



On the Loss of Forests and the Co-opting of First Nations

When environmentalists idealize the values, traditional ecological knowledge and philosophy of First Nations and quote from Chief Seattle (the Hollywood translation), they fail to take into account the social breakdown, the alcoholism, substance abuse and drug use, the foetal alcohol syndrome that destroys the mind and spirit. Also there is the impact of residential schools, junk foods, pornography, and all the other social ills that have been imported along with the whiskey. Add to that reserve politics made worse by government money being controlled by whichever faction can gain a 50 percent majority; cultural shame exacerbated by overt racism in nearby redneck communities; the impact of epidemics of disease; and the fact that many of these cultures where traditionally hunter-gather nomadic families only removed by a couple of generations and you can imagine how susceptible they will be to the Machiavellian manipulations of big corporations and their government handmaidens.

This is going to be an ongoing challenge right across Canada as First Nations get more control of forestry operations. Some First Nations may have aligned themselves with conservationists and environmentalists on the surface but in some cases it has been a tool to gain control of their land base. The convoluted politics and lack of any sort of business ethic will definitely make them a challenge for governments and businesses to do business with but I have no doubt in my mind that they will find a way to manipulate things so that in the end it is as close to business as usual. The scary thing is in many cases it could be worse. The First Nations can fall back on their poverty and need for social development to justify just about any sort of atrocity to the natural world and not without justification. In the end they are going to sell themselves to the highest bidder just like the rest of us.

I don't think the Greenpeace orgs and Natural Resource Defence Councils can sustain a bidding war with the Weyerhaeuser's of the world. I know this all sounds cynical. There are some very sincere and committed in First Peoples Communities just like there are the same in government, corporations, and the public at large. The problem is they are few and far between and the deck is stacked against them.

This brings us to the Huu-ay-aht First Nations where I think all the things I said above apply. They had already logged some of the sacred traditional under their control quite aggressively, maybe saving the odd culturally modified tree. These were some of the last stands of old growth in a forest that is literally an industrial sacrifice zone. The excuse was that they were going to use the money for salmon rehabilitation. Why Weyerhaeuser wasn't made responsible for the salmon restoration in their negotiations since it was they who had destroyed the habitat escaped my logic. On this a propaganda video was made - paid for by Weyerhaeuser - in which they are made out to be the good guys and everything is sunny and rosy between industry and First Peoples.

I wasn't privy to what was going on with the forestry negotiations with the Huu-ay-aht and the Bamfield Community Forest. This was one of the problems. No public input or transparency. I was even told that I wasn't welcome to attend meetings of the Community Forestry board, with the exception of their annual general meeting. Yet I was a community member with an interest in forestry and quite an extensive background on how to approach value added and ecologically certified market opportunities.

Comments by Phil Carson in a personal note to Karen Wonders dated 15 May 2005. Phil Carson is a Vancouver Island filmmaker (www.screenweavers.com), a founding member of the Friends of Cathedral Grove (FROG), and a former resident of Bamfield.