Canadian Institute of Forestry
Institut forestier du Canada

OLD GROWTH

Topic: Scientific experts describe old growth forests in terms of age and species. Depending on forest type and site productivity, this may include large trees. Old Growth forests are usually found in areas where large-scale harvesting has never occurred. While the definition of old growth forest may differ across Canada, these forests often contain uneven-aged structures and high levels of biodiversity due to long periods with no disturbance. These valued forests often represent the last phase of forest development (climax stage), an uneven-aged forest that is self-sustaining or simply a forest with trees much older than most of the forests in the region.

The structure of these forests on high productivity sites with long-lived tree species may with time develop a structure, with large trees and layered canopies. These forests inspire feelings of awe and can provide a spiritual connection. When they are lost due to logging, extreme weather events, fire or pests, many people feel a profound sense of loss. This sense of loss generates intense demands to stop the logging of old growth forests in some regions, as demonstrated through past and current protests.

Background: Old growth forests are often the most valuable forests to log because of their size, quality, and how they are often found in easily accessible landscape positions. However, in some regions of the country, they are also the most vulnerable to disturbance such as fire and insects. As such, forest planners over the past decades commonly targeted them for logging first. As older forests have become scarcer and conservation communities have strengthened, there has been an increasing demand to protect old growth forests. This has been bolstered by a better understanding of the importance old forests for a host of environmental services such as habitat for the spotted owl or woodland caribou, coupled with endangered species legislation. Saving old growth has become a rallying cry to stop logging since the time of 'war in the woods' in California, Oregon, Washington and the BC west (i.e., Clayoquot Sound). Old growth is also often associated with the concept of wildness or places untouched in post-colonial times.

Current Status: In most parts of Canada, National and Provincial parks and natural areas have both small and large sections of old growth forest that are legally protected. In most public forests designated for timber management, there may be older forests that are slated to be logged. They are slated for logging to sustain an even flow of timber to mills. In most of these 'managed' forests, however, current forest management plans also leave blocks of old forests unlogged to sustain watershed, biodiversity, Indigenous or recreation values.

There continues to be tension between those that are strongly committed to conserving all old growth forests and those that want some of the trees harvested for economic benefits. Such polarized positions are found across society, with many rural and indigenous communities dependent on the forest industry. These communities have the difficult decision of deciding whether the benefits of managing timber for a sawmill, along with the traditional and economic benefits to their communities, outweigh sustaining old growth structures on their lands. These stresses have been very divisive for both indigenous and non-indigenous communities alike.

Key Considerations: In many regions of Canada, most of the lands managed for timber have been harvested at least once; this might mean that the desire to protect remaining old growth will increase in areas that still have plans to cut old forests or the old growth issue may subside at least in lands managed for timber. Eventually, all the lands with timber as a primary focus, will be second growth forest. This will occur whether the disturbance is logging or occurs due to other events like fire, pests, or extreme weather events. Stopping the logging of an old stand may not necessarily keep it from being damaged or destroyed by intense fires, wind, or through insect attack or drought – instances which are likely to increase with climate change.

For many in rural Canada the choice on old growth is stark and very personal. Many rural and remote communities, companies, and workers face the reality that their economic livelihoods are at stake. For many companies, large and small, the inexorable erosion of accessible, quality, and economic timber provides few options but to close down. When these companies depart, they leave behind abandoned infrastructure and towns, lost jobs, and bleak economic prospects. While some towns re-invent themselves, most do not.

Reverence for old growth - Coastal Douglas fir

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While large firms with multiple operations tend to have deep economic resources, the fact remains that capital is mobile and gravitates towards areas of better returns, which is usually outside the province or country. While protecting old growth is a worthy and important conservation value, there are consequences and those that bear the brunt of these decisions often have few other options to fall back on.

Options: Several mechanisms might help approach compromise on this issue. One option is setting up clear zoning of forest land where conservation, biodiversity, recreation, and Indigenous, and spiritual values are recognized with high value. As timber is also important in our green economic future, the lands designated for timber must also have a significant certainty on the landscape. To make up for those old growth forests lost to natural disturbance, some of the older managed forests might be swapped for former old growth stands affected by fire or other disturbances. Some of the characteristics of old growth forest such as big trees or a more varied canopy structure, can be generated in younger forests by specialized thinning, and fertilization regimes to speed growth of stands to develop old growth characteristics – hence forest management can contribute to conservation values (Franklin et al. 2018, Beese et al. 2019). These options for addressing old growth align with recommendations from the report, 'A new future for old growth', including:

- Partner with Indigenous leaders and organizations when developing policy and implementing strategies.
- Prioritize ecosystem health, implement legislation that ensures this is a priority for all sectors.
- To guide forest planning and decision making, implement zoning for clarification purposes (highly integrated and highly focused harvest areas).
- Implement a government model that is more inclusive and stable. One that gives local communities and stakeholders a larger role in the forest management decisions that impact them.
- Improve public information on old forests, with information delivered in a timely and objective manner (i.e., forest conditions and trends).
- Implement a standardized, modern framework for setting biodiversity objectives.

Conclusions: Old growth forests are an important and valued feature across Canada's landscape. Protecting most, or all of these forests, will conserve valuable environmental services. However, the economic consequences of protection efforts are being felt by rural workers, communities (indigenous and non-indigenous) and firms, large and small. Old growth is a polarizing and emotional issue for those on both sides of this ongoing debate.

References:

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