

**"T**HERE'S A LOT of mud slinging on both sides but the conservationists' mud is a lot cleaner."

This comment from veteran British Columbian journalist Tony Eberts aptly reflects the level of tension between the antagonists in the battle for British Columbia's 500-year-old forests. But, coming from a relatively impartial observer, it also indicates that public support to conserve the forests outweighs plans to log most of Canada's westernmost province's big old trees in the next few decades.

New Zealand's largest company, Fletcher Challenge Limited, today finds itself embroiled in a bitter argument over the future of Canada's forests as a result of having bought a majority interest in Columbia Forest Products in 1987. As reflected in Fletcher Challenge's annual accounts, timber is big business in Canada. In 1988 Fletcher Challenge Canada (FCC) made a net profit of \$C290 million; in 1989 \$C188 million; and in 1990 \$C82 million. In 1989 the total value of forest exports to the country was \$C40.2 million.

## Huge country

Canada is a huge country. British Columbia - not the largest Canadian province - is 95 million ha in size (four times larger than New Zealand). Of that, 46 million ha supports forest, but 20 million ha is considered unharvestable. That leaves 26 million ha of "working forest" as the logging industry describes some of the world's finest temperate forest. Around 60 percent of that is "old growth" (virgin or primary) forest, but the percentage varies according to latitude. In the north, where logging is marginal, there are still large areas intact. In the warmer south,

between 60 and 70 percent of the old growth forest has been cut.

Despite the staggering quantities of available timber, almost all of which is owned by the provincial government, the day of reckoning for the industry could be relatively close at hand. At British Columbia's current cut of 260,000 ha a year (more than is cut in all US national forests combined), its coastal old growth forests will be exhausted in 15 years, say environmentalists. Industry officials contest this, estimating up to 30 years. In New Zealand the native forest woodchip industry cleared 16,557 ha between 1971 and 1989.

It is little wonder that the coastal forests, especially of 386-km-long Vancouver Island, are so sought after by loggers, or revered by tree huggers. The rainforests are dominated by four majestic tree species: Sitka spruce, Douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock. On immensely fertile sites, Sitka spruces tower up to 95m above the forest canopy, higher than anywhere else in the world. In the 6,700 ha Carmanah Valley there are an estimated 5 million cubic metres of timber. Compare that to the more northerly Kitlope watershed on the mainland whose 317,000 ha can only muster 4 million cubic metres of timber.

*The work of centuries, the giant western red cedar can grow to a prodigious size, surpassing every other British Columbian tree species for size and mass. On Vancouver Island the largest existing recorded tree has a six metre diameter. Photo: Adrian Dorst*



*Bald eagles rule over the forest world, their massive nests located at the summits of tall trees. Until relatively recently the eagle trees were felled along with all the other trees, but now they are left. But are those trees sufficient when the remainder of the forest is destroyed around these magnificent birds of prey?*

Photo: Adrian Dorst

