Once again, the University of British Columbia is on the cutting edge of education, hiring a First Nations Forestry Coordinator at its Faculty of Forestry, the first university in Canada to do so.

The B.C. Forestry Association explored the First Nations perspectives on forestry with UBC’s new coordinator, Gordon Prest.

BCFA: What is the role of the newly created First Nations Coordinator on the Faculty of Forestry at UBC?

Prest: Working within existing courses offered with the Faculty, I am examining how we can incorporate First Nations perspectives in integrated resource management planning. With the imminent resolution of aboriginal rights and inherent jurisdiction on crown lands and natural resources through intergovernmental agreements with the B.C. Treaty Commission process, First Nations people will be assuming partnership roles as well as direct management control over portions of their former traditional territories. They will influence decision-making on a much greater scale.

Coupled with this recognition of aboriginal rights, we need to create a pool of First Nations professionals in the natural resources management sector. This will both increase First Nations organizational capacity as well as build a solid foundation to facilitate better relationships between the First Nations, the province of B.C. and the third party interests in the natural resources sectors.

I will also assist the Faculty to develop appropriate First Nations content in courses being offered in the various departments. Students are asking, “What are aboriginal rights? How will I work within them when I graduate?”

While the current program gives state of the art instruction when it comes to scientific industrial cutting or technological education of practicing forestry, it doesn’t deal with these questions.

BCFA: You have referred to the need to develop a ‘holistic’ thought model for forestry practices. Can you expand on that?

Prest: You have heard of the expression “can’t see the forest for the trees”. Well, in many ways, that is what has happened in B.C. up until fairly recent times. What I am about to say are my own personal perspectives developed over 25 years as a forest ranger and operations manager with the Ministry of Forests and over 30 years as a First Nations person.

In the past, forestry schools produced foresters who were expected to implement forest practices based on monetary gain by harvesting old-growth forests and replacing them with even-aged, commercially acceptable tree species in a managed forest or what is commonly referred to as a “working forest”.

Social attitudes towards our forests are changing. No longer can foresters ignore the other natural resources and user groups and merely concentrate on wood fibre harvesting. There must be a paradigm shift away from what I call the “colonial exploitive mentality” to a more holistic thought model for forestry. I define holistic forestry as managing the forest as a whole, the water, the birds, the rocks, the fish and the trees. The whole is greater than the parts.

We need to look at a thought model:

- that is more environmentally sensitive
- that will allow us to start to develop environmental and land ethics that will reflect how we can interact with the forest on a personal as well as professional level.
- that will allow us to view how we are a part of the forest and natural environment and not as a separate and omnipotent power that can destroy, create and manipulate or “manage” the environment solely to meet our own selfish needs and wants.

As a First Nations person, of the STOLO, I look at resources in a different way than western society. But I also think any caring human being can look at it that way, not just a First Nations person. More and more people are becoming more sensitive to the practices happening out there. The STOLO share a special relationship with the river and the salmon. Our survival depends on them. We are the “Salmon People” or “People of the River”. We live in harmony. I’ll tell you a story an elder told me about a tree. A young person came up to an elder and asked, “How do I hug or connect with the creator?” The elder said, “You see that tree, go hug the tree and you will hug the creator. The tree is rooted in mother earth, The branches reach up to father sky. You hug the tree and connect to mother and father.”

Like all of these kinds of stories, there’s some mystery. You don’t have to have all the answers for everything, like in the sciences, which bring everything down to the finite point, to the point where we lose it. Perhaps we should accept nature as perfect itself. As human beings, we like to go in and manipulate for our own needs by growing mono-species with commercial value. I really question the validity. We’re playing at it for its parts or components (trees). Forests have a purpose way beyond an economic development and resource management of our forests, will traditional forest values be affected?

BCFA: What perspectives do First Nations want built into forest education in our high schools?

Prest: What relationship did the Aboriginal people have with the forests since time immemorial? Why do the First Nations need to be a part of the decision-making process based on their aboriginal rights? A forest education program should also incorporate an acute sense of respect for the environment and a deep and personal understanding of ecology and the principles of sustainability. It should include a basic understanding of various decision-making options, such as decision by majority, by compromise and by consensus.

BCFA: What are the long-term benefits in educating the next generation in First Nations perspectives?

Prest: An awareness and understanding of each others’ views. This will facilitate better relationships for the future. We are told that when the creator made life, it was in infinite diversity and this must be respected. Not to try to make things and people for our own needs and purposes, but to consider how we can exist in harmony.

BCFA: As First Nations increasingly become participants in the economic development and resource management of our forests, will traditional forest values be affected?

Prest: We will still look at the forest as a whole rather than look at it for its parts or components (trees). Forests have a purpose way beyond “wood fibre production plants or factories.” We will always need to utilize the products from the forests to meet our basic needs, but we must also look to the forests to meet our higher needs as well.

First Nations’ Perspectives on Forestry

Giving students a holistic view of the forest

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