

# TREE FARM . . . OR COMMUNITY FOREST?

## Revelstoke CFC cannot hope to realize sustainable practices until provincial forest legislation changes

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**A**s the forest resource declines in British Columbia, along with employment and economic certainty for local people, forest dependent communities are beginning to challenge the long reign of corporate control over the province's forest land. Prince George, Malcolm Island, and Zeballos are just a few from a long list of B.C. communities who have submitted proposals or conducted feasibility studies to manage a community forest. A simple justification for local control echoes throughout each proposal: Local people will make management decisions with the best long-term interest of their community and its forest landscape in mind.

The City of Revelstoke is one of those resource-dependent communities which has suffered the effects of megaproject boom and bust over the years. Beginning in 1965, the construction of hydroelectric dams generated many jobs and fueled Revelstoke's economy for 20 years, while flooding prime forest and agricultural land and dislocating 600 farming families. Once the construction boom ended in the mid-'80s, so did the jobs and the economic benefits. Over these years, a large sawmill in Revelstoke processed wood from the region's Timber Supply Area (TSA), but this sawmill also closed in 1986. Meanwhile, a 500,000 ha. Tree Farm Licence (TFL) that had been established in the 1950s and stretched from Revelstoke to Castlegar, was controlled by a single corporation which processed all of the timber in Castlegar. Some logging continued in the area, but the timber left the community for processing elsewhere.

Faced with an economic crisis and the loss of one-third of its population, Revelstoke organized a community economic development strategy, which, according to CED Commissioner Doug Weir, began with small projects and small successes

“to develop the tools and capacity for bigger successes.” The Revelstoke Community Forest Corporation (RCFC) was one of those big successes. (See page 39.) The Corporation resulted from seven years of hard work, a period during which

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the community engaged in critical analysis of the forest industry, made presentations and wrote position papers, advocating for local industry, local processing and better forest management. The community gained trust from the industry and the public, and developed the credibility needed to be granted control of its forest land. Moreover, Weir says, the community's history of boom and bust elicited a desire for community control to secure its own future.

Revelstoke's campaign for control of its local forest began in 1988 when the town demanded that new forest licences be awarded to local companies. Then, in 1992, it halted the sale of a TFL from one large corporation to the another. After which, the City itself was presented with the opportunity to purchase and manage half the TFL. Working against a deadline, RCFC mobilized its entrepreneurial resources and, with a bank loan and a partnership agreement with local industry, bought half the TFL with an associated annual cut level of 98,500 cubic metres. Following a community referendum, RCFC became the holder of Tree Farm Licence 56. (See map, page 40.)

Despite the evident merits of Revelstoke's initiative, a troubling question remains for those concerned about the need for structural change in the forest industry in order to achieve economic and environmental sustainability: Does Revelstoke have a community forest?

#### **WHAT IS A COMMUNITY FOREST?**

A Community Forest is defined broadly by forestry analyst Peter Duinker as "a tree-dominated ecosystem managed for multiple community values and benefits by the community." To attain these benefits and maintain these values for the long term, three criteria are necessary: 1) local revenue and local employment; 2) local control and governance and; 3) a commitment to maintain the ecological integrity of the forest ecosystem. Each of these

components is important.

First, for a community to gain full benefits from the timber cut from its forest, the flow of wood must be such as ensures that local people derive the economic benefits from it, thus keeping jobs and revenue in the community. Enhanced local processing that adds value to any products leaving the region is one important way to achieve this. Another would be the utilization of a local log market that returns maximum value for any wood extracted. By increasing such returns (that is, by increasing the social resource "efficiency"), less throughput of wood will be necessary to generate employment and profits, which in turn helps to sustain the forest resource by "getting more for less".

Second, the decentralization of management is imperative to ensure that decisions are made by local people rather than by a remote institution. This local control should extend beyond merely running a licence as a *private* licence-holder to include some form of *public* management that devolves authority from the bureaucratic interests of the Ministry of Forests in the provincial capital to the regional interests of the whole community.

Third, and most important, is the ecological side of "community" which entails a commitment to maintaining the integrity of local forest ecosystems. The health of a community and its economy is dependent on the health of its resource base. Indeed, with the knowledge which we now have in the 1990s, it is wrong to define a community in anthropocentric terms, that is, purely in human or social terms. Community includes the whole complex of social, cultural, ecological, and heritage attributes of a place. Thus, community forestry necessarily goes beyond immediate social and economic objectives to incorporate the landscape as a living bioregion.

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(for example, by clearcutting old growth forests or depleting local fish stocks), a community approach works to ensure that its assets are secure and sustainable for the long term. In this light, community forest management emphasizes value rather than volume and a diversity of forest benefits, not just timber. This implies that conventional methods of industrial forestry, which use large capital-intensive machinery to maximize timber production, be discriminated against in favour of a shift to “ecoforestry” alternatives which are labour-intensive and operate so as to maintain fully functioning forest ecosystems.

Merging these three criteria is very difficult. For one thing, such changes necessarily challenge existing corporate and bureaucratic institutions. For another, they will have a direct economic impact on any community that attempts to embody them where they have been previously dependent on high-volume commodity production. For such a community, a successful re-orientation would require a larger economic strategy that can really only be undertaken with provincial assistance. Yet because of the threatening nature of these changes, such help is hard to come by.

#### **LIMITED BY LEGISLATION**

The Revelstoke model meets many of the social and economic criteria of a community forest. Over 80% of the sawlogs from its licence are processed in the community; pulplogs still leave the community. The community runs a log yard which sells timber to the highest bidder, maximizing value. Whenever possible, operations are contracted out to local people and local suppliers. Due to community involvement, the operations of all forest companies are better co-ordinated to ensure that logging is spread throughout the year to create continuity of employment. In the first few years, high log and pulp prices generated even better profits than

were expected, allowing the City to pay off its debts more quickly.

With the City as its single shareholder, RCFC has a board of directors made up of city management staff, councillors, and members of the community at large, along with an advisory committee which includes industry partners. Nevertheless, governance has only been partially changed. The forest tenure system in British Columbia allocates rights to companies to cut timber on provincial land. Because the forest land is public, all aspects of management are administered by a central bureaucracy, the Ministry of Forests. A TFL is one such tenure. Without outright ownership or an alternative form of tenure which bestows more decision-making power to the community, Revelstoke is bound by provincial forest policy, and management is limited by the terms of a tenure designed for corporations and corporate interests, and these are not the same interests as are embodied by the concept of a community forest.

Indeed, under the *Forest Act*, the holder of a public forest tenure, be it a community or corporation, has little opportunity to make decisions about the types of products it wishes to manage for, the forest practices it wishes to apply, or the rate at which it wishes to cut timber (the allowable annual cut) which is determined centrally by the chief forester at a rate which will “sustain timber production.” Tenure holders are penalized for exceeding the established level, but they are also penalized for undercutting. Now that Revelstoke holds a TFL, it must meet production quotas - “Log it or lose it” as the saying goes.

Finally, RCFC must follow the Forest Practices Code, which legislates clearcutting and the replacement of old growth with even-aged plantations. These practices compromise ecosystem functioning and fail to preserve forest values for the future. To go beyond the Code by practicing ecoforestry would result in non-com-

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pliance with production requirements and would likely contravene Code standards oriented to industrial logging. Thus, the big difference between Revelstoke's community-held TFL and a corporate-held TFL is that the community enjoys more of the immediate benefits.

#### **FOLLOWING THE CORPORATE MODEL**

This difference is undoubtedly significant, even under the constraints of the *Forest Act*. For example, RCFC is considering the elimination of herbicides and the development of more environmentally friendly logging techniques for some sensitive sites. According to RCFC general manager Bob Clarke, alternative logging systems make up approximately 20% of their operations. Clarke explains that they spend \$200,000 just cleaning up the mess and debris left behind by their predecessor. The community was also left with most of the valley-bottoms cut over, as earlier logging went for the best and easiest timber. Consequently, RCFC incorporated more cable-logging to access slopes and difficult terrain. This technique employs three times as many people as do "cats" and is also lighter on the land. In addition, Clarke expresses the community's concern for wildlife habitat and the protection of grizzly and cariboo. RCFC is experimenting with cutblocks as small as one hectare.

Nevertheless, over 60% of the logging follows the usual clearcutting techniques, and RCFC is planning to build roads on steep slopes and sensitive soils where, according to ecosystem-based forestry, no logging activity, in particular road building, should take place. RCFC board member Loni Parker, who represents an "environmental" perspective, explains that the community intentionally chose to purchase rights to an area with the widest range of forest values. She says that RCFC is working with tourism operators, for example, to ensure sensitive

logging techniques in specific areas. Nevertheless, Revelstoke blocked a 1994 CORE recommendation to establish a large portion of the forest land base as a "special management area" where ecologically-oriented logging restrictions would be have reduced the annual cut.

Revelstoke's key management strategy is to "provide a steady flow of revenues", an approach which is more oriented toward immediate economic sustainability than toward long-term ecological or, arguably, economic sustainability. In this regard, Revelstoke is limited also by its corporate partners, with whom they have a "timber removal agreement" which obliges RCFC to supply these local facilities with a steady supply of timber. Timber "removal" thus underlies this agreement, along with the profit motives of the industry. Tied to mainstream financing from the Royal Bank, the community forest must generate enough revenue to pay back its loan. This means using conventional logging practices which maximize profits in the short term but compromise ecosystem integrity. Not surprisingly, RCFC's management committee members are appointed based on experience in business and forestry, not for knowledge in ecological processes. As a result, decisions will still tend to externalize non-timber values, and make it difficult for people with conflicting values to participate, potentially fracturing the community.

#### **COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE**

Across the country, large-scale resource use has overshot environmental carrying capacity, degrading ecosystems and diminishing resources, while hooking communities into a dependence on unsustainable resource industries and driving central governments deep into debt. Although the strategy of community economic development has been around since the 1960s as both a grass-

roots alternative to combat the effects of corporatism and as a governmental policy to mitigate the negative impacts of the business cycle on fringe communities, it was conceived without an ecological component. Without a transformative agenda, it does little to create an economy of greater self reliance, to change the structure of local governance, or to reduce the levels of resource flows. Yet all three changes are paramount to achieving true community sustainability, that is, to ensuring the sustainability of local place.

Forestry-oriented CED strategies in British Columbia have largely failed. When the town of Ocean Falls, for example, was badly fissured by a major sawmill closure and corporate abandonment, the government supported the development of a new Ocean Falls Corporation and a modernization program which included a new sawmill, pulpmill upgrades, and an expanded site to accommodate an anticipated increase in timber volumes. But a community suffering from the effects of resource depletion has little to gain by adopting a strategy aimed at continuing, or accelerating, unsustainable rates of resource utilization by building even bigger facilities. Within seven years the project crumbled, laying off an additional 400 workers and leaving the town, once again, helpless and dependent on central government.

The Revelstoke Community Forest Corporation also grew out of a broad CED strategy that sought to address a host of inter-related developments - the winding down of mega-project developments, the decline of the forest resource base, and corporate divestiture. For the short term, forest liquidation may sustain profits, but the long-term is problematic. Revel-

stoke's TFL has a 120,000 ha. land base, but only 20,000 ha. of productive forest to work with; most of the area is alpine and sub-alpine. The community also benefits today from logging high quality old-growth forests. Once these forests are replaced with tree farms, the community will have to live with both a reduction in cut levels, and inferior wood. An alternative strategy which works with its limited land base and takes the long-term health of the environment and community as a starting point would stress lower levels of resource throughput, value rather than volume-based production, and a diversity of benefits for present and future generations.

#### **TOWARDS A TRUE COMMUNITY FOREST**

No opportunity exists today for communities in B.C. to take control of their forest land and manage it for sustainability. Instead, as we have seen, communities like Revelstoke are forced to fit into the very tenure system, management structure, and pattern of economic development that caused the problems from which they are seeking to escape. Some communities - such as the Slocan Valley, Denman Island and Cortes Island - advocate a different strategy based on a bottom-up process that begins with the development of ecosystem-based plans for community forestry. These plans first determine the ecological limits to human activity, and then designate areas for ecologically responsible forest use, including timber and non-timber values. This approach is the basis for true community forestry, but its implementation awaits the creation of a more suitable form of ecologically-based community

“tenure”, a broader conception of what constitutes economic development, and a willingness to let communities take the whole process on.

Here one reaches the limits of a go-it-alone strategy. One must turn to those higher levels of government, particularly the province, that alone have the resources to make such a transition feasible. The province could create new forms of community tenures, could allocate the land base to support a community's needs on an ecosystem basis, could provide new financing mechanisms (such as an enhanced Community Futures program), and could foster innovative local management institutions.

In assessing the Revelstoke experience, it is difficult to be critical of a community that has done so much to keep itself vital. But it is imperative, as well, to appreciate realistically what can be achieved and what cannot within the *status quo*. Otherwise, CED in the future will remain what it has been in the past - an incremental strategy for the margins, not a transformative platform for the mainstream. ❧

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