

Tragedy and Travesty at the Sacred Sooke Potholes

Ingmar Lee (21 June 2005)

Often times on a summer's morning, I head out to the Sooke Potholes, where I strip off all my clothes and swim naked into a most wondrous whelm of wilderness. Immersed in the crystal clear waters of the Sooke River, and looking up through the lofty boughs of the hoary old fir trees which cloak the valley, the sublimity of nature deeply permeates ones being. Drifting under the ancient trees one slowly sinks out of this world, and on through the realm of hamadryads and satyrs, and beyond. All of the physical conditions for the human being's most ultimate quest are to be found here. No cathedral, no masjid, no mandir, vihara or synagogue can offer such immersion into that primaevial place from whence we have all evolved. One day, several years ago, while swimming through the Potholes, a sudden flash of fluorescence, a colour unknown in nature, focussed my vision back to Earth, and onto a fluttering piece of flagging tied around an ancient tree.

In winter when the river swells into a torrent, boulders swirl around and around in the current and gradually drill down through the sandstone bedrock. In places, a boulder may wear through the polished wall of its hole, thereby opening an underwater passage through to its neighbour. In summertime when the river flows lazily through these translucent pools, a swimmer may pass easily from one into the next. Above, an ancient trail winds along the smooth ledges of the canyon, which once led to Cowichan - a distance covered more quickly by foot than by paddling around the coast by canoe. Throughout millenia, people have appreciated the power and sanctity of this place. The hereditary Chief of the T'Sou'ke First Nation tells me that the Potholes are sacred. A haunting magic still reverberates there and is perceptible and beloved by many.

10,000 years ago, a global-warming event was melting down the kilometre-thick sheet of ice which covered Vancouver Island. In the wake of receding glaciers, fish followed the ice out of the ocean and up the valleys, and people followed the fish. Post-spawn fish carcasses fertilized the verdure which began to blanket the land, spreading out from the riparian areas. First lichens, then mosses, then

grasses, then shrubs and then forests emerged from the rock and gravel landscape. Eventually coniferous forests blossomed into the most resplendent botanical efflorescence which ever graced this planet. Sheltered in the island's rainshadow, gigantic 100 metre-tall Douglas fir trees, once the tallest trees in the world, grew up alongside the Sooke River.

Vancouver Islands forests sprouted from the post-glacial till with careful human stewardship right from the beginning. The T'Sou'ke ancestors skillful symbiosis left a legacy of magnificent biodiversity in their primaevial forest ecosystem. Those forests which remain now mourn for their lost human element. The measure of civilisation has nothing to do with the complexity of human material invention, but is seen only in the subtle degree of the common ecological footprint, when a community lives well and gently within the capacity of the giving planet.

As I swam, I knew that this was the final tract of primaevial wild forest in the entire Sooke River valley, and amongst the last in an ecosystem now reduced to tiny refugia tufts, rising out of a sea of second-growth stretching off to the horizon as far as the eye can see. Southeastern Vancouver Islands primaevial Douglas fir forests have been virtually exterminated in 150 years of industrial logging. Fully 80% of all of Vancouver Island's primaevial wild forests are now gone. I crawled out of the river and climbed up the canyon and into the forest to see what was with the flagging. Sure enough, it was a TimberWest Falling Boundary, laid out to within 30 feet of the most sacred section of Potholes. The final tract of ancient fir forest in the Sooke River valley was here ensnared in big-logging's noose, slated for cutting. Now it is gone, a steaming stumpfield laid waste in April, 2005.

For those who aspire to the higher callings of the human experience, the Buddha had this best advice: -go to a quiet place, a cave, a forest, or at the roots of a tree, and focus your mind with equanimity on the experience of the reality of the moment. The noblest use of the human life is to accumulate those moments. Primaevial wilderness is the best place for such an undertaking. There is nothing better, and being there for that purpose leaves the very gentlest ecological footprint.

Ingmar Lee has travelled 8 times around the world and recognizes the emergency of the global ecological catastrophe. He is adamant that all of the Earth's final remaining primaeval forests must be protected from logging, and that humans must learn to live within the capacity of the evolving ecosystem.