

An Overview of British Columbia Forests

British Columbia forests are largely made up of coniferous or softwood species, but there are some deciduous or hardwood species such as aspen, alder, and birch. Some forests have been logged for years and are in a constant cycle of cuts, replanting, and growth. Some 95 percent of British Columbia's 95 million hectares is publicly owned; 85 percent of the province has been designated as Provincial Forests, more than half of the public forest lands--50 million hectares--are roadless, backcountry areas. About half of the total public lands are productive forests, and half of these lands--more than 25 percent of the designated lands--are currently available for timber harvesting. Each year, about one percent of the forests are actually harvested: 1992-93, 196,000 crown and 25,000 private hectares were harvested.⁷ More of British Columbia's forests are publicly owned than in any other country: in B.C., nearly 99 percent of the forests are publicly owned; in Canada as a whole, 92 percent are public. In contrast, the percentage of forests publicly owned in the United States is 28 percent: in Sweden, 26 percent; in the U.K., 40 percent; and in Japan, 32 percent.⁸

B.C. forests include national parks, provincial parks, and ecological reserves that are completely protected against development (6.4 million hectares, 6.8 percent of the province) and recreation and wilderness areas that are partially protected (1.0 million hectares, 1.1 percent of the province). Another 10.1 million acres are Protected Areas Strategy study areas, 10.7 percent of the province. B.C. is Canada's most biologically diverse province and is home to at least 85 freshwater fish species, 280 mammal species, 500 bird species, 21 amphibian species, and from 50,000 to 70,000 invertebrate species.⁹ Some 33 pairs of Spotted Owls and 15 nesting sites have been discovered in Canada, all in Lower Mainland B.C. and only in forests at least 120 years old. The owls were designated as endangered in Canada in 1986. They are considered indicator species for the overall health of forests.¹⁰ Residents of B.C. make some 47 million visits to provincial forests each year and an additional eight million visits are from non-residents. Recreationists spend an estimated \$2.5 billion a year as part of their visits.¹¹ The Forest Service also issues approximately 2,000 grazing permits and licenses and earns \$2 million in revenue each year. Grazing permits are good for five years; licenses, for ten years. Selective thinning of dense forests occurs in order to protect forage against forest encroachment.¹²

The temperate rainforest of British Columbia's central coast is one of the great wilderness areas of North America. It is a vast expanse of snow and glaciers, archipelagos and fjords, abundant fish and game, and clean water. These 26 million acres of giant Sitka spruces, red cedars, and western hemlocks have largely escaped the timber cuts that have occurred throughout the southern part of the province and form the largest old-growth forest on the continent. The lands include 6,000 square miles of the ancestral home of the Heiltsuk Indians but were claimed by the British in the late Nineteenth Century. The Heiltsuk are trying to regain control of the lands before the provincial government allows timber companies to cut down the forests. But the tribe members are not united; many view logging as an economic boon and support industry efforts and even seek the jobs they offer. The claim is expected to take five years to wind its way through the Canadian courts.¹³