



# Cathedral Canyon

## Five Years Later

By Richard Boyce

In April 2006 I witnessed an assault on the international forest icon Cathedral Grove.

Forest destroyer corp Island Timberlands (aka Brookfield Infrastructure Partners, Brascan, Weyerhaeuser, MacMillan Bloedel) was heli-logging Cathedral Canyon.

I returned in January 2011 to see what this primeval forest looks like today.

### January 2011

Standing on a 120 meter cliff looking over the ancient forest of Cathedral Canyon, I can see that the trees are covered in a magical dusting of snow. I was impressed at how natural the forest looked despite plans by Island Timberlands to log the area with helicopters five years ago. A friend and I hiked down onto the Canyon from the North-side. We made our way down a very narrow cleft in the stone cliffs, composed of sedimentary rock worn away by the river over milieus. The opposite side of the river is nearly as steep where a mountain ridge towers over the narrow canyon.

Massive Douglas fir, grow sporadically between giant boulders which have broken off the cliffs and rolled down toward the river, today they are covered with lichens, moss, ferns, and trees. As we descended the forest became more lush where, over many centuries, thin strips of rich soil along the river's edge provide a lush floodplain thick with devil's club, salmon berry, ferns, moss, and ancient yew and cedar trees that grow straight and tall as they reach for the limited light funneled between the steep cliffs of the canyon. Most of the largest Cedar and Douglas fir

trees had pink ribbons around them along with aluminum plates with stamped numbers nailed into blaze marks on the massive trunks. What is amazing about this is that Island Timberlands marked these trees 5 years ago and they are still standing today. This is a testament to the fact that the public can make a difference. This is privately owned land with very few regulations protecting the water, which flows down river to become the drinking water for the town of Qualicum Beach, and was slated for helicopter logging back in 2005. However, local people became outraged that a multi-national company could destroy some of the last pristine Coastal Douglas Fir forest left on the island, and so close the Cathedral Grove which at that time had been defended by the public for 5 years to prevent the BC government from logging Old Growth Fir trees in the park itself to make way for a parking lot.

Public pressure, media reports, and several rallies seem to have scared Island Timberlands from logging Cathedral Canyon. At any rate today the trees stand tall. I stood beside many of the trees that would have been cut down if people hadn't come to their rescue. In particular a group of three giant Cedar trees, right on the bank of the river, which stood with the same ribbons on them that a logger had tied around them five years ago. The serenity of the forest remains and hopefully the forest will be left in its natural state for centuries to come.

## **April 2006**

There is a jewel hidden at the base of Mt. Arrowsmith. A place so secluded that most people do not know that it exists. Since the last ice age the flow of water known as the Cameron River has cut a deep canyon through the stone ridge many know as 'the Hump.' Cathedral Canyon reaches a depth of 250 meters and runs for 6 kilometers between the Cameron logging road mainline and the Alberni Highway at the base of the hump.

In mid-April people had reported hearing helicopters and seeing giant logs on trucks pulling out from the logging roads on the Port Alberni side of Cathedral Grove. I left behind the massive clear-cut and single species tree farm that makes up the Cameron Valley, with the exception of the old-growth trees of Cathedral Grove, and hiked down into Cathedral Canyon. I should say I clambered, scaled, and climbed between the sheer rock faces by skirting along the moss-covered rockslides, which had fallen off the sides of Mt. Arrowsmith.

I started my descent into the Canyon down the east face. The forest showed signs of a forest fire approximately 200 years ago which had opened the forest canopy to allow the growth of many tall, slender western red cedar and western hemlock trees. Moss and lichens covered almost every surface in this dense forest. Colours blended

into one another, yellow green over the rocks, gray and green hanging from the trees, with spatters of red or orange created by lichens in bloom. Despite the rugged location this dense forest is so lush that any open spaces are covered with ferns, Salal, and Salmon berry.

Between the dense growths of younger trees, most over 150 years old, I came upon the occasional massive old-growth Douglas fir. Remnant survivors of the fire, the thick bark of these trees had protected these fir trees for six to eight hundred years.

Then I saw the first freshly cut stump. I lost count of the rings at six hundred and forty because the growth was so slight towards the outer edge that I could not distinguish between the years. I later counted thirty stumps and twenty more old growth trees marked for logging by Island Timberlands on the east side of this steep canyon.

The next day I hiked/climbed down the west face of Cathedral Canyon, where the 'hump' falls off into the deep ravine. Steep cliffs are topped by a series of clear-cuts and tree farms ranging in age from 50 years to this winter when Island Timberlands cut down the last of the big trees. I skirted an almost vertical drop down to the Cameron River where I found a very narrow floodplain with thick soil and massive Cedar Trees.

Both sides of the river are lined with some of the finest specimens of Western Red Cedar that I have seen in my entire life. They are about two meters in diameter, straight with no spiral, clear with few limbs until the top, which reach heights of sixty to eighty meters. The forest floor is covered in moss, lichen, ferns, salmon berry, and devil's club. Most of the big trees, some growing directly out of the river's bank, are ribboned and spray-painted for logging by Island Timberlands.

Single stem heli-logging involves a faller climbing the tree while cutting off any branches and then the top of the tree with a chainsaw. He then climbs down and cuts the tree from both directions with no wedge cut until there is only a very narrow piece of wood holding the tree. Then he runs for cover as a helicopter grabs the top of the tree with a claw, snaps off the tree trunk, and flies away with the log.

Is it any wonder that more fallers are killed every year than any other occupation in BC? This type of logging allows access into the places that have never before been logged and trees are being cut down in the most fragile and sensitive locations. This is not sustainable. After all, how long does it take to grow an eight hundred year old tree? Cathedral Canyon needs to be protected not logged.