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Canada to Shield Five Million Forest Acres

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big picture



Princess Royal Island, in British Columbia, is part of the Great Bear Rain Forest, the largest remaining temperate coastal rain forest. The area, more than 15 million acres, has only about 25,000 residents.

(Photo: Bayne Stanley / The NY Times)

crossroads in their relations.

The agreement comes after more than a decade of talks, international boycott campaigns against Great Bear wood products and sit-ins in the forests by Native Canadians and environmentalists, who chained themselves to logging equipment.

The process has already inspired similar efforts to save the Canadian boreal forest, to the north, and suggestions that the agreement could be a model for preservation in the Amazon and other threatened forests.

Scientists say the agreement should preserve not only the few hundred spirit bears and other black bears, but also one of the highest concentrations of grizzly bears in North America as well as unique subspecies of goshawks, coastal wolves, Sitka blacktail deer and mountain goats.

"It's like a revolution," said Merran Smith, director of the British Columbia Coastal Program of Forest Ethics, an environmental group. "It's a new way of thinking about how you do forestry. It's about approaching business with a conservation motive up front, instead of an industrial approach to the forest."

Hartley Bay, British Columbia - In this sodden land of glacier-cut fjords and giant moss-draped cedars, a myth is told by the Gitga'at people to explain the presence of black bears with a rare recessive gene that makes them white as snow.

The Raven deity swooped down on the land at the end of an ice age and decided that one out of every 10 black bears born from that moment on would be bleached as "spirit bears." It was to be a reminder to future generations that the world must be kept pristine.

On Tuesday, an improbable assemblage of officials from the provincial government, coastal Native Canadian nations, logging companies and environmental groups will announce an agreement that they say will accomplish that mission in the home of the spirit bear, an area that is also the world's largest remaining intact temperate coastal rain forest.

A wilderness of close to five million acres, almost the size of New Jersey, in what is commonly called the Great Bear Rain Forest or the Amazon of the North will be kept off limits to loggers in an agreement that the disparate parties describe as a

Under the agreement, the loggers will be guaranteed a right to work in 10 million acres of the forest, which some environmentalists criticize. But they will be obliged to cut selectively: away from critical watersheds, bear dens and fish spawning grounds, negotiators said.

"There's a new era dawning in British Columbia," said Gordon Campbell, the province's premier. "You have to establish what you value, and work together. This collaboration is something we have to take into the future, and it is something the world can learn from."

As a sign of new Native power gained in recent court cases, many areas that will be preserved or selectively logged have been chosen based on the oral tradition of Native groups and the opinions of their elders. These include areas with cultural significance like ancient cemeteries, or those with medicinal herbs and cedars big enough to make totem poles, canoes and long houses.

If the federal government agrees, more than \$100 million will also be raised by governments and foundations to start ecotourism lodges, shellfish aquaculture and other environmentally sustainable economic activities for the 25,000 people who live in the region.

"Now we can manage our destiny," said Ross Wilson, chairman of the tribal council of the Heiltsuk, one of the Native nations involved. "Without this agreement, we would be going to court forever and we would have to put our children and old ladies dressed in button blankets in the way of the chainsaws," he added, referring to the ceremonial dress worn in past protests.

Among the supporters of the agreement are some of the biggest players in Canadian lumber and paper, including Western Forest Products, Interfor and Canfor.

"It's a cultural shift," said Shawn Kenmuir, an area manager for Triumph Timber, which has already forsaken old clear-cut practices and begun consulting with the Gitga'at before cutting on their traditional lands. "We've started the transition from entitlement to collaboration."

The forest represents a quarter of what remains of coastal temperate rain forests in the world.

Because 15 feet of rain can fall in a year, the Great Bear has never suffered a major forest fire. That has allowed some of the tallest and oldest trees on earth to thrive, including cedars more than a thousand years old.

An estimated 20 percent of the world's remaining wild salmon swim through the forest's fjords, including coho and sockeye, whose spawning grounds were threatened by erosion caused by past logging. Largely intact because of its remoteness, the forest contains an abundance of wolverines, bats, peregrine falcons, marbled murrelet sea birds and coastal tailed frogs.

big picture



Shawn Kenmuir, area manager for Triumph Timber, which already avoids clear-cut logging, a practice that has sometimes led to boycotts.

(Photo: Bayne Stanley / The NY Times)

The ecological richness is immediately apparent to the few people who visit. Within minutes of a recent helicopter visit to Princess Royal Island, in the heart of the rain forest, a group of visitors saw a pack of six gray and black wolves, a seal and numerous bald eagles and swans.

"Look at the forest move," said Marven Robinson, 36, a Gitga'at guide, as eagles glided through the moist air and the wolf pack played hide-and-seek with the visitors along a channel of diaphanous water. "As long as there is a spirit bear, we're going the right way."

big picture



Sacred sites in the Great Bear Rain Forest are to be protected.

(Graphic: The NY Times)

Other companies gradually fell into line.

The efforts to save the rain forest began a decade ago, as lumber companies that had already cut most of the old-growth forest around British Columbia, by far Canada's richest forestry province, began moving into the Great Bear.

A deluge of postcards and demonstrations by groups like the Sierra Club and Greenpeace at shareholders meetings and retail outlets pressed American, Japanese and European hardware chains to shun products from the area.

By 1999, when the Home Depot announced it would phase out sales of wood from the Great Bear and other endangered old forests, some lumber companies were shifting their approach, agreeing to work with the environmentalists.

MacMillan Bloedel, before it was acquired by Weyerhaeuser, broke ranks with the industry and promised in 1998 to phase out clear-cutting on the British Columbia coast.

"The customer doesn't want products with protesters chained to it," said Patrick Armstrong, a consultant who served as a negotiator for the lumber companies. "We're dealing with old-growth forests with charismatic wildlife."

Once Mr. Armstrong sat at the opposite side of the bargaining table from the environmentalists, but now he works closely with them. "This needs to be celebrated - it's a big, big deal," he said. "Everyone had a greater interest in resolving the problems than continuing the conflict."