

THE TEMPEST AND THE TREES

Abridged

By Icel Jane Dobell

The Mayor and Council do not give us pause but the gale force winds do—a dramatic pause, full stop. Also, enough fallen trees to silence any argument that we need to do any more patch clear cutting for revenue this year.

The timing of the gale and the epic Council meeting before Christmas, where hundreds of citizens gather to make a request of their leaders, unfolds like a Greek tragic comedy where the voice of Nature is made manifest as a gale force wind. This is not to say that the immediate danger and aftermath of the storm are comic but rather that it is a serious story which may have a happy ending.

After the storm, with trees fallen throughout our community forests, we must decide what is the most enlightened action to take. What is the greatest value of the thousands of trees? Never has it been more important to pause and consider where we are headed. The past proves that in all matters where there is insufficient time for reflection and consultation, if we race forward, we will regret our decisions.

Two months ago, as a collective, we learn that the six mountains surrounding our valley, being logged on the backsides, are not owned by an industrial forestry company

but belong to North Cowichan. Logging is coming over the tops of the mountains; our municipal government is about to systematically clear cut the six forests rising above our valley. Hundreds of citizens come together to ask for a **pause of all logging of our community forests to allow time for public consultation with experts on the forest not predominantly from the industrial forestry sector, including experts in Eco tourism.**

On December 19, at 1:30 pm, at the busiest time of the year, hundreds of people congregate at a Council Meeting to request pause. Our numbers swell the hall; people fill the seats, sit on the floor, line the walls, standing shoulder to shoulder, wrapping around the Mayor and Council, fill the foyer and the spill-over room. Cars line both sides of the road almost to the highway. Still more people arrive, cannot fit through the doors, must drive to other places to watch the proceedings online. It is an unprecedented show of public will as has never been seen at our Municipal Hall. Someone counts approximately 400 people, including those who must leave.

The Mayor is magnanimous. At the last moment, he changes the format of the meeting. He opens the floor to allow everyone to speak. He cancels the three minute spots normally allotted at the beginning and says every person may have two minutes.

The citizens are optimistic—the congregation so large, the message so simple, direct, impossible to deny, the outcome is obvious. The leaders will grant the pause and a re-structuring of the



Forest Advisory Committee, (comprised of volunteers retired from the industrial forestry sector), to advise Council and the public on the wisest possible course moving forward.

To the majority it is obvious; to systematically clear cut a community forest is simply not done anymore, not in these times, not in enlightened communities. What other municipalities in this forest-hungry developed world would do it? There are so many other options to manage a locally-owned, non-industrial forest.

Aside from changing ecological and social values, the economic reasons for not patch clear cutting are irrefutable. Eco tourism is the new industry. How can the incalculable present and future value of tourism be denied?

If we continue to systematically clear cut our forests, the result is inevitable: more fields of broom and other invasives, reduced tree canopies, tree lots of matchstick size, standing two-by-fours susceptible to climate change, drought, erosion, rain and **increasing winter winds.** (When the speakers foreshadow the winds to come, they are not speaking in bold; they have no idea what will occur in less than twenty-four hours—an act of nature





timed as if to drive home the need to pause, never to clear cut again— they are referring to scientific predictions).

If we continue to build clear cut lots, will tourists, bikers, hikers and other forest lovers continue to come?

Further to the financial argument for “conventional harvesting,” beyond the lucrative economy of tourism, people who have looked at the 2017 Annual Forestry Report calculate that after expenses of logging, patch clear cutting our community forests brings in revenue equivalent to the approximate value of an average house in the Cowichan Valley. (The annual budget of the North Cowichan Municipal Hall is \$64 million).

To summarize the complex issues and questions raised in the Council Meeting, here are a few of the main points: Until ten years ago, those of us who for decades have traveled the old trails of the community forests could walk all day and never meet another person. Last year, 80,000 people visited Mt Tzouhalem. 35,000 Stoney Hill. Who could have

foreseen such change? In the face of enormous ecological, economic and social changes, we are facing a complexity of questions about our community forests.

Two months ago, our forester and Forest Advisory Committee were continuing to do as had been done for decades, running the best forestry operation they could to create revenue for our community.

They were not being asked to consider other ways to manage our forests.

Two months ago, most citizens didn't know our forests are community owned. The public was not yet on social media talking about pause, public consultation, questioning what we could learn from a world of possibilities, given time to consider.

We were not talking about a possible sister forest in Germany and joining other international forestry think-thanks. As a collective, we didn't know all the options. We still don't. We are just beginning to ask. For two months, we have come together, growing

exponentially, recently amassing over 1200 signatures and hundreds of thoughtful comments—comments we will continue to collect and send to council until we are given the necessary pause.

Why not pause? The budget is not yet decided. What would it cost taxpayers to pause logging for a year? (According to the recent water referendum, not much).

Our government allowed us to decide over affordable housing and water. Why not our forests? Our vote made it clear— we are a community that understands higher values.

We understand that the forests, water and ultimately our ability to live here are interdependent.

Logging is moving closer to our communities raising questions of the health of clear cuts, erosion, summer drought, increasing winter winds and rain, invasive species, chemicals, the cost and impact on watersheds, habitat, the danger and expense of fire in cut blocks with small trees and broom.

We have inherited a gift other communities would spend millions of dollars to own. This is what communities around BC are doing right now, buying forests for Eco-tourism—forests that can't compare with the six mountains of forests we don't have to buy because we already own them—an asset for growing sustainable jobs now and for the future.

With our new Mayor, new council, new attitude toward public consultation, in a new era of understanding the value of old forests, we have arrived at the crossroads—the legacy moment that will be remembered.

We are not yet at the wall but we are at the turning point, there is still time to pause.

Thirty-two people deliver variations on the same theme. Not one person is critical of the forestry department to date. Many express gratitude to the foresters for the years of volunteer hours. All the service and good they have done for our community is acknowledged. Over and over, the point is made: we are not talking about past conventional harvesting practices; we are talking about recent complex changes and how we adapt.

A handful of retired foresters and allies say that there should be no pause, no fundamental restructuring of the Forest Advisory Committee, (someone suggests adding a recreation advisor—this is received as a token gesture of minuscule proportion), business should continue as usual, all that is needed is to *educate* the public on what a good job the foresters are doing. They say that they will

Where Do You Stand On Our Community Forests?

The Six Mountains—Prevost, Tzouhalem, Sicker, Richards, Maple, Stoney Hill—are yours to protect.

You have a right to be heard.

**TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
Educate yourself.
Read the issues on
www.WhereDoWeStand.ca**

Watch the video of the December 19 Council Meeting where hundreds of people showed up to request a pause in all logging to allow time for public consultation.

<https://www.northcowichan.ca/custom/council-meetings.aspx>

Sign the petition at The Community Farm Store and online at WhereDoWeStand.ca

Read the comments, write your own.

Email your comments to Mayor and Council at council@northcowichan.ca, let them know you support WhereDoWeStand.ca

HELP SPREAD THE WORD!

Sign up to: distribute flyers • post posters • put up lawn signs

Share your forest story, email your friends spread the word on facebook. For updates on Council meetings to attend, go to:

www.WhereDoWeStand.ca



take the Council and interested citizens on guided tours of the forests.

We have seen the places where the tours occur; we have visited “Logger’s Lane.” Tours are conducted with not one representative of alternative sustainable forestry practises, not one ecologist, conservationist, non-industry biologist, community forester, or landscape planner/landscape architect in sight. The tour does not talk about herbicides and invasive species. Tour leaders do not take busloads of citizens and Councillors to the “Broom Fields” of Stoney Hill, Tzouhalem and Maple.

The community of citizens representing the 1200 people who cannot leave work to be

at the meeting, hear the small, mostly retired, anti-pause group with dismay. To tell us that the Forest Advisory Committee will *educate* us is not public consultation.

“Consultation” or education without pause, while business continues as usual and all peaceful requests for political sanctions are ignored, is not democracy. One speaker quotes from the Community Forestry Guidebook: “As far as public consultation, there must be transparency and meaningful genuine involvement of the public.”

After two and a half hours, the Council meeting comes to a confusing close—at least, most of the people present





are confused. Nothing is said about the citizens' request for a pause of logging of the six mountains—Tzouhalem, Maple, Sicker, Richards, Prevost, Stoney Hill, or a fundamental overhaul of the Forestry Advisory Committee. A motion is put forward about one mountain. The majority of citizens do not understand why.

Why only one mountain?
Why not all six? No explanation is given.



(A few of us understand the reasons why Stoney Hill should never be logged again; we have walked with many experts on the forests who have informed us of the ecological reasons; we support the motion but as we feared, the motion obscures the real reason why hundreds of people showed up and 1200 people signed the WhereDoWeStand.ca petition).

The Mayor says something about a “staff report on our forest operations,” something about “status quo,” and that nothing will probably be decided before February. Meanwhile, the Council and staff will educate themselves on the issues. The implication is that they will be educated by the forester, and Forest Advisory Committee.

If this is true, if this is the extent of the education our Mayor and Council are to receive on the changing ecological, economic and social values regarding the forests, as well as the multitude of ways to sustainably manage a 5,000 hectare community forest, then how can one not ask, as people do, “Who is actually in control of our public-owned forests? Our elected officials representing the public, or the industrial foresters *educating* them?”

Some of us have recently spent two months and hundreds of hours educating ourselves about the forests, meeting with experts from various backgrounds, and we are barely at the beginning of grasping the complexities.

How much time will Council take? And meanwhile, what about the forests? Will new tenders go out? New logging roads be built? New logging contracts be signed?

After the Council meeting, with all of our questions

hanging in the air, within twenty-four hours, one of the biggest gales of recorded history in these parts, over 130 km/h where the mountains funnel the currents, takes the valley by surprise. Thousands of trees are fallen by the wind. The windfall is worth a fortune in timber and may be even more valuable to the forests if left to decay and replenish the soils. (Industry foresters tell us that we don't need to leave valuable timber in the forests; we can enrich the soil with fertilizers. This is true, we can spend money on fertilizers and we can filter the chemicals out of our drinking water, but we cannot rebuild a forest of natural soil).

Suffice to say, we ask for a pause in all patch clear cutting of our community forests to consider other enlightened forestry management practices and we get it—not the way we were anticipating but such is the nature of profound change beyond our control.

The ability to adapt to sudden change is a prerequisite for survival, physical, financial and emotional.

When faced with unprecedented change, (how many thousands of trees down?), if we move quickly we will make mistakes that we and future generations will regret.

With a new year beginning, change in the air, a potential new direction as dictated by the windfall lying on the earth, is it self-evident: To act as visionaries, now is the time to pause.

For the unabridged version go to WhereDoWeStand.ca

All images courtesy Chris Istace www.chrisistace.com