

# Ontario forests threatened by new bill

## Environmental crises not just in BC

By S. Justine Wilson  
TORONTO (CUP)

SINCE THE GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH Columbia allowed logging to begin in Clayoquot Sound in April 1993, B.C. forests have been the focus for the rage and tears of activists and the attention of the media.

But the destruction of other forests is being forgotten --and few people know that the future of Ontario forests is being decided in the provincial legislature this fall.

Manavi Handa, environmental coordinator of the Ontario Public Interest Research Group, says issues concerning Ontario forestry are of similar importance to those in B.C., but are not getting the same attention.

"A lot of stuff is happening around Clayoquot," Handa says. "Meanwhile Ontario's Crown Forest Sustainability Act is quietly going through here without many people hearing about it."

Bill 171, the proposed Crown Forest Sustainability Act, is intended to replace the old Crown Timber Act, which regulated logging in the province.

The old act is widely criticized for treating trees as an economic resource, not as the linchpin of ecosystems.

Now environmentalists say the new bill is also industry friendly, created with industry solely in mind. Even the bill's title uses the word 'sustainable' loosely, they say, and little is clear about the bill's objectives.

Now about to face its third reading in the upcoming session of the Ontario legislature, ambiguities aren't the only problem the new bill has.

Conservationists, aboriginal groups and pro-logging groups alike are also upset that many interest group committee reports outlining questions and concerns about the legislation have been ignored.

As well, they say the proposed act will do nothing to change the status quo of forestry practices in Ontario.

Specifically, environmentalists are criticizing the proposed bill for its lack of definition of sustainability, the exclusion of previously approved reports regarding forestry, its failure to acknowledge the need for the protection of new areas and native land claims.

Activists also complain that the bill gives the Minister of Natural Resources sole decision-making powers on forestry matters, excludes the need of environmental audits before logging, and lacks requirements for the regeneration planning of all forests before they are logged.

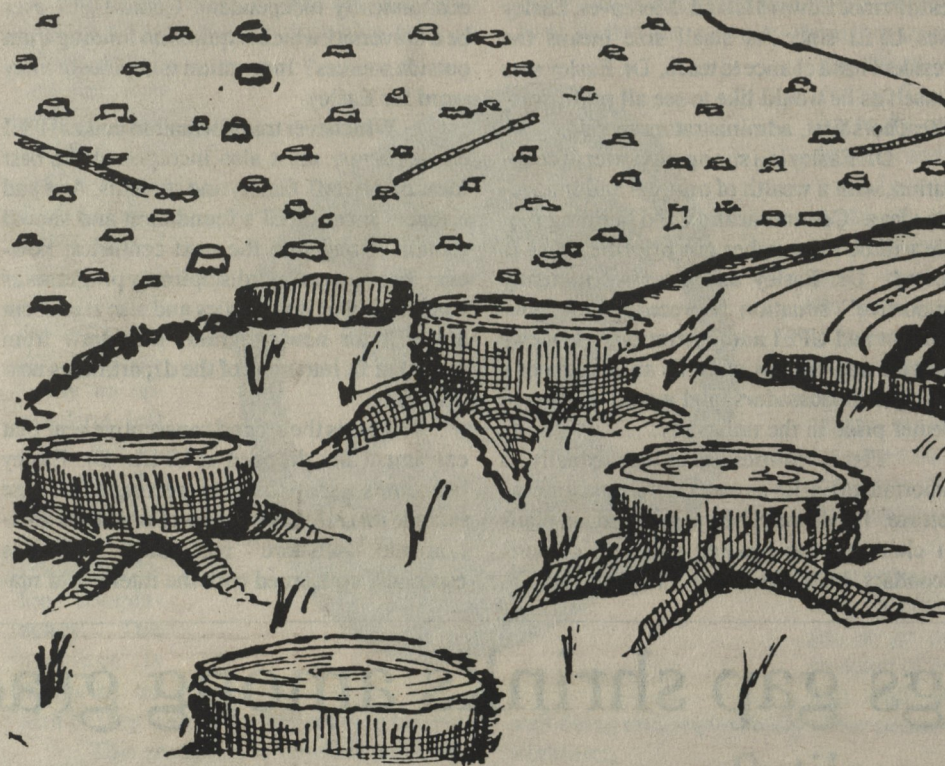
Tim Gray, a researcher for Wildlands League, a chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, is one environmentalist who questions the bill. He says the government shouldn't pass a bill on forest sustainability without explaining exactly what 'sustainability' will mean.

"Currently the act does not define, nor

make reference to a definition of forest sustainability," Gray says. "It is almost unthinkable that an act, titled as this one is, and dealing with a biological entity such as forests, could become law without such a definition."

David Puttock, a forestry professor at the University of Toronto, agrees that the bill is vague.

"Obviously, if you are going to talk about sustainable forestry, you have to somehow define what you mean by it," Puttock says.



"To manage something on a sustainable basis you first have to have something to measure it against. In other words, what are the criteria?"

Paul Aird, another professor in the same department, agrees.

"The act did not define sustainability, and thus it was the one point most people picked up on. Virtually every other act has a whole section of definitions," Aird says.

Many individuals and groups who participated in the recent public hearings say the government asked for input from all the interested parties, then ignored what they received.

Members of environmental interest groups wonder why previous results of these consultations seem to have been excluded from the bill.

"A lot of time and energy was put into multi-sector committees such as the Forest Policy Panel, Old Growth Forest Report, and the Wildlife Strategy to reach consensus and develop reports. Nothing has really happened yet," says Chris Winter of the Conservation Council of Ontario.

"The Wildlife Strategy developed a comprehensive report that has been virtually ignored. The Minister [of Natural Resources

Howard Hampton] says he doesn't have time to consider this, so it hasn't been incorporated into the manual or act."

Even pro-logging groups say the ministry is ignoring the process of consultation it initiated. Martin Kaiser, policy advisor for the Ontario Forest Industries Association, says their input was left out as well.

"The diversity document, an independent panel developed over a year with input from many different groups, was supposed to be one

Kaiser says loggers need a bill with workable definition that tells them what practices would entail sustainable forestry.

"Clear measurement must be outlined so that industry and government alike know what the rules are. Such measures are not apart of the bill as it stands now," he says.

While loggers are confused about what the government will expect of them under the new legislation, native and environmental activists are outraged.

Alan Roy, a representative of the Union of Ontario Indians, says the bill is clearly pro-industry. "The act was drafted with industry in mind, strictly a timber-use approach."

The Conservation Council's Winter also wonders whether this legislation is geared towards forest management and multi-use planning, or whether it's upholding the status quo of timber management.

He says the act has changed little from the one it's supposed to replace.

"It's ironic that they're taking timber management principles from the previous [legislation], and using them in sustainable forestry management," Winter says. "Environmental groups had argued that the focus was on forest management rather than timber-management."

But Rosemary Hnatiuk, a spokesperson for the Forest Ministry, says her ministry has made big changes in the proposed legislative act from the old Crown Timber Act.

"The old act sees forest as timber. The new act is saying, 'No, not good enough, we have to bring back the whole ecosystem,'" Hnatiuk says.

But Roy says very little has changed. "The proposed legislation hasn't addressed the issues and problems brought up by the other stakeholders. What good is new legislation if it isn't changing something? The act is simply window-dressing. It isn't designed to upset the status quo, it's only designed to make the status quo accountable," Roy says.

One possibly positive change in the proposed legislation is that the government is giving the responsibility of forest regeneration to industry.

This move is welcomed by both environmental groups and industry. But they also say the rules and system for regeneration seem vague and confusing. Environmentalists say there could be problems in future enforcement.

According to Gray, the Wildlands League applauds the government's decision to transfer regeneration responsibility to industry, but questions whether or not industry will be up to the challenge or commitment.

"Making large companies responsible for regeneration is good, but legislation doesn't exist to enforce regeneration and makes it difficult for environmentalists to challenge. Historically, industry never paid. This act may

of the underlying themes to the act. But it hasn't been incorporated," Kaiser says.

Winter says the ministry has been rushing to get this bill passed.

"[It was] too much in too little time," he explains. "They were trying to boil down the whole idea of sustainability into two months."

Gray of the Wildlands League agrees. "It's ironic that they're shoving through legislation that hasn't been revised for over 20 years without anyone looking at it."

Aird says the province's forestry experts feel left out. "Many other pieces of legislation have been shown to a whole lot of people before it's debated in the house or presented in the first and second reading. It looks as if they've skipped this step, gone through the first and second reading and then said, 'What do you think of it?'"

Pro-logging groups agree the legislation is going through too fast. Kaiser says loggers feel left out of the process, too.

"The legislation was introduced for the first reading without anyone seeing it, and there has been little opportunity for involvement in developing the act."