
Community forests' on-going battle with corporate forestry

A long way from the tropical rainforests of Amazonia, British Columbia (BC), the western most province in Canada, has been characterized as "Brazil of the North" for its rate of forest liquidation. The British Columbian forests are dominated by large corporate tenures and large scale extraction. But there is a glimmer of change as community forests emerge, and with them, a new way of doing forestry and forest management. One of these community forests belongs to Kaslo, a small town on the shores of Kootenay Lake, in south-east British Columbia.

In 1997, the Kaslo community was awarded a community forest, giving the people of the community a greater say in managing the local forest. This forestry operation started with a wide range of people, much wider than the people traditionally involved in BC forests (BC forests are about as male dominated as a bachelor party, with only the token female stripper). One of those people is Susan Mulkey.

Susan Mulkey came to the Kaslo community forest as facilitator with a background in social work, with no direct experience in forest management. As a board member for five years, Susan helped the community forest get off the ground – and put her facilitation skills to work. The Kaslo community forest operated using consensus for decision-making to negotiate between the vastly different perspectives that make up small communities.

The Kaslo Community Forest began to have some success: they were profitable, improving participation and democratic involvement, managing for a diversity of values including ecological, consumptive water use, visuals and recreation, and primarily local people were employed in the forest – directly benefiting the local community. The old boys club dominating management decisions began to slowly include broader and more inclusive perspectives.

But this was not a smooth transition, as Susan explains it, "The dominant groups in the community, the ones who have traditionally held control – the mill owners, contractors – many were, and some still are very threatened by our work. Here I am, a short, female social activist, talking about doing things differently in forests, talking forest management, talking consensus, talking diversification. The old guard is terrified of all that stuff." Some people in the community, particularly ones who have traditionally held all the power, strongly resisted these changes, resenting the so-called "women's build relationships approach", which was less valued, and often seen as soft, or unnecessary.

The corporate, industrial forest forces are still very strong in Kaslo, as in all of British Columbia. At the last Kaslo Community Forest election, the 'old boys' managed to wiggle their way onto the board (the main decision-making body), and now they are once again dominating the local forest, bringing a totally different approach to forest management than the past few years.

So, what happens when industrial forestry takes over the community forest? One thing is for certain, the Kaslo community forest is definitely at threat of remaining a 'community' forest, as Susan Mulkey reports: "All those things that make a community forest different than corporate forest management are being eroded – the decision making system, stewardship education, gentle forest

management approaches, increased public consultation and participation.” But, Susan goes on, “This has been an enormous learning experience. We have learned how important governance is, and setting up governance regulations in a way that will not allow one interest to dominate over all the others. We should have built in mechanisms to avoid this sort of situation, while remaining attentive to the need for a democratic process. For example, we should have entrenched in our by-laws the governing principles and values such as consensus decision making process, mechanisms to ensure diverse community representation.”

For some of us it is difficult to view community forests, or community based forest management as a threat, when it seems to be the ideal way to put democracy, social justice and ecology back into forestry. But to some of the people and institutions who have profited and gained from old corporate forestry, community forests and the new people they can bring to the decision making table (particularly women) are threatening. The challenges for changing forestry and forest management does not stop at gaining community forestry tenures, or increasing participation in management. Challenges are on-going – particularly to ensure that community forests, or community based forest management do actually mean something different in the relationships of people at the community level; to ensure that they truly are contributing to a democratization of forestry.

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