

The Forest Outside of the Park

Fred Davies, Parksville Qualicum News, 7 November 2006

The masking tape tells the story. Stretched diagonally across a map it reveals a near complete absence of land protected from human intrusion on Vancouver Island's east coast. Annette Tanner, chairperson for The Western Canada Wilderness Committee' mid-island chapter uses the illustration before a group of about 15, ranging from toddlers to seniors, gathered to hike into a canyon containing some of the very last remaining old growth forest around. Located outside of the protection of MacMillan Provincial Park (Cathedral Grove), it's filled with towering, centuries-year-old fir and cedar as well as ancient yew trees only recently discovered.

The Wilderness Committee says a mere 13 per cent of the Island is protected in parks and on the east coast that amount plummets to two per cent. "It's privately owned this side of the masking tape," says Tanner. "Whether it's logged or protected will depend on people like you."

She is among a group assembled for what turns out to be a gruelling, yet entirely enchanting jaunt that includes nature guide Gary Murdock, ecologist and watershed advocate Phil Carson and Scott Tanner, ex-Qualicum Beach councillor.

On our way we'll encounter perilous and muddy slopes, see uncommon specimens like Douglas Maple and the aforementioned yews, and pass trees tagged and painted with numbers; telltale signs of imminent demise at the hands of loggers. Most surprising was to stumble upon a prospector's home nestled deep into a crevice beneath an imposing cliff wall. But first the group faced the daunting task of getting down to the valley and the Cameron River that flows through it.

Starting from a pull out some four kilometres north of MacMillan Provincial Park at the hump of Highway 4A, we walked on logging roads and trails for around 20 minutes (follow the white 'gulch' signs) before coming to a trailhead into the canyon. The rough, unmarked path is slick with moss. As we approach a bluff — that eventually rewards with commanding views over the forest canopy and across the valley — it becomes necessary to slip and scuttle our way down the dangerously inclined slopes on our buttocks or risk falling hundreds of feet to the valley floor below.

After a brief stop to catch our breath and take in the spectacular scenery we regroup and renew our descent. Along the way we see a massive Douglas Fir scarred by a fire, likely occurring many generations ago, that was unable to consume its thick, gnarly bark. To our left is the towering rock face we stood on only moments earlier, rising up like a behemoth as we struggle against the steep slope grabbing at underbrush to stabilize us as we go.

We stop again in front of a yew tree twisted and torn by perhaps millennia of enduring nature's ebb and flow. "It's hard to tell. It could be 1,000 years old," says Murdock. "They'll only grow in the shade of an existing old growth forest at a rate of about four inches a year."

Yews, Murdock says, are of interest because they contain within their bark a substance called taxol that has traditionally been used in cancer treatments. Further along, the worst of the treacherous descent behind us, we come upon evidence of the prospector.

"The logging companies have tried to chase him out of here," says Scott Tanner. "He'll be the only one left around if the holocaust hits." Apparently the 'cave man' has survived challenges from successive timber companies to oust him and, as a prospector with mineral rights, has every right to stay and chooses to do so. The length of his tenure is obvious. Scattered implements, roughly hewn furnishings, pails and debris of all sorts is scattered for yards along the lengthy entrance to his multi-roomed abode. There is a wood stove, lanterns and a mattress. Only thin sheets of plastic sheeting are up as protection from the elements. A hammock hangs limp and forlorn a few paces away.

On this day the man isn't home or perhaps has chosen to leave, reluctant to play host to so many at once. From here we can hear the bubbling river and finally head towards it for some lunch and another well deserved break. The lush verdant landscape enthalls. The water so clear it's invisible.

Before heading up, to our cars, Carson has us gather around thick trunks emblazoned with lurid blue loggers' insignia. He offers some unsparing opinions on what's at stake should these forests be torn down. "This area is a gem by anyone's scale," he says. "It would be the crown jewel of a national park,"

Carson notes the moss "which can hold 1,000 times its own weight in moisture," and the roots work to stabilize the soil preventing the flash floods and habitat destruction he says is sure to be the result should logging occur on such an unstable flood plain.

Logging companies, he continues, "are treating the land like it's their own personal fiefdom and it's nobody's business. It's everybody's business."

The Wilderness Committee and others are fighting to have the remaining 1,300 hectares of the grove and public land around Cameron Lake protected to prevent damage to drinking water, wildlife and public values.

"There's so few areas like this left and the only reason is because they can't get at them with traditional logging," says Carson, noting the only way to harvest in the area is through expensive heli-logging techniques.

"We're allowing this to happen for what amounts to a few shekels." Sobering words to ponder as we turned around to face the task of climbing the long steep terrain up and out of the old growth forest and back to our everyday lives.