

## **Stumping the Forest**

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Usually people of my advanced age group are favorably disposed towards fiber, both for the physical constitution and the moral one. But, I find myself more and more anti-fiber when I witness the ongoing war in the woods over industrial, clear-cut logging. Each generation has its own rendezvous with the land; it would seem today's Forest Service is at least a generation behind today's public that want their forests managed for more than dimensional lumber. The specter of logging in the Castle River watershed, in southwestern Alberta reinforces this dichotomy. It follows pitched battles by concerned citizens over logging in the Ghost watershed, Bragg Creek area, Kananaskis and Crowsnest Pass.

The impression one is left with in reviewing the actions and intent of our Forest Service in these disputes is an agency out of touch, lacking a unifying sense of forest values. Observers might conclude that leaving forests to the care of the Forest Service is akin to leaving a pig under the protection of the butcher. In one case all that is left is the squeal, in the other just sawdust, stumps and sediment.

Forests are more, much more than fiber, described as dimensional lumber, fence posts and now bark mulch for landscaping. But, fiber vision, a variant of tunnel vision, has become a debilitating disease in which perception and reason are restricted by arrogance and ignorance. Vision is further distorted by vested economic interests and politics. If left untended the malady progresses to a type of institutional blindness, in which no other forest attribute or value can be discerned. Its legacy, other than rotting stumps and eroding skid trails, includes streams filled with silt, a ravaged landscape that has lost visual interest, an unnatural quiet, with no trees to capture the wind or shelter birds and a vacant space, across which wildlife are reluctant to travel.

If there was an appropriate metaphor for the situation it would be a brain dead dinosaur, whose tail hasn't yet got the message that forests are more than fiber. The tail, consisting of industrial clear-cuts, continues to swing wildly, crushing and smashing everything in its path. It is almost as if the sole goal of our Forest Service is to reset the geological clock back to a less biologically diverse time when there were only primordial pines and ferns.

As for the foresters that design the logging plans, the bureaucrats and politicians that push them over citizens' concerns and the corporate directors who collect the profit from deforestation, they will soon be extinct. But we must give them their due; they are doing their very best to take with them creatures whose residence in these watersheds is at least 10,000 years longer than theirs. That which exploiters fail to value, or do not value, they take no trouble to comprehend. Of clean water, cutthroat trout, bull trout, grizzlies and connections only lip service is paid.

The forests of the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains were viewed by early policy makers as pivotal to the settlement and well-being of the area later to be known as Alberta and Saskatchewan. Hence, the forests were "reserved", for water, local timber needs and to sustain wildlife. How quickly our Forest Service has forgotten history. The need for watershed protection and maintenance of biodiversity is not an artifact of history, but a compelling need for today (and the future). We need to learn to take our wealth from our forests in less damaging ways, and to realize wealth is also found in managing them for more than fiber. An intact forest is a symbol of progress, a landscape covered with stumps is not.

The Forest Service, in their antiquated public input process, sucks the oxygen out of legitimate debate over forest management with the time tested "DAD" approach (Decide-Advise-Defend). Whatever the public process is, the deal is rigged and participants end up wasting time and energy on something our Forest Service was really never engaged in anyway. Any good will engendered by asking the public to participate is squandered and rapidly evaporates into anger towards an agency still in a command and control mode. The rush to cut trees, because they are getting older

supercedes forest management for multiple values and, meaningful engagement with Albertans who care about their forests.

I know there are still professionals in our Forest Service that care about forests and have the public interest as a focus. These voices of reason, of balance and of restraint are overwhelmed by the politics of timber harvest.

If, in the future, you plan to drink water, enjoy a forest landscape, fish and hunt or watch wildlife, now is the time to pay attention to the rapid industrialization of our forests. The focus should be less on wood fiber and more on moral fiber in forest management. A lack of public oversight now will doom us to a new Alberta coat of arms displaying a field of stumps where forests once stood.

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