

# **Degrading Forests for Private Profit, with Government Help**

**Bob Bancroft      Mar. 2, 2016**

## **Made in Shade**

Centuries ago, Maritime forests loomed over freshwater shores; tall, vibrant, thick and strong. Early European settlers grumbled about spending dismal days in forests with sunlight cut off by thick overhead canopies of leaves and needles. Seeds from trees and ground cover plants could take root and grow in that shade. Young trees waited in the shadows for decades until an elder fell nearby. When sunlight penetrated the forest floor, a race began between young trees to fill the gap. Trees could live for 200-450 years. Green forest canopies kept forest soils moist and air temperatures cool, even on hot summer days.

## **Soils**

Since the ice age over ten thousand years ago, rich organic soil layers gradually accumulated as dead plant and tree material showered down onto the ground below. That material was recycled by nature's fungi, bacteria and other "decomposers" into soil, then new growth. The roots of living plants stabilized soils and held their organic nutrients, while the shade and coolness provided by the trees prevented these soils from drying out and blowing away.

## **Solar Panels with Roots**

Trees lead very complicated lives, communicating to each other underground and sometimes keeping each other alive. They possess living solar panels called leaves or needles to catch the sun's energy, and roots attached to the ground that gather nutrients, minerals, air and water from soils.

## **Harvest Techniques**

To paraphrase Dr. Wilfrid Creighton, a former Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests, "the quickest way to harvest apples off a tree is to cut it down. However, this may not be the wisest". His Lands & Forests department transitioned into Natural Resources, a provincial department that now cannot, or will not, sensibly define a clearcut.

Whatever they call it, removing most of the trees from too large a forested area changes the ground rules for new tree growth. Conditions of moisture and cool shade are replaced by sudden exposures to sun, wind and direct rain. When soils dry out, their organic layers loosen up. Stored nutrients and compounds like carbon exit by wind and rain. Streams with water levels that once rose and fell gradually after heavy rains begin to flush like toilets. Bank erosion becomes rampant.

With the exception of balsam fir, most original tree species that commonly grew in forest shade are unsuited for new, exposed-ground conditions. Instead, open ground presents an opportunity for invasive plants like glossy buckthorn, as well as grow-fast, die-fast tree and plant species that take root on open land after disturbances such as fire. Fires release nutrients back into soils. When trees are trucked away after a harvest, soils tend to become impoverished.

Cutting down all the solar panels doesn't make energy, productivity or common sense. More gentle ways exist to remove valuable trees from a woodland while still maintaining the character and canopy of the entire forest. Creating small gaps in the forest can imitate fallen trees. The Menominee Indian tribe in northern Wisconsin have harvested the forest for 150 years. Forest structure, species and age classes remain intact, and support healthy wildlife populations.

By actions alone, Nova Scotia has no long-term forest vision. While words are spun, 20-40 year old forests disappear with poor economic and job returns for the ecologic losses that result. Protected wilderness areas should be connected with ecologically-healthy working forests if wildlife populations are to survive.

## **Public Sentiment**

More than 40% of the operable forest in NS has been clearcut in the last 25 years. Many Nova Scotians understand that clearcutting and other large-scale methods of forest flattening cause drastic environmental changes. Nature, when severely wounded, takes much time to heal.

A Nova Forest Alliance public opinion poll published in September, 2000 interviewed 643 urban and rural residents in central NS and found that:

87% believed clearcutting should be permitted only in certain cases or banned altogether.

84% wanted the provincial government to introduce regulations to control clearcutting.

15% believed that clearcutting of public lands was acceptable.

85% thought the most important objective of forest management should be environmental protection.

In 2008-2009, a Voluntary Planning Committee, at the bidding of the provincial government, held public consultations about forests and published the results. The overall conclusion was “Across Nova Scotia, a resounding call for change has been voiced. Current natural resource practices for all uses and all users are not sustainable.”.... “The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment.”

Instead, the status quo promoted by the forest industry prevailed, while science-backed recommendations that mirrored the public desire for positive changes were ignored.

Nova Scotia's forests are overcut. Since 2010 we've added the harvesting of hardwood forests for cheap biomass, to be burned to produce electricity at efficiency rates of about 21.5% or less. Forest biomass burning has contributed to forest flattening in Nova Scotia and beyond.

## **Politicians and the Forest Industry**

Politicians are elected by voters. Politicians, however, obviously don't listen to voters with respect to managing forests. Politicians listen instead to forest industries that promise jobs as they busily transform forests into cheap fibre and biomass on private and public (Crown) lands, for private profits. Unprotected public forest lands are being degraded by a feeding frenzy of biomass and pulp miners. Wildlife and ecologically-healthy forests are disappearing quickly. Over the past decade governments have passed out hundreds of millions of taxpayer's dollars in subsidies to pulp companies that can't compete financially in declining world markets. The Department of Natural Resources won't disclose all details of those agreements, the current state of our forests, or certain documents that would clearly condemn clear-cutting, such as a soils study they commissioned with taxpayer dollars.

Those Voluntary Planning public consultation sessions began under a provincial Conservative regime. The next NDP government continued the process with a forests panel, then allowed the forest industry to sabotage its credibility. The current provincial Liberal government has hired forestry industry herbicides and clearcutters to be senior forest managers and policy makers in the Department of Natural Resources. Not one of the three main political parties have reined in this taxpayer-funded, nature-destroying “cheap wood rush”.

Government has the foxes guarding the chicken coop. Who exactly are “our” politicians working for?