

Twenty-five international environmental organizations call for urgent action for Vancouver Island's rainforest and communities



Vancouver Island's rainforest and communities need urgent action

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Vancouver Island's rainforests are among the rarest ecosystems on the planet—temperate rainforests have never occupied more than 0.5 per cent of the earth's land surface. They are also among its richest—they have been home to First Nations for time immemorial, and they contribute to a diverse economy including forestry, tourism and wild salmon in indigenous and non-indigenous communities on Canada's west coast.

Unfortunately, today, the vast majority of productive old-growth rainforest on Vancouver Island has been logged and replaced by young forest. Only about 10 per cent of the biggest trees are still standing, and some types of forest such as old-growth Douglas fir on southeastern Vancouver Island have less than one per cent of their original range left. At-risk species such as the Marbled Murrelet that depend on ancient trees are in decline together with ancient forests. The original record-high amount of carbon stored in ancient trees has been dramatically reduced as a result of logging and has contributed to climate change.

With so little left, it is now only a matter of time before the logging industry runs out of old-growth trees to harvest and fully transitions to logging second-growth. But despite shrinking revenue, declining job numbers from logging, and the increasing value of the remaining intact forests for species, clean water and air, carbon, and as a basis for a diverse economy, more than 9,000 hectares of old-growth rainforest are still being cut every year on Vancouver Island.

That's why more and more voices are speaking up for protection of endangered rainforest. In the spring of 2016, British Columbia's Chamber of Commerce voted to protect old-growth trees where they have greater economic value for communities if left standing. In September 2016, the majority of delegates at the Union of B.C. Municipalities convention voted to protect all of Vancouver Island's remaining old-growth forest on public land. In January 2017, the Ahousaht First Nation in Clayoquot Sound announced a land use vision including a ban on industrial logging in their territory.

The finalization of the Great Bear Rainforest and Haida Gwaii Agreements by First Nations governments and the B.C. government, with the support of a number of environmental organizations and forestry companies, shows that solutions are possible. As a result of these agreements the majority of the old-growth rainforests in the Great Bear Rainforest and on Haida Gwaii are now protected from logging. First Nations' shared decision-making with the province over land use in their traditional territories has been solidified and there is certainty about how much old-growth is available for logging subject to stringent standards.

South of the Great Bear region, a century of logging has produced an ecological emergency in coastal rainforests. Climate impacts like droughts and storms exert additional pressure and result in severe consequences for watersheds and salmon. With a few exceptions, land-use plans are not meaningfully addressing First Nations rights and interests and are not based on modern conservation science. Meanwhile, raw-log exports are at a record high and jobs per cubic metre at a record low compared to other parts of the world, leaving neither healthy forests nor healthy communities behind.

Unless the provincial government changes course to protect and restore what remains of our endangered old-growth, much of Vancouver Island could turn into a severely degraded landscape this century. That's why we are urging the B.C. government to take immediate action for the well-being of indigenous and non-indigenous communities, biodiversity, clean air and water, long-term forestry jobs and to save one of the world's most efficient carbon sinks.

We must start with protecting remaining intact rainforest areas imminently threatened by logging, for example the Central Walbran and East Creek, and using a science-based phased approach for protecting and restoring the remaining old-growth forest, starting with the most endangered ecosystems. Comprehensive steps for conservation and improved forest management for Vancouver Island must respect First Nations rights and interests, enable a transition to sustainable second-growth forestry, support diverse economic activities such as tourism, and reduce carbon emissions.

Saving our best ally in the fight against global warming means improving forest management to reduce carbon emissions from forests and ending wasteful practices such as slash burning. We are certainly the last generation that will have an opportunity to make a difference for the fate for Vancouver Island's remaining old-growth forests.

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