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The real value of B.C.'s old-growth forests

Wooded areas are a gold mine for worldwide carbon offset markets

By Dr. Reese Halter, Special to the Sun
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Twenty-five years ago I was a freshman in the faculty of forestry at the University of B.C. I was keen to learn about trees, animals, water, medicine and old-growth forests.

During the early 1980s, the province of British Columbia advertised itself to the world as "Super, Natural British Columbia." Concurrently, the forest industry ran a campaign of "Forests Forever."

Much has changed in a quarter of a century.

Multinational forestry corporations received massive tax credits, felled millions of hectares of old growth, shut their doors and moved to South America while thousands of B.C. forestry workers including Ministry of Forests employees have been dislocated.

The fact is that, after a century of exploiting old growth in B.C., there's not much left.

It seems incongruous that the Resort Municipality of Whistler, in partnership with Squamish and Lil'wat First Nation, has been given a 25-year tenure licence by the province to log high-elevation old growth around an international tourism destination.

B.C.'s old growth is a gold mine for worldwide carbon offset markets. And B.C. is a member of the Western Climate Initiative, which includes Arizona, California, Montana, New Mexico, Washington, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec; they have all agreed to cut the region's CO2 emissions by 15-per-cent below the 2005 levels by 2020.

Marriott International, with more than 3,000 global properties, has partnered with Conservation International and is the first hotel company to calculate its carbon footprint and has launched an aggressive worldwide campaign to lessen its impact.

Each year, it uses 2.9 million tonnes of CO₂, or 30 kilograms per available room.

To offset this, Marriott has undertaken a remarkable initiative. It is spending millions of dollars over a long-term period to protect more than 600,000 hectares of endangered rainforests in the Juma Sustainable Development Reserve, in partnership with the state of Amazonas in Brazil.

If Brazil is renting its old-growth rainforests for millions of dollars, then why shouldn't the government of B.C. consider its options?

The oilsands of northern Alberta are polluting trillions of litres of fresh water, and Europeans have mounted a campaign -- Rethink Alberta -- dissuading international tourists from visiting that province.

Surely B.C. does not want to jeopardize its reputation as world-class tourist destination by destroying old-growth forests, one of the key attractions that draw people from around the globe to visit beautiful British Columbia.

With more than 60 B.C. glaciers receding, securing fresh water supplies is crucial, and maintaining exquisite high-elevation old-growth forests, which capture, retain and slowly release trillions of litres of snow melt in the springtime, is priceless.

While maintaining the integrity of Brazilian forests is important, so too are the Northern Hemisphere's last contiguous great temperate rainforests of B.C.

Why not rent Whistler's old growth and some of the remaining old growth throughout the province, take advantage of their awesome ability to absorb enormous amounts of rising CO₂ and provide a buffer against global warming?

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