

If British Columbia Managed its Forests Sustainably

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Abstract

Internationally, agreements have been reached over what should and should not be considered as sustainable forest management. For Canada, this was done primarily through the Montreal Process, which covers most of the temperate and boreal forest area of the world. Here, I outline some of the expectations associated with this international agreement. British Columbia meets some, but by no means all of these.

British Columbia, like many jurisdictions around the world, claims that it has some of the best forest management practices in the world. While it is easy to compare fine details, such as the width of riparian buffer strips, we are at risk of losing sight of the big picture associated with the sustainable management of our forests. The characteristics of sustainable forest management were agreed to almost 20 years ago through the Montreal Process and similar international agreements in other parts of the world. If we really were managing our forests sustainably, then British Columbia:

- Would have resolved all outstanding treaty claims from the Aboriginal peoples on the land;
- Would have entered into productive, meaningful relationships with those peoples to ensure that their needs were met while ensuring a sustainable future for the forests of British Columbia;
- Would ensure that all forest-dependent communities in the Province were able to utilize the forest in ways that met both their current and future needs, and the current and future needs of the forest;
- Would have a land ownership and associated tenure system that encouraged investment by licensees in the future forest estate;
- Would clearly separate land management needs from the needs of the manufacturing sector;
- Would have clearly defined mandates for governments (federal, provincial, First Nations, municipal, etc.) and licensees over responsibility for the management of forest lands;

- Would have a system of protected areas that through the maintenance of their ecological integrity would ensure the long-term survival of all species, and which would enable natural adaptation to climate change;
- Would have a provincial monitoring system capable of determining that the conservation status of all species was regularly assessed;
- Would have recovery plans in place for all endangered species;
- Would protect a full range of environmental values, enabling use of the land base by multiple groups with seemingly conflicting objectives;
- Would assign proper economic value to all the goods and ecosystem services provided by forests;
- Would ensure the sustainable supply of timber through the immediate re-planting of all harvested or otherwise disturbed areas, with no lands deemed as currently unproductive and worth restocking;
- Would have an effective public consultation process in place for the management of public lands;
- Would have a flexible forest planning system that allowed for adaptation to unknowns, such as natural events and climate change;
- Would ensure that all forests were managed to strategic plans that addressed all aspects of sustainable forest management;
- Would have a professional association that was not only dedicated to upholding the values sought by the public (the owners of the forest), but would know and understand what those values were;
- Would have a professional association that knew when those values were being compromised and would take action to rectify any problems, whoever was responsible;
- Would pay its workers a fair wage and would ensure that safety took precedence over economic expediency;
- Would be attracting more young people into the sector than it could accommodate;
- Would make decisions based on up-to-date, comprehensive, inventory information and utilizing the best available science;
- Would hold those responsible for any deviation from sustainable practices;

- Would not be caught by surprise by either natural disasters or disasters brought about by climate change, inappropriate management or other drivers;
- Would have a simple, transparent and honest system for valuing and selling wood from public lands, upheld by professional foresters;
- Would have open markets through which logs were sold for the highest price that bidders were willing to offer;
- Would have a labour force that understood the basic principles of competition and free markets;
- Would have a diverse array of forest products manufacturers, ranging from low-cost suppliers of commodity materials through a range of value-added industries to high-end manufacturers that maximized the value of the wood being harvested in the Province;
- Would have an industry selling to an array of different customers in different countries, resulting in resilience to economic downturns in particular countries;
- Would be able to support jobs in all rural communities and in many urban centers;
- Would have a vibrant research sector capable of generating new ideas and products, enhancing the competitiveness of the sector, and capable of conducting research and monitoring to ensure that forest practices were sustainable;
- Would have genuine innovators ready to introduce new processes, products and practices to the Province;
- Would be ready to adopt such innovations.

While some of these requirements are being met, either wholly or in part, others are not. In fact, there are very few, if any, jurisdictions around the world that can claim to meet them all. Until they are met, British Columbia needs to be very careful about making claims that its forests are being sustainably managed.