

The Corporate Forest

How big business is rolling over rural communities on Vancouver Island.

“One morning in June 2005 we were at the table speaking government to government. Then Weyerhaeuser walked in with the press release,” Judith Sayers, the chief councillor of the Hupacasath explains how 70,000 hectares of traditional Nuu-chah-nulth lands in Tree Farm Licence 44 on Vancouver Island became private. Private lands that can be logged with few restrictions to protect the environment.

Following a legal battle by the Hupacasath, Madam Justice Lynn Smith of the British Columbia Supreme Court ruled in December 2005 that the B.C. government, “must consult with First Nations with regard to 70,000 hectares of private timberlands within their ancestral territory before deciding whether, at the request of then owner Weyerhaeuser, to remove those lands from Tree Forest Licence (TFL) 44 and place them under a different and much more [environmentally] forgiving regime.” The ruling came months after the provincial government had already failed to consult with First Nations.

“So Weyerhaeuser can write us and say, ‘we’re logging another sacred site – haha.’ And that’s all they have to do,” Sayers says. Grassy Mountain, the most sacred site in Hupacasath territory, lies within the private lands. The mountain wears a cloak of old-growth cedar and Douglas fir. Sayers sits in her office at the Hupacasath’s new House of Gathering tucked at the end of a winding lane in Port Alberni wondering why her people bothered spending \$200,000 to win a fight that changes nothing in terms of their land being logged.

Now it’s spring and the logging trucks rumble out of TFL 44 at the rate of 200 per day loaded with raw logs for export to Asia and points across North America. According to Sayers, 1.3 million cubic meters of forest, worth about \$160 million Cdn are coming out as fast as the logging company can cut. Despite the legal ruling, the privatization couldn’t be reversed due to the economic hardship it would cause the new owner of the TFL, according to the court.

The private lands date back to the days when ancient trees on Vancouver Island were as plentiful as rainfall. In 1887, the fledgling B.C. government gave the land as a gift to Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway for building an island rail-line between Victoria and Port Alberni.

That parcel of forest, mountain and stream became a jewel in the MacMillan-Bloedel empire until 1999 when the world’s largest logging corporation,



The remains of the sitka spruce floodplain near the villages of Bamfield and Ana'cla. This rare ecosystem falls into the private lands transferred to logging companies, and was logged without adequate community consultation despite petitions signed by a majority of residents

Weyerhaeuser, arrived on the island. When Weyerhaeuser was finished with the TFL, they wanted to sweeten the deal for potential buyers, and lobbied the provincial government to set the 70,000 hectares apart from the public portion of the TFL. After three years as the biggest campaign donors to the BC Liberal party, Weyerhaeuser got the deal.

Then the Toronto-based investment company, Brascan, stepped up to buy. A quick name change created Brookfield Asset Management. It divided into two more companies. Cascadia Forest Products would manage the public lands, and Island Timberlands Limited Partnership which took over the private lands. This web of identities makes it hard to get answers as to what's happening in the TFL where people are observing clearcuts of sizes that haven't been seen since the 1970s.

Island Timberlands Corporate Forester, Diane Medves, claims that the public's perception is wrong. She said that the private lands that her organization logs in TFL 44 are still legislated under the Private Land Management Act (PLMA). "I don't know," was her answer when asked how much of the 70,000 hectares would be cut this year.

Under the Private Land Management Act, the strict forestry standards developed in response to global protests over B.C.'s forest industry don't apply. Dennis Morgan, the former manager of the Bamfield Community Forest explained that the PLMA doesn't protect biodiversity, require community consultation or protect salmon habitat. "The Fisheries Act and other environmental laws kick in only after the damage has been done," says Morgan. There is no maximum size to clearcuts on the so-called private lands.

The Water Quality Act is also supposed to protect residents down stream of logging operations, but the town of Beaver Creek just outside of Port Alberni has been on a boil water advisory since December 2005. The community sits below the Beaufort Range where deforestation has clogged salmon streams with mud. Endangered species and wildlife habitat get no notice under this logging free-for-all either. And because it's private land, Island Timberlands can do as it wishes after it's cleared - replanting isn't mandatory. "They can log it then make a Whistler-style resort. There's nothing we can do about it," says Sayers.

Further down the logging road heading towards the west coast the Huu-ay-aht, another band belonging to the Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council, plan to profit from the new rules. A rare example of Sitka spruce floodplain adjacent to Phase 3 of the Pacific Rim National Park has been logged despite local protest. The nearby communities of Bamfield and Ana'cla signed petitions calling for consultation on the logging plan. Months of cat and mouse games between the village, the band council and Island Timberlands resulted in no significant changes to the plan. Huu-

ay-aht chief Robert Denis claims to have gotten the approval of his community, but Bob Baden, owner of the Bamfield Hardware store scoffs at that assertion. "We're trying

"We're trying to market ourselves as a wilderness experience, yeah, come see the clearcuts. Do you think people want to come and see a Wal-Mart parking lot?"

to market ourselves as a wilderness experience, yeah, come see the clearcuts. Do you think people want to come and see a Wal-Mart parking lot?" In the past, the Huu-ay-aht and the Bamfield Community Forest worked together in land use decisions. Following the Huu-ay-aht unilateral decision to log right across from the west coast trail hiker registration site, Baden, a long-time member of the Community Forest, felt compelled to resign.

Bamfield Regional Director and manager of fisheries for the Huu-ay-aht, Stefan Ochman, criticized the proposed logging blueprint, "They're not leaving enough buffer along the creeks. That gives no protection to the riparian area," Ochman said. None of the forestry jobs went to people on the reserve. "The band will make \$1.2 million off the logging, but they can't use the land - it's a floodplain, it'll be hard to even replant it," Ochman explained.

When the province first tried to remove the private land from TFL 44 in 1997, the public marched on the legislature in numbers that forced the then NDP government to scrap the deal. Now, it's happened behind closed doors. Legislation allows the Minister of Forests to designate more land as private at his discretion. Vancouver Island is not an isolated case. Island Timberlands holds 258,000 hectares of pristine B.C. wilderness on the Queen Charlotte Islands, the north coast and Vancouver Island. The cutting continues, and few citizens outside the rural communities watching the trucks go by know what they're losing.