

Beyond the Trees

BC Wild producers band together to offer an alternative view of our forests

By Matt J. Simmons

Can you see the forest through the trees? The growing network of “Buy B.C. wild” retailers, wholesalers, harvesters and producers say, yes. British Columbia is known internationally as a source of abundant raw material resources—primarily timber—and, until relatively recently, the mass-cultivation of our forests continued unchecked for the better part of a hundred years. Then came the naysayers, protesters and blockaders: in short, eco-warriors. But however well meaning they were, the environmentalists of old lacked viable alternatives to the problems they saw with logging; now, the Centre for Non-Timber Resources believes they have come up with a solution . . . or, to be more precise, many solutions.

The forest, according to this growing sector of sustainable forestry products, is much more than just trees. “Forest ecosystems provide a wide range of goods and services, including clean water and carbon capture, as well as recreational opportunities,” says Tim Brigham, one of the coordinators for the Centre for Non-Timber Resources. Established in 2004, CNTR is Royal Roads University’s first research centre; its stated goals are to “help coordinate existing knowledge and develop new knowledge as required [and] to guide the conservation, management and sustainable use of these resources.”

Sounds good, but, as Brigham points out, CNTR is only part of the solution. “We’re not saying this is going to replace those industrial forestry jobs,” he cautions. “We are trying to provide alternatives for people who are wanting to stay in their resource-based communities.” As such, CNTR’s annual Shop the Wild festival is a gathering that showcases the variety of wild, sustainable products and services already available in the province; things like mushrooms, medicinal native plants and wild-berry wines are among the successful trades that are slowly supplanting the traditional timber trade. At this weekend’s free public event, visitors are exposed to a diverse group of individuals and companies trying to instill change in the way we see—and use—our forests.



Nope, that’s not concrete—it’s beetlecrete



Mushrooms are but one of the many natural products ready for harvest in our forests

When a tree falls, use it

Andreas Schwall, founder of the Victoria-based custom furniture company Eco Furniture, creates products that transcend typical wood furnishings. The soft-spoken German designer explains that he can document for his customers the entire life cycle of his creations, from the selective felling of a tree on Salt Spring Island to the final treatment of a chair with natural beeswax finish. “People always ask, ‘What makes your furniture ‘eco’?” he explains with a laugh. “I say, ‘Well, take a seat.’”

While there’s no short answer to the above question, Schwall still loves to tell the story.



Eco-furniture maker Andreas Schwall

“I’ve been making furniture for over 20 years and I’ve never had so much pleasure doing it.” It’s not only sustainable forestry practices—including the use of salvaged and recycled materials—that set his furniture apart, it’s his unwillingness to sacrifice quality, both practical and aesthetic. Schwall’s furniture looks good and, unlike products from a certain Swedish line, it lasts; but he maintains the end product is not necessarily his only motivation. “I want to show that it can be profitable to do this,” he notes, explaining that profits will, in turn, inspire others to follow the same eco-savvy path. But the best part? When customers purchase a product that has this ethos behind it, Schwall says simply, “They feel good about it.”

Also putting in an appearance at Shop the Wild is Artisan Edibles, a Parksville preserve company specializing in seasonal jellies made from the abundant fruits and flowers growing wild around Vancouver Island. Their well-marketed natural offerings recently had some high-profile attention by being included in the gift bag for the 2009 Juno Awards. And while fishing is obviously not really thought of as a forestry industry, it can be just as affected by negative forestry practices as the more obvious non-timber resources—something the makers of Sointula Wild Seafoods know well. (As the saying goes: “All rivers run into the sea.”) The concept of using non-timber resources acknowledges the delicate connections between these greater ecosystems.

Exhibitors at Shop the Wild run the full gamut of natural products: balms and body lotions jostle for elbow room with freeze-dried chanterelles while syrup producers share a laugh with naturopath practitioners; out here, there truly is something for everyone. And while the Centre for Non-Timber Resources is facilitating the gathering of this unique retail sector, as Shop the Wild coordinator Holly Caine explains, the consumer is not necessarily the ultimate target for all these efforts; if there is enough demand for change at a consumer level, then presumably legislation will start to accommodate that shift. “Consumers will drive this change,” she says hopefully.

ing at the woodlands with different eyes. Like-minded entrepreneurs and advocates are poking their heads up across the province with new solutions to the logging dilemma. One alternative branch of forestry that continues to make news in B.C. is the industry that is sprouting up to deal with the billions of trees killed by the Mountain Pine Beetle. Despite potentially negative connotations, MPB wood is structurally sound and, obviously, there’s a lot of it out there up for grabs. The salvaged wood with its distinctive blue hue is becoming desirable—not only for its aesthetic uniqueness but also because it carries in its colour a statement about your personal view of the landscape in which we all live.

In Prince George—roughly the epicenter of the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic—a researcher has created an entirely new material out of MPB wood called “beetlecrete.” Sorin Pasca, a Romanian forestry engineer who studied for his Masters degree at the University of Northern British Columbia, developed the material as an alternative to gypsum. While it has yet to go through the tests necessary to be sold as a structural material, beetlecrete is already being used in decorative applications. “I’m partnering with a concrete countertop manufacturer and we are doing small projects,” explains Pasca. “We made a front desk countertop for Government House in Victoria, another one for the campground amenity hub in Golden and a bench for a skateboard park in Saskatoon.”

Clearly, Pasca’s efforts—and those of the Buy BC Wild network—represent a shift in thinking. As Schwall explains, “At the beginning, I had to do a lot of explaining [about why customers should buy eco-friendly products]. Now, people are more and more aware.” And once awareness increases, the need for education decreases and producers are able to spend less time on marketing their products and services, and more on producing higher quality offerings.

As that inimitable advocate of simple living, Henry David Thoreau, wrote in *Walden*: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” Thoreau intimately understood that the forest is so much more than its trees; he saw the forest as a source of education. And while we continue to gain knowledge about what is out there, we clearly still have a lot to learn. **M**

Proceeds support scholarships and educational resources for the art of flamenco.

Photos: Quadra Street Designs

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Beat the beetle

As extensive as it is, the CNTR network of folks working on forest sustainability isn't the only group out there look-

Shop the Wild

10 am-4 pm, Saturday-Sunday, October 3-4
 Royal Roads University's Mews Conference Centre
 Free • 250-391-2600 ext. 4328
 buybcwild.com/shop-wild