The Working Forest of British Columbia

Mark Belton

The Working Forest of British Columbia is described on its dust jacket as a visually stunning and informative book about the state of British Columbia's forests. This it most certainly is with superb photography, excellent graphics, and an easy to read text. No effort or expense has been spared in the production of this beautiful book, which has been produced and published (privately) to put across the industry side of the story...or in their words, "to show the BC forest as it really is...in photographs...and with (sic) "concise and factual information".

Forestry in British Columbia has been enmeshed in controversy for decades. It is the province's single biggest industry, and one that is highly regulated by government decree and regulation. Almost all of the BC commercial forests, or working forests as this book calls them, are on public land, and since the mid 1940s the terms of forestry licenses have attempted to maintain sustainable yields through prescribed "annual allowable cuts". Work started by Professor Krajina in the 1960s resulted in characterisation of forest ecosystems for each of BC's distinctive biogeographic regions, and by 1988 Silviculture Regulations required classification of all harvest areas, and their re-establishment with compatible species. Even more intensive regulations were introduced in 1995 with the Forest Practices Code, and the Forest Renewal Plan. According to this book the effect of the 1995 regulations in combination with Provincial Government's current conservation set aside programmes will reduce the working forests capacity by a further 25 percent. Currently about 220,000 ha are harvested annually to produce about 70 million cubic metres of logs, down from the peak a decade ago of 85 million cubic metres harvested. Last year all the big BC forestry companies working on public lands declared operating losses for the first time ever, a consequence of depressed market prices for lumber and the increased cost of compliance with regulations.

I would have found this book more satisfying if it had examined the economic and social dimensions of the BC forest industry. Much could be made of declining harvest levels, declining employment, and reduced profitability and revenues to the government arising from increased regulation of the industry. Economic and ecological sustainability are inseparable.

For me, The Working Forest laboured too much on the theme of the regenerative capacity of BC forests (illustrated by numerous time lapse photos of harvested forests), and the competence and dedication of the province's professional foresters. Some information provided is too general to useful, and could easily be construed as being misleading. For example the comparison of the area of BC forest affected by natural disturbances; out of 59 million ha of forest land it is asserted that "fire, windthrow, and insects annually affect 820,000 ha", and this is compared to the annual harvest level of 220,000 ha. This raises the question of what is meant by "affect", and whether it means forest destroyed. If not, the comparison with harvesting impact is invalid.

However these are small concerns in comparison with the good qualities of The Working Forest. I leaned much about BC forestry from this book. It provides an excellent overview of the industry, and succeeds in presenting indisputable evidence on the regenerative capacity and resilience of the BC forests when they are subject to catastrophic disturbance, be it by nature's hand, or a forester's.