



## **Getting past the hurdles of harvesting on Haida Gwaii**

**Constraints are a fact of life with forestry operations on Haida Gwaii, off the north coast of B.C., but Haida-owned Taan Forest has an initiative underway that would see primary manufacturing of logs from its FSC certified forest operations.**

*By Jim Stirling*

Itemizing them can make the situation sound worse than it is. But constraints are a fact of log harvesting life for Taan Forest.

Right off the top, about 52 per cent of the land base in Haida Gwaii—formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands—is formally protected by one category or another, like parks and reserves.

Take away lands that are unavailable and the northern British Columbian island's timber harvesting land base shrinks to between 20 and 25 per cent, estimates Jerome Benoit, planning-contract supervisor with the Haida-owned Taan Forest.

There are also numerous Haida cultural features within the working forest that must be accommodated through the timber harvesting planning process. An example is “monumentals”, large mature trees that may have values for pole carving or other ceremonial purposes. The 1.20 cubic metre per tree volume and 110 centimetres diameter minimums are just the beginning parameters on a list that must be met to qualify trees as “monumentals”. Some cedar take hundreds of years to achieve “monumental” status.

Several forest plants also require accommodation for varying reasons including devil's club, fairy slipper and crabapple. Other constraints include yew trees (partly for medicinal purposes), bear dens (Taan is Haida for bear) while marbled murrelet and goshawk habitats also have to be protected in the planning process.

Riparian zones and buffers are part of the no-go zones along with the impacts of landscape and terrain assessments and requirements stipulated under the Forest Stewardship Council's (FSC) standards for qualification as a sustainably managed forest.

“That's an indication of the shopping list for the forest areas we can't harvest,” summarizes Benoit.

The planning work involving the necessary field assessments for the constraints comes with a cost attached. Benoit reckons the silviculture and engineering costs that have nothing to do with logging per se amounts to plus or minus 10 per cent of costs.



“We’re keeping our heads above water,” reports Bob Brash, chief operating officer with Taan Forest.

As a major employer on the islands, there is much local interest in what Taan does—or what observers feel it should do. People talk a lot about value added manufacture on-island and that is something they’re interested in working on, adds Brash.

“Value added manufacture requires capital and we’re a young company,” he explains of the business realities. Taan Forest is entering its second five-year operating period as a company.

Back in the early- and mid-1980s, Haida Gwaii was being creamed of its timber by off-island owned companies at an unsustainable rate of two to three million cubic metres a year. The Haida found that situation intolerable and set in motion a process to wrest back control of their lands and seas. It’s worked. The islands’ TSA AAC was estimated at 512,000 cubic metres in 2014. The actual harvest, however, was about 345,000 cubic metres.

Taan Forest has the largest AAC at 460,000 cubic metres but is actually harvesting little more than 300,000 cubic metres, says Brash.

Harvesting methods by volume are about five per cent helicopter logging; 25-30 per cent grapple yarding and most of the rest hoe chucking. Skilled fallers and those wishing to become skilled are in demand on Haida Gwaii.

Deer are an expensive impediment to cedar regeneration on the islands. The animals were introduced to Haida Gwaii at the turn of the last century and because they have no natural predators, their numbers have mushroomed. Cedar seedlings are the deers’ delicacy. Protection, typically by expensive staked plastic tubing, is necessary for about five years to protect the cedars’ vulnerable leaders from browsing.

Haida Gwaii’s isolation from traditional wood product markets has been a major factor hindering development of a viable on-island log processing sector, especially in the available second growth timber stands. There have been many more attempts than successes through the years.

Taan Forest is working on several fronts to find ways to expand its options and develop more high end markets. The FSC certification process is one example of the strategy. Another is the establishment of a re-manufacturing facility. The model being considered would probably see primary breakdown on Haida Gwaii with final manufacturing in southern B.C. where Taan has established business relationships with wood product manufacturers for custom cutting and has access to marketing expertise.

A development like this would give them the ability to ship a quality product in a timely manner, says Brash.

On island, Brash explains, Taan Forest is trying to come to an understanding with an existing operation. The Old Massett Forestry Corporation, owned by the Old Massett Indian Band along with Abfam Enterprises, have



recently opened a wood briquette manufacturing plant in Port Clements on Graham Island. Abfam, a long-established small sawmilling operation has been one of the most consistent and persistent operators on the islands. “We would like to try and move that forward. It creates jobs locally and that’s what we want to do,” says Brash.

Taan Forest is involved in continuing negotiations with manufacturers of high grade soundboard and keyboard manufacturers, like Yamaha and Steinberg. The top quality, FSC certified, precisely manufactured parts are critical to the instruments’ integrity in the market place. “We’re getting there,” believes Brash. Another positive initiative underway on island are negotiations between BC Hydro and the Council of Haida Nation (CHN), Taan’s owner, seeking energy solutions. Haida Gwaii depends on expensive diesel power generation. It has been another stumbling block to developing profitable wood processing facilities on-island. Hydro and CHN are examining the feasibility of establishing a bioenergy plant. Furnish would come in the form of wood chips or sawdust created from the ample supply of pulp logs on Haida Gwaii.

### **Certification provides a market edge for Taan Forest**

The archipelago of Haida Gwaii curves like a protective shield up to 130 kilometres out in the Pacific Ocean from British Columbia’s northern mainland. The land and sea and the living things within them have shaped all that is Haida Gwaii. They are the mirror image of the islands’ rich culture. Trees flourish in the mild maritime climate.

Wood products made from them traditionally have high value and quality. Taan Forest, owned by the Haida people, wants those values and qualities reflected in its markets.

Part of the strategy for achieving that is why the company turned to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to certify its approximately 480,000 hectares of forest operations on Haida Gwaii. Taan joins much larger forest companies in Canada like Canfor, Tembec and Al-Pac which have raised the FSC standard to demonstrate to their customers their wood products originated on land that conserves biodiversity and is responsibly and sustainably managed.

All told, about 23.5 million hectares of Canadian forests have been certified against FSC’s forest management standards.

The FSC was co-founded in 1989 by the Rainforest Alliance and is the world’s first global sustainable forestry certification program. The certification process involves the on-the-ground evaluation of a forest by an independent third party certifier. Keith Moore is an independent consultant and principal in Moore Resource Management, based in Queen Charlotte City on Haida Gwaii. He has worked as a lead auditor and certifier for the Rainforest Alliance since 2000 in five Canadian provinces and nine countries. However, Moore was not involved in the Taan Forest accreditation process on Haida Gwaii.



The FSC recognizes regional differences in a country as large and diverse as Canada through its classification standards system. They include B.C.; the boreal forests; the Maritimes and the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence regions. Auditors will typically put together a team to conduct the accreditation process. It begins with a detailed assessment followed by four annual audits to ensure the standards established are continuing to be met in forestry and the downstream chain of custody during each five year period of accreditation.

“The FSC certification is the gold standard in our approach to market credibility,” points out Bob Brash, chief operating officer with Taan Forest. The company is in the process of diversifying its product range to include higher value and niche product lines. “Where FSC certification is additionally helpful is that customers have stayed with us when the market is not so robust,” noted Brash. “We’re comfortable with our FSC decision. We have to respond to the marketplace.”

### **Haida Gwaii voices on logging**

*April Churchill a former vice president with the Council of Haida Nation:*

“Respect all things. Always start with the principle of value.

“Taan has a business plan to increase added value; to cut less and be careful about export. The Haida people fight for that protection and industry now has a certainty factor.

“The Haida Nation and the Haida people have a rich culture because of the land. We’re connected to it. We have to protect our land or we won’t be here.”

*Colin Richardson a former logger and now manager of the Solutions Table.*

The Table is a cooperative between the B.C. government and the Haida Nation set up to review applications for land use on Haida Gwaii.

“We had to slow down the clearcutting of the lands and bring back Haida authority to decision making, a benefit to all citizens of this earth, not just Haida or B.C.

“If we can protect 85 per cent of the yew tree ( for medicinal values) I feel all right about that.

“The Haida want to ensure the natural rhythms of Mother Earth continue.”

### **Stump to dump or phase contracting in Haida Gwaii?**

Fierce gales are natural occurrences on Haida Gwaii. A storm brewing now, however, could have precedent-setting implications for forest companies and their logging contractors throughout the British Columbian coastal region.



The dispute pits the United Steelworkers (USW) against Taan Forest and it concerns how jobs are contracted out. Specifically at issue is how log harvesting is structured on Taan's TFL 60 on Haida Gwaii.

The Steelworkers says pre-existing agreements stipulate the use of stump to dump log contractors. Taan counters that a phase contract model better suits the islands' smaller logging contractors.

The issue surfaced after long time islands stump-to-dump contractor Edwards and Associates declared bankruptcy in 2015. During early discussions between the USW and Taan, the union agreed TFL 60 could be sub-divided into two stump to dump contracts. Taan's position is that suggestion still favours larger, off-island contractors.

More recently the USW ran a full-page advertisement in the Haida Gwaii Observer, the local newspaper, outlining the background to the TFL 60 situation and the union's position. Taan Forest responded to that salvo with an open letter of its own.

Both letters alluded to a continuing willingness to negotiate an out-of-court settlement.

The next developments are likely to happen behind closed doors rather than in the media. The Labour Relations Board could be the next stop with the issue.