

The Timberlands West Coast debate: Is logging 'bad' for natural forests?

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In most parts of the world, this past decade has seen concerted effort by ENGOs, governments and industry to come to grips with the notion of how harvesting the renewable crop of the forest can be sustainable. ENGOs have rightly pointed out that forest practices in some jurisdictions were irresponsible, destructive and/or degrading, resulting in temporary or even permanent damage to forest ecosystems. The mainstream forest products industry, in part driven by market pressures, has been trying to find ways to improve forest harvesting and silvicultural practices and to find ways of dissociating themselves from the 'mavericks' of the industry - i.e. those who are wantonly destructive. At the same time, governments have had to reassess what the balance between social, economic and environmental objectives really means.

In the midst of all this debate, the value systems of the major players have been given a firm shaking. Suddenly ENGOs are having to define in practical terms what they mean by sustainable forestry, industry has taken a long hard look at setting new environmental and social objectives and governments have had to find new 'mission statements' to redefine the new balance that society is demanding from its political representatives (remember, they are representatives not masters).

All this is well and good but there are still some 'myths', if society truly wants to further express these changes and make progress in a constructive manner.

Myth 1. Forest harvesting by medium to large corporations in the natural forest is bad irrespective of the type of management applied.

Forest products production requires access to market capital, distribution channels for the products, marketing expertise and management expertise. Medium and large corporations are no more 'bad' than a large NGO or a large bureaucracy for doing what they are designed to do.

Myth 2. The older and larger an organism is, the more it is worth protecting.

This argument is frequently heard, particularly in relation to 'old-growth' forests. However, it is only valid in certain situations. Organisms die, and if there are no younger individuals to replace those that have died, the older organisms will be gradually lost from the population. This situation is arising for example with parkland trees in Britain and other parts of Europe.

Myth 3. Forests managed for timber production can be easily segregated from forests managed for all other uses.

The spatial separation of resource uses and non-uses stems largely from a modern urban theory that many critics argue is now outdated. The display of this theory is still found for example in modern cities, with segregated areas for residential, industrial and commercial zones. Many of the world's first national parks were established on the basis of the same theory.

Myth 4. A more biocentric view of the world (some

may call it a greater respect for nature) has not been as widely accepted in the marketplace.

Value systems reflected in such words as biodiversity, conservation biology and ecosystem management are now part of the mainstream thinking for those working with forests. In many parts of the world forest operations have clearly had to start reflecting ecological values.

What does all this mean in the case of the Timberlands West Coast situation? Clearly the debate has moved well away from the merits and application of science and scientific principles; it is now entirely within the political realm. It could be said that land managers such as foresters deserved this as, for too long, they focussed on trees and not on the interaction of trees with people.

The company, Timberland West Coast has lost its credibility to resolve the issues. Similarly, it seems that the ENGOs, in this case Forest and Bird, has resorted to political tactics that few find admirable. Finally government also has encountered a significant problem for the way that it has handled a very emotional issue and one to which there is no correct answer. In the end it seems as if all players have been dealt a poor hand and are now suffering from the brutal scars of an intense conflict.

But to my mind there is still an opportunity, a way to find some common ground. Imagine, as John Lennon did, that there are other viable solutions. Not knowing New Zealand's history and culture perhaps my foreign ideas are rather naïve, but just consider the following: Suppose the West Coast beech forest in question were turned over to a local indigenous group, small woodlot owners or local community groups for management. They could set out the terms of management, even hire some of the skilled people from the old company to provide the necessary expertise and work with the ENGO community to provide guidelines on operations (many ENGOs are starting to do this in other parts of the world).

I believe that the vast majority of people in New Zealand would admire the efforts being made in Clayoquot Sound with indigenous people, in Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve with small woodlot ownership management or in the Mission Tree Farm with community-based management. These are just a few Canadian examples of sustainable forest management in practice and many, many more exist in other parts of the world.

Today, we are limited not by the ability of the forest to produce a variety of goods and services but by our own lack of imagination in finding a solution to a problem!

For those who want an example see this story from Brazil. <http://www.environmentaldefense.org/programs/International/chico/slideshow/ERslide01.html>

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