merely scattered giants in various stages of decline, looming over a sea of sugar maple.) Although they contained some of the biggest trees in eastern Canada, these Ontario "old growth" stands were not nearly as impressive or likely long-lasting as those found in BC's coastal forests. From reading the UBC's Forestry Handbook for British Columbia, I note that the iconic species associated with old growth here (including Douglas fir, western red cedar, and Sitka spruce) are more enduring components of old growth and thus likely to be with us for a long time to come if given suitable protection. In addition, BC's old growth forests are undoubtedly unmatched for their biodiversity, carbon sequestration value and scenic quality.

Completing this summary of my background, in the early to mid 1980s, I served as the conservation director of the Canadian Nature Federation, where I worked on issues including the successful campaign to protect the southern wilderness portion of Haida Gwaii. In the last 30 years of my career, I worked as an environmental consultant in the Ottawa Valley, serving primarily federal government clients including the departments of Environment, Fisheries and Oceans, Natural Resources, Parks Canada and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. As a volunteer in recent years, I helped raise funds to purchase Gillies Grove, a tract of old growth forest that had been slated for residential development in the town of Arnprior, Ontario.

What old growth means to me and how I value it

In addition to a long career in conservation and environmental protection, I've had a life-long interest in the outdoors, with a particular attraction to forests. And to me, big old trees are an unending source of wonder. I cannot fathom why a wealthy country and a rich province could countenance the continuing loss of forest treasures that may soon be gone forever.

I am aware of the economic arguments in favour of logging old growth. But I don't see the logic of liquidating old growth forests while exporting raw logs. Why should we sacrifice the large potential value added and social benefit that would result from processing the logs here in BC?

I believe that trees are renewable resources, and wisely used, forests can provide economic and social benefits in perpetuity. But I don't see how old growth forests can be considered renewable, given how long they have taken to develop, the dramatic differences between old growth and second growth, and the likely intention to manage on relatively short rotations once the old forests are logged.

I have a lot to learn about BC's forests, and I'm looking forward to exploring them further. But I am certain the old growth ecosystems found here are unmatched anywhere else in Canada if not the world.

My perspective on how old growth is managed now

It's disheartening to see images of old growth logging going on right now. Not long ago I attended a presentation on old growth hosted by various conservation organizations. One presenter showed a photo of a logging truck filled to capacity by a single log. The presenter commented that, if these giants were elephants being killed and hauled away, there would be a huge outcry.

I understand that some large trees are being taken down with dynamite. Perhaps this is a safety issue for logging, but something just seems wrong about taking down the giants using such extreme measures. To me it brings to mind the illicit killing of African elephants with heavy weapons, as we often hear about.

I have read that, as millions of unprocessed raw logs are exported from BC every year, the province receives fewer dollars and gets fewer jobs per tree cut than any other province. And on Vancouver Island alone, the equivalent of 34 soccer fields of original forest is logged every day.

Some other alarming information I've heard is that through logging, slash-burning and wildfires, forests in B.C. have emitted more carbon than they've absorbed since the early 2000s.

It's widely known that old growth logging will end within a few decades, no matter what. I wonder what will happen to workers and communities that currently rely on a dwindling supply of old growth wood once it's gone. What's the plan for easing the pain of the inevitable transition to more sustainable sources of employment?

How I think old growth could be managed more effectively in the future

Given the dramatic declines of old growth in BC, preserving what's left should be the absolute priority. Conservation organizations such as the Ancient Forest Alliance, Conservation North, Wilderness Committee, and Sierra Club of BC have worked together and consulted other stakeholders to address issues and define solutions. They have logical proposals for managing our forests in a way that recognizes Indigenous Peoples' rights and vital role in forest management, addresses the needs of forestry workers and forest-dependent communities, protects our climate, conserves biodiversity and protects our remaining old growth. You will no doubt be hearing from these organizations, and I would urge you to support their recommendations.

The following is a brief summary of points that conservation groups have raised and that I hope the province will address with urgency:

- Prioritize Indigenous Rights and Title, social and economic justice for Indigenous Peoples.
- Protect remaining ancient forests and transition the forest industry to sustain itself long-term.
- Encourage local production by curbing raw log exports and reinstating laws requiring timber be sent to mills in the same region it's harvested. (These changes are consistent with the NDP 2017 election platform.)
- Invest in additional processing and manufacturing so forest communities can produce more valuable products to support rural economies.
- Pursue opportunities to return forest tenures to First Nations and local communities, who will be motivated to manage them for local benefits.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to thank the Panel for its work on these important issues. I hope that the provincial government will consider your recommendations in light of the need to protect our remaining old growth forests. It's unfortunate that the liquidation of old growth is proceeding apace while you analyze the issues and the government decides what to do about them. In this regard, I find it disheartening that more than 30 years after the federal government and the Haida people recognized the value of old growth forests and chose to preserve the natural wonders of Haida Gwaii, the BC government is still sanctioning the liquidation of old growth remnants elsewhere in the province.

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