



Vashon Forest Stewards

Selling a new vision of forestry to the public

By Andrea Watts

In the heart of Vashon Island last summer, active forest management was underway in the Island Center Forest with 75-100 truckloads of 30-year-old Douglas fir and 60-70-year-old red alder leaving the island to local mills. When local residents toured the thinned sites, one resident expected to see “scorched earth” but after seeing the sites still stocked with trees, she said, “[I’m] not seeing it.”

Education Leads to More Logging

More than 20 years ago, a logging operation on Vashon Island would have been inconceivable. So how did such a reversal come about? Education—20+ years of it through one-on-one discussions, workshops, and fieldtrips on what is required to create and maintain healthy forest conditions.

With a growing movement toward creating community forests that fulfill the recreation, wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and job needs of the community, the logging operation underway on Vashon Island may foreshadow a future where logging jobs aren’t with a productivity focus in rural areas but are selective thinning operations adjacent to urban centers. The role of citizen-led organizations such as Vashon Forest Stewards (VFS) will be crucial in serving as liaisons between the public and the timber industry.

The authority with which David Warren, executive director of VFS, discusses forest management leads you to assume he has a forestry degree. Actually, his degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, is in design with a focus on the human-centered environment. His understanding of how humans interact with their environment is valuable when communicating the complexities of a forest ecosystem and its management.

VFS had its beginning when Warren served as the executive director of the Vashon Maury Island Land Trust—a nonprofit with a mission to preserve the ecosystems found on the island.

Liaison between Owner and Logger

In 1994 Warren started the first of many forest stewardship classes for landowners, preceding the forest stewardship classes now offered through the King County Forest Program.

“Every year we were holding these classes and...as the years went by, we realized a lot of the people couldn’t write their own plan...They didn’t even walk their own forest,” Warren recalls. He realized that the landowners were professionals who commuted to Seattle and desired a country-like lifestyle with the goal of managing their forestland for wildlife and aesthetics. Consequently, “a lot of stewardship wasn’t getting done,” and the environmental community didn’t trust the logging community.

In 2000, he left the land trust to work for California-based Pacific Forest Trust, and he also worked with The Nature Conservancy. But two years later, he was back on Vashon Island and incorporating the VFS, or as Warren describes it, “the little engine that could.” His return also coincided with a community now aware of the tragic results that accompany a



hands-off approach to forest management. No one could conceive that a tree 80 feet away from a trail could kill someone. Eyewitness accounts describe only a crack preceding the tree's fall. It fell onto a trail where several girls were walking, killing a twelve-year-old.

Warren recalls there being an awakening at the time, with some public land managers realizing, "there is a time to take down a tree." With his name already associated with forest stewardship classes, Warren was approached to write forest management plans for landowners. These landowners owned parcels with backyard forests of five acres to 60 acres of timberland. Through VFS, he wrote numerous plans, sometimes for free, and the land owners became more receptive to logging, telling Warren, "You're the tree guys. Which tree should I take out?"

Falling the First Trees

The real test of their credibility came in 2003 when the Vashon Island Park District board approached VFS to write a forest management plan for the 30-acre forested Agren Memorial Park. With its walking trails and two acres of ball fields, the park is a popular attraction for residents. Warren knew that logging would be necessary to, at the very least, remove hazard trees and enlarge the existing trail to build a requested ADA-compliant trail. With this logging likely the first ever in a park in the Puget Sound region, Warren recognized that "if we blow it, we might as well move off the island."

To gain credibility for the forest management plan, he enlisted the support of University of Washington Professor Jerry Franklin and Andrew Carey of the U.S. Forest Service, who are recognized experts on old-growth forests. Franklin and Carey agreed with management prescriptions, and the plan was then presented at a series of public meetings.

Once the park district approved the plan, the park was closed for several months during the logging operations. Of Bellingham-based TimberTec Inc. who performed the work, Warren says, it "could not have gone better" and we had a "great relationship." A processor and forwarder were used to minimize damage on the ground and Warren says there were almost no damaged trees in the entire forest when the job was finished.

Warren recalls an instance when an operator recommended taking out a different pair of trees to avoid damaging the leave trees. The end result was a forest that was "exactly what we are looking for." Fifty log truck loads were trucked off the island, and they only received one complaint from a park user: Why was the park closed for logging when no logging was done?

Island Mill is Born

Seeing those loaded log trucks leave the island caused Warren to realize some of the wood should stay on the island, and this inspired VFS to add another component to their mission: an island mill. If we thin from our own forests and use the wood in our local community, we are training our own people and providing local jobs, he says. This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the Joel Kuperberg mill yard, named in honor of one of the first board members of the VFS.

With their 2003 Mighty Might bandsaw, the mill produces an average of 30,000-50,000 bf per year. While it can't compete in the 2x4, 2x6 market, it can offer customers custom beams and flooring at fairly competitive prices. Their wood is air dried—for slabs, one year for each inch—before being finished in their kiln. It's a slow process, but it achieves the quality VFS wants to market.



Custom Orders

VFS works with many of the local wood workers on the island and often handles custom orders. With most of the land-owners cutting for forest health, their wood supply isn't steady, and their wood inventory is of species usually not found in Douglas fir productive-focused regions. Rather it may be madrone, red alder, or maple that arrives at the mill yard. Being a nonprofit means they don't have a budget for advertising their inventory, so it is mainly through word of mouth that Warren is contacted about what's in stock.

In 2014 VFS purchased a used 1980s Freightliner log truck so they could improve their ability to serve forest owners by hauling logs back to their mill. Their staff is fairly bare bones too, with Warren also working part time for King County, and sawyer Stewart Putnam sometimes working part time. Other seasonal employees include several high school students.

Warren's vision of the mill's future, producing not only the raw material for island wood workers but also finished wood products, is inspired by Jim Birkemeier's "Full Vigor Forestry" and his work with the Menominee Tribe in northern Wisconsin. From their managed timberland, the tribe manufactures finished products made with what is harvested from the forest according to their 12-year rotation management plan. The viability of Warren's vision on Vashon Island bore fruit in 2012 when VFS was asked to produce lumber from the school's forest for their new \$47 million high school.

Continuing Education

To educate the public about the logging operations in the forest, field trips were held, and Warren describes one memorable field trip that had several participants who opposed the proposed logging. Warren started the fieldtrip by telling the attendees that since we all use wood, "Why not take it from our own backyards?" At one point on the trail, one of the women opposing the logging questioned Derek Churchill, a board member of VFS and research associate at the University of Washington, on why a medium tree was being taken out rather than the smaller tree. Once Churchill explained that the smaller tree served as a ladder into the upper canopy and removing the medium tree provided more growing space for the larger tree, "one of the women threw her hands up in the air and said, 'I get it, I get it,'" Warren says proudly.

Trust is the primary reason the islanders turn to VFS to serve as a liaison between themselves and the logging contractors when logging their own land. Though this means that VFS doesn't reap the profits associated with productivity-focused logging operations, Warren adds that there are other rewards that make the work worthwhile, and Churchill describes the work as "really satisfying."