



A BRIEF HISTORY OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT IN BC

Aboriginal peoples lived throughout the area of the province of BC, utilizing the food, fuel, shelter, clothing and medicines that were provided by the forests. They developed a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the forest landscapes, which gave them sustenance.

The influx of Europeans in the 1800's brought a different focus that included viewing the forest as a store of timber and other related products. In the early 1900's, forest harvesting began in earnest in BC. The first Forestry Royal Commission in the province (the Fulton Commission) recommended that forest resources be retained in public ownership and that "a sound policy of conservation must be established." This pioneering vision provided the framework for future stewardship and ensured that forest lands were not fragmented among many owners.

After several decades of emphasis upon basic needs such as fire suppression, road building and timber harvest, the need for more comprehensive legislation and policies became evident as BC responded to a major increase in demand for wood products (following World War II). The forest industry was expected to be the primary engine for economic growth and prosperity in the province, and harvesting rights were given to companies as an incentive for them to establish timber processing facilities and provide employment. The administrative framework that we generally have in place today (which is a sharing of forest management responsibilities among public and private sectors) evolved during this busy development phase. The focus was on timber sustainability and resource use, first as a part of the 'multiple use' concept (1970's), then 'integrated use' (1980's) and finally 'sustainable forests management' (1990's).

By the 1970's, there were increasing concerns and questions about the industrial development of BC's forest resources. Global interest about the limits of the earth's resources focused attention upon BC (and other forested regions). The practices of road building, clearcutting and slashburning became international targets, and tree planting by itself no longer satisfied concerns about stewardship and sustainability. In response, BC became active with initiatives such as strategic landuse planning, operational forest development plans and public involvement. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development emphasized that sustainable development would require new approaches. At this time, BC was actively working on its new Forest Practices Code and attempting to redefine best management practices. In the late 1990's, other SFM initiatives were undertaken such the Protected Area Strategy, First Nations roles and responsibilities, criteria and indicators, and forest certification.

At the same time, the forest industry was experiencing a very difficult period with issues of markets, demand, cost, price, facilities, capacity and supply. Also, many people in BC were becoming increasingly concerned that they had little opportunity to participate in and influence forest policy and decision-making.

In spite of many problems and continuing concerns, BC has a considerable endowment of forests throughout the province. This natural capital should be sufficient to satisfy the many facets of SFM, including biodiversity, timber, water, soil, air, and the health of forest-dependant communities. However the real question is whether or not BC has the desire, understanding and ingenuity to establish the necessary sound policies and institutions for SFM in the new millennium. This includes developing an overarching vision for our forests, setting appropriate objectives and strategies to enable the vision, applying forest practices that are truly sustainable, encouraging people to be meaningful participants and full partners in our forest decisions, and having an auditing regime to measure our progress and make changes in direction or content as necessary.

Are we up to the task in BC?? The Forests Society plans to be a part of the picture to define and accomplish what people want as SFM.

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