



Wild Lands Advocate 12(4): 15, August 2004

Saving Natural Capital in Alberta's Boreal – The NRTEE

Dr. Ian Urquhart

Given the state of Alberta's forests, some readers are bound to be suspicious of my title. Is there really any need to save capital in Alberta's boreal forests? Doesn't capital – whether in the shape of large multinational forest companies or locally owned sawmill operations – rule our forests? Don't commercial forestry interests dictate forest policy in Alberta?

The National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) hopes to change this perspective by encouraging decision makers to recognize the importance of another type of capital, natural capital. Vital ecological services, the services that provide us with clean air and clean water, are considered natural capital and should be recognized as a foundation for a healthy society and economy.

Through a series of case studies, including one examining the Forest Management Agreement Area allocated to Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries, the NRTEE is looking at how regulatory and taxation policy could be reformed to promote a balance between conservation and industrial activities on boreal landscapes that have been allocated to forest products companies.

Toward this end, the NRTEE held a workshop in Fort McMurray in early May to hear what industry, government, First Nations, ENGOs, and academics felt was needed to insure that the ecological functions of the boreal are recognized and valued. It did not take long in the proceedings to recognize the ambitiousness of the NRTEE's goal; tremendous hurdles have to be overcome if natural capital is to be given its due.

For some participants the largest hurdle to moving forward was conceptual. A senior Alberta official wondered what natural capital really meant and how we could move ahead "if we do not know what we are working towards." For others the most significant hurdles are institutional – the departmental, regulatory, and taxation structures established to promote values such as "sustained yield," values challenged by natural capital.

Monique Ross, from the Canadian Institute of Resources Law, drew our attention to the sorts of overarching regulatory and fiscal barriers to assigning real value to natural capital. They included accounting systems that do not value environmental goods and services, unresolved First Nations claims, no comprehensive land-use planning systems, and a failure to adopt a decision-making model where contradictory departmental mandates and overlapping tenures can be accommodated for the benefit of natural capital.

For me, it was hard not to come to the conclusion that institutional tinkering will not raise the prominence of natural capital. Such a fundamental reordering of values demands a fundamental overhaul of our institutions. In order to give ecosystem-wide ecological values priority, don't we need to look at models of governing ourselves that are based on ecosystems, not on the discrete activities taking place in those ecosystems (such as Energy, Agriculture, Forestry, Fish&Wildlife, etc.)?

This approach is not as novel as you might think. Daniel Kemmis, in his important book *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West*, resurrects a proposal made by the nineteenth-century American explorer John Wesley Powell. In 1889 Powell urged the Montana Constitutional Convention to structure government along the following lines: "I think each drainage basin in the arid land must ultimately become the practical unit of organization and it would be wise if you could immediately adopt a county system which would be convenient with drainage basins."





One step Alberta could take toward this more ecosystem-sensitive model of governing – one that I think the NRTEE took seriously – would be to establish a “Cumulative Effects Ministry.” This agency could be modeled somewhat after the province’s intergovernmental affairs ministry. It would have the authority to require agencies to consult with each other and to resolve conflicts between agencies when conflicting mandates damage natural capital.

If you are interested in the concept of natural capital and how the National Roundtable is trying to apply it to Canada’s boreal forest, visit the NRTEE’s website, http://www.nrtee-trnee.ca/eng/main_e.htm, and click on the conservation link.

