

From logging in wildlife habitat

sawblade

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one of the larger, older, intact floodplain rain forests on the northern coast. Stands of trees 200 years old are the norm. Of special concern to conservationists is the existence of large groves of healthy, old-growth Sitka spruce. Never very abundant, these trees have been virtually logged out of existence, and now account for less than 2 percent of all mature coastal timber. Of the remaining Sitkas, there are specimens that measure 3 metres (10 feet) in diameter and reach 60 metres (200 feet) into the sky. Ironically, it is the richness of the forest that has attracted the attention of the logging companies and placed the valley's future in doubt.

The B.C. government has acknowledged the importance of protecting the Khutzeymateen's dense population of grizzlies and their habitat. Yet, in 1986, this same government withdrew its long-standing proposal to establish an ecological reserve in the area, in favour of the B.C. Wilderness Advisory Committee's controversial recommendation that the valley be logged. The government's action, says Vicky Husband, the president of the B.C.-based Friends of the Ecological Reserves, threatens what is "the best and maybe the last chance to save an intact coastal watershed with a high concentration of grizzlies. The government actually stated that logging activities and grizzlies are compatible, which runs contrary to every study we've ever seen. Wildlife biologists are predicting that within the next 10 to 15 years, there won't be a single major unlogged coastal watershed left in British Columbia, and yet the government refuses to set aside 10 square miles of a valley with international wildlife values."

The committee, appointed by the British Columbia government in 1985, with a membership heavily biased towards industry, studied the Khutzeymateen amongst many other wilderness areas. Despite an admitted lack of scientific information about the area's wildlife and habitats, it still endorsed a plan to open the valley to logging. The committee's one concession to those opposing the plan was to recommend studies on how to minimize the impact of logging activity on grizzly habitat in the soggy, narrow valley bottom.

Declines in grizzly bear populations have typically followed the development of coastal valleys. Grizzlies are not as adaptable as black bears, and have a lower reproductive rate. Female grizzlies and their cubs are especially vulnerable to disturbance. The magnificent creatures require vast tracts of untouched wilderness habitat in order to survive.

Knowledgeable resource analysts agree that, with or without studies, logging will devastate the valley. Any logging operator working on the north coast faces a squeeze between logging costs and timber prices. In the interest of making the operation economically viable, any plans to minimize environmental impact will likely be discarded.

The logging proponent, Wedeene River Contracting Company Ltd., told the Wilderness Advisory Committee that the operable timber in the Khutzeymateen Valley was worth \$72 million in the marketplace, based on average prices. This estimate is contradicted by the results of an independent study, which predicts that, depending on sales values, logging the Khutzeymateen will result in a net loss of between \$4 and \$44 million.

Logging in British Columbia has, in the

recent years, been marginally profitable at best. More often, it is grossly unprofitable and is sustained only by government subsidies — a staggering \$590 million between 1980 and 1985! Cutting costs wherever possible is going to be necessary in order for this operation to have any chance at all of turning a profit. This is especially true since B.C. Minister of Forests, Dave Parker, announced last year the suspension of credits to logging companies for road and reforestation work.

Examples of badly conducted logging operations abound on the north coast, and Wedeene River Contracting itself has a record of insensitivity to the environment. The company was convicted under the Canadian Fisheries Act of destroying salmon habitat in the Queen Charlotte Islands and reprimanded by the Forests Ministry for causing mass soil wasting in logging its north coast licence.

"If it's bad business to log the Khutzeymateen, why is there so much pressure to log it?" Vicky Husband wonders. "Why not log other valleys — areas less favoured with wildlife and scenic features? Can't Wedeene's sawmill be guaranteed a timber supply that doesn't endanger one of the real environmental jewels in the province?"

Although bears and their habitats are protected in many national, provincial, and territorial parks, these areas are usually designated for use by both humans and wildlife. It is doubtful if this multiple-use system will be effective in safeguarding the survival of grizzly bears into the 21st century. An adequate system of sanctuaries and preserves needs to be established.

All too often in cases like this one, arguments centre on economics, personal biases, and the rights of future generations to enjoy the benefits of unspoiled wilderness areas. Seldom does anyone argue on behalf of the bears, the birds, the fish, and the trees. They have the right to live undisturbed in their natural habitats, independent of man's will. Granted, in today's world it may be a bit unrealistic to expect that people will put the rights of wildlife above their own interests all the time, but certainly some concessions must be made. The logging companies can survive without the Khutzeymateen; the grizzlies cannot.

"We've done a great job of destroying them, killing them outright by hunting or else destroying their habitat."