

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' FORESTRY: LINKING COMMUNITIES, COMMERCE AND CONSERVATION

**An International Conference
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**Organized by:
The University of British Columbia (UBC) Faculty of Forestry, Forest Trends, the
UBC First Nations House of Learning, Iisaak Forest Resources, Ecotrust Canada,
and the National Aboriginal Forestry Association**

**Co-Chaired by:
Bill Bourgeois, Vice President, Lignum Ltd. and Garry Merkel, R.P.F Chair UBC
Faculty of Forestry First Nations Advisory Council**

Rationale and Agenda

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Rationale

Interactions between indigenous peoples, governments and commercial forest interests have historically often been contentious. Starting in the sixteenth century governments around the world have overridden the traditional rights of native peoples and have given government forest agencies authority over vast tracts of natural forest and indigenous inhabitants. During the nineteenth century most governments with substantial forest resources began to transfer forest management rights to private firms able to access investment capital for economic development- with little to no regard of the interests or aspirations of indigenous peoples. These policies have denied indigenous peoples access to their forests, forests that are not only central to their cultural identity and lifeways, but often their most important economic asset and primary option for advancing their own economic well being. This situation continues to largely define the global forest estate today, spurring conflicts between indigenous peoples, governments and commercial forest enterprises.

But these historic patterns are beginning to shift. Throughout the world, indigenous peoples are growing in political strength and commercial capacity. Some governments are beginning to redress historic injustices by recognizing indigenous ownership and cultural and human rights. Indigenous communities now legally own or administer approximately 10% of the global forest estate, a far greater amount of the world's forest than forest industry and about the same amount as all private landholders combined. Many corporations are seeking opportunities to negotiate and partner with indigenous communities in order to reduce conflict, uncertainty and risk, and to bring stability to their industry. In some countries national and international processes are also driving the integration of community concerns into forest management. Many leaders in

both government and industry see the empowerment of indigenous community enterprises more as an imperative than an opportunity, an imperative that will help ensure sustained community development, sustained markets for forest products and sustained forest conservation.

While these shifts are important, they are incipient in nature. In most countries the legal framework, policies, regulations and government subsidies remain tilted against communities, and there are substantial business barriers to community enterprises and joint ventures. In Mexico, for example, communities own 80% of all forest resources but less than 5% of the processing industry. In short, the vast network of supporting policy, research, technical assistance, marketing, and business associations that have emerged to enable large-scale industry to compete and survive do not exist for community enterprises and for their joint ventures with conventional industry. Communities themselves face major challenges in building on their culture-based governance systems to effectively manage commercial enterprises.

The large and growing amount of forest owned and administered by communities, the growing recognition that communities can often be as good if not better managers of forests than governments or companies, and the potential for forest resources to contribute to sustainable community development, have all moved indigenous peoples' forestry to the center of the global forest debate. While indigenous people's forestry may have moved to the center, indigenous peoples themselves are not yet central players and there is a tremendous lack of awareness on barriers and market opportunities at the national and international levels, in industry, research and development organization circles. There is also a great need to facilitate new networks of communities, companies, policy-makers, investors, environmental groups and researchers. Indigenous peoples' forests and forestry present a huge challenge to the global forest community.

There are few places in the world where both the promise and the problems of indigenous peoples forestry are better represented than in British Columbia, Canada. There the Government and some First Nations remain in negotiations over land rights, government forest policies are undergoing major review, and many within the commercial forest industry are in active dialogue with First Nations communities. Over the last few years there has been a dramatic increase in company-community partnerships and alliances between commercial interests and First Nations that were unthinkable several years ago are being formed to fundamentally restructure the forest economy. British Columbia appears to be entering a new, historic, phase where the interactions between First Nations, governments, and commercial interests are more positive and forward looking.

The international conference: **Global Perspectives on Indigenous Peoples' Forestry: Linking Communities, Commerce, and Conservation** will promote indigenous peoples forest enterprises and joint ventures by advancing the collective understanding of key market, policy, and technical issues surrounding indigenous peoples management, promoting information exchanges between indigenous peoples and their supporters active in forestry, and connections to new opportunities for investment. The

conference will bring together leaders from communities, conservation organizations, and industry from Canada, the U.S., Latin America, Europe and Asia. It will develop agendas for governments, commercial interests and researchers to advance indigenous peoples' enterprises and their joint ventures globally.