That there exists a crisis in British Columbia’s forests and forest dependent communities appears to be one of the few points of consensus in the province’s raucous politics. We say ‘appears’ as there are in fact multiple crises: forestry workers and their unions point us to the crisis of unemployment; environmentalists point us to the ecological crisis of old-growth liquidation (which it takes many forms), forest capital insists that it confronts an unparalleled profit crisis. As if this were not enough, voices from all sides counsel us that one crisis can only be resolved at the expense of exacerbating another: forest workers will only find work if we allow, or speed up the liquidation of ancient forests, forest companies can only continue production if environmental regulations are limited, ancient forests can only be protected by shutting down forestry work. While forest policy and practice appear to create much dissent, the struggle often appears as much between the dissenters as any place else. Very often this struggle has been between forest workers and environmentalists.

For the activist and the sociologist, the persistent, sometimes violent conflict between two “progressive” social movements is disturbing and confusing. British Columbia’s old-growth forests, with their giant fir, cedar, spruce and hemlock are pitted against the livelihood of forest workers and their families. The value of work and community stability is played off against habitat.

1 All quotes are taken from interviews carried out with forestry workers and union activists in Squamish British Columbia between the fall of 1999 and the spring of 2000. See Moore (2002).
ecological diversity and a sustainable environment. While it is suggested from many sides that both goals might be met (and we too offer a variation on this), most often we are confronted with painful contradiction and impossible decision.

This paper, using data drawn from a study of the conflict over logging in the Elaho Valley in South Western, British Columbia, argues that both structural and cultural explanation is necessary if we are to understand the clash between forestry workers and environmental groups. However, we also contend that if we are to more fully comprehend this conflict, care must be taken to place forestry workers’ struggles, including their struggles against environmental groups, within a larger history of class politics and of class struggle. This class context, it is argued, not only helps us understand the conflict between labour and environmental movements but also suggests the means by which such inter-movement conflict might be overcome.

The Structural Construction of Place: Environmental and Social Contradictions of Capitalist Forestry in the Temperate Rainforests of British Columbia

Any explanation of environmental politics, and indeed politics more generally, in the Canadian hinterland must begin with some understanding of the uniqueness of the natural and built landscape. In British Columbia, environmental politics has most often come to center upon the temperate rainforests that stretch along Canada’s Pacific Coast. These forests, evolving since the last ice age, were never plentiful – forming only a thin sliver along the coasts of continents. Today, temperate rainforests occupy less than 0.2% of the earth’s land surface and British Columbia’s Coast, Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) contain the largest remaining tracts. Not only rare in number, temperate rainforests are also uniquely productive in a biological sense (Ecotrust). While ecologists measure this in terms of biodiversity, others take a more prosaic tack and merely point to the stands of immense old-growth cedar, hemlock, and Douglas Fir. Although in the first instance the rarity of these forests is a question of geography, it is also a question of political economy. Ancient temperate rainforests are also productive in an economic sense and Canada’s largest forest industry, one that British Columbia has both fostered and long depended upon, has developed to take these trees and turn them into lumber, pulp and paper, (and much more rarely other products)². This industry has spread across 83% of the forest area

² This industry accounts for approximately 50% of all the logging in Canada.
and replaced old-growth forest ecosystems with managed plantations of commercial species and problems of biodiversity loss, destruction of salmon streams, soil erosion and over-cut have each come to the fore (Ecotrust).

If the natural environment has not fared well under industrial forestry, neither have forestry communities. Indeed, if the development of an increasingly capital intensive forestry may be implicated in the loss of old-growth forests, it has also been cited as a reason for the increasingly perilous state of the hundreds of forest dependent towns spread along the coast. Political economists have demonstrated that this staples industry has created highly-cyclical local economies, marginalized women, and drawn profits off to the more diversified urban centers (Marchak), while those studying the labour process have traced the deskilling, job loss and tightening of managerial control that have accompanied the introduction of new technologies and managerial systems (Rajala 1998).

Such a structural explanation of the troubles facing British Columbia’s forests and forestry communities is both necessary and highly revealing – so revealing in fact that many commentators have consciously or not tended to simply read off forestry politics from this explanation. It is very common, for instance, for popular commentators to equate forestry workers with their employers and pit this “industry” against environmentalists. The so-called “war in the woods” is described as one between “loggers” and environmentalists; a stance that conflates workers with their employers and naturalizes the conflict between resource workers and the environmental movement3. Taking quite the opposite tack, other forestry critics suggest an entirely different reading of these same structural tea-leaves and insisted that that cooperation between environmentalists and forestry workers is about to break out at any moment and is a simple matter of debunking misinformation and industry and state propaganda4.

A longstanding concern of environmentalists, forestry communities and forestry workers has been the relative lack of secondary manufacturing, a problem whose economic, political and social impacts are traced in Patricia Marchak’s pioneering work, *Green Gold* (Marchak 1983).  

3 In the popular press forestry disputes are almost invariably referred to as ‘logger vs. environmentalist’ and environmental groups are described as ‘anti-logger’. More academic works however also conflate workers and the forest industry.

4 See Burrows and Hayvice (1998) or Burrows (1998) for well articulated versions of this argument.
Of more than a little import is the fact that both these camps can muster a significant body of contemporary and historical evidence to support their case. Those pitting workers against environmental groups need only point to the decidedly “anti-environmentalist” stance of the International Wood and Allied Worker’s Union (IWA), the success of pro-industry “wise-use” movements and to the participation of forestry workers in protests, demonstrations and even acts of violence against those seeking to expand protected areas. Those arguing for a red-green solidarity can point to the fact that the Pulp Paper and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC), have worked alongside environmental groups and forged an admirable set of environmental policies (Simon; Moore) and to a history of inter-movement cooperation that dates back to the forest policies of the IWA and CCF during the 1930s (Moore).

In 1998 I began interviewing loggers, mill workers and union activists working in Squamish and the Elaho Valley setting out to resolve this debate. I hoped that my conversations with these workers would betray an underlying agreement with the aims of environmental movement or a convincing argument for the inherent conflict between these interests. Instead, forestry workers’ explanations of the source of social and environmental problems in the area, their personal worries and hopes for their community, and their thoughts about the environmental movement were marked by tensions and contradictions echoing the structural pushes and pulls we have described. Certainly forestry workers argued that their interests had come to directly clash with those of environmental groups. Workers were afraid for their jobs that are linked to the harvesting of old-growth timber from the Elaho and elsewhere; they approved of some (previously existing) protected areas but saw little reason for any additional protection of old-growth forests; they were skeptical of scientific claims made by environmentalists; and they saw the work of environmental groups as a direct threat to their livelihood and the well-being of their community. Workers lamented:

[...] for every acre that you take out of our area [for preservation] that contains inventory logs, and of course that means work. And they’ve set aside tens of thousands of hectares and that’s huge, that’s a huge impact on forestry workers, and not just the forestry workers but the town people [...] Most people in the city are so hard on the forest industry. They can’t see what’s really going on. There ARE parks! We have how many parks in B.C. right now? Do we have to make all of B.C. a park for somebody to exploit. What do we do with our citizens?
Do we back burner them? [...] And now they’re demanding 600 000
hectares which is basically [...] all from here to Lillooet as a park.
Now why does anybody need that amount (Moore).

Another chastised environmentalists for ignoring the interests of his
community musing, “If people treated other people the way they want to
treat trees, it would be a hell of a better place to live. They care more about
those trees than the people who live here [...]” (Moore).

Scientific claims about the ecological value of these forests and the damage
day of clearcutting were either dismissed as “some kind of ploy” to shut down
the industry or pitted against the social value of maintaining this industry.
As one millworker argued: “There are significant risks in leaving scientists
to make those kinds of decisions. It is scary; I mean if somebody’s priorities
are bugs, then we might not be cutting because there is the potential to
eliminate a bug” (Moore). The stands of old-growth forest that environmental
groups and others were defending were dismissed as insignificant, decaying
trees and a particular stand of old-growth cited by environmentalists as a
reason for preserving the area was mocked as “basically a snag, you know,
it’s something that’s not even commercially viable, and they’re running
around like it’s some kind of God” (Moore).

At other moments however, workers arguments paralleled those of
environmental groups. Workers spoke of how technological change not
environmental protection has been the most important destroyer of jobs,
of the importance of protected ancient forests, the fundamentally different
interests of employer and employees and of the environmental problems
brought by their industry. When asked about the most important factors
in job loss over the years a mill worker was characteristically blunt:
“technological change, technology – labour has been reduced, machinery
brought in and production has doubled”. A logger described the situation in
the forest saying,

The cut has decreased [for environmental protection and to maintain
long-term resource supply]. However the cut may have gone down
fifteen percent or something, whereas employment dropped by thirty
or forty [...] We used to have all towers [now we have] grapple yarders.
One uses twice as many people to operate and with the engineering
has been done properly you’re getting a lot more wood out with half
the people. Power saws cut faster, the log loaders load faster (Moore).
Many workers, though denying the need for more local protected areas did agree that there were reasons for protecting ancient forests. A fellers reflected:

I subscribe to the notion that it is essential that we preserve the wilderness, I mean wild areas. People use all these words like ‘pristine’ and all that kind of stuff – they’re almost all irrelevant somehow, because in the truest sense, there is no such thing anymore. I think it is important to set aside drainages and significant areas of wilderness. It’s kind of hard to articulate why exactly. But I just think it’s important; it seems to be essential in some sort of organic sense that we have these things. I think the world would be missing something huge if we didn’t do those things, if we didn’t have significant parks (Moore). [A pulp mill worker and union executive agreed:] Yes, my own personal belief is yes and I think I would be speaking on behalf of the local saying “yes we do”. We have reasons for that, and some of them would be personal. I’m not ashamed of them. Even though I might never see the Queen Charlotte Islands, when they made Moresby Island and all that a park, it made me feel good that it is there. I think that it’s personal, kind of like a motherhood issue (Moore).

Importantly, even though many workers acknowledged that there was much cooperation with management in the fight against expanding local protected areas, many also recognized the longstanding and fundamental differences in interest. A feller described this difference:

[..] If you don’t want to operate on a sustainable – on a commercially sustainable – basis, as a worker, you’re kind of cutting your own throat whereas as a company can, quite honestly I think, they’re much more bottom line orientated. They’re much more next order, year-end orientated. I also think that if the company can plan 5 years ahead, that as far ahead as they’re probably able to see, whereas as an employee, I think that you’re much more likely to consider that you’re working, you know, the longer term or medium term anyways, which would be the 10 to 20 to 30 years you might like to work there, or potential for your kids to work in the industry, whereas corporately, they can maximize the profits from an area and then move on to the next area. [More succinctly a pulp mill worker remarked:] Let me say this about that. [Laughing] The companies’ major interest is making a profit. We all know that. Right. They’re not there saying we want to give you a job, we want
to make sure your healthy and just maybe we might make some money out of this. So their philosophy is to make money (Moore).

The confusion of our opening quote then reflects a larger pattern of contradiction within forestry workers’ discourse. Workers bounced between a defense of corporate forestry practices and the acknowledgement of the environmental and social problems that had accompanied the growth of this capital intensive industry. At times workers starkly portrayed environmental groups as opposing interests and at others it was suggested that any such conflict was overblown. What does any of this reveal about the two competing readings of the material grounding of labour-environmental movement conflict and cooperation in the hinterland? In a sense, both readings are accurate – and this in turn reflects a fundamental weakness of reducing forestry worker politics to structural conditions. On the one hand, alongside the steady displacement of labour by capital, capitalist forestry has produced undeniable job/environment tradeoffs and such tradeoffs are a powerful factor in forestry worker’s politics. On the other hand, forestry workers and their families are directly affected by the loss of forests, salmon streams and the contamination of water and air that has accompanied the growth of this industry setting the stage for forestry worker-environmental movement cooperation.

We are confronted then with the fact that, to paraphrase James O’Connor, Red-Green solidarity and the lack thereof is a problem of politics first and economics second. While forestry politics might be shaped by the structural pushes and pulls of political ecology the outcome is clearly contingent. Contingent on what? The study of forestry politics in British Columbia, and in Canada more generally, has drawn attention to a multitude of answers including the political history of forestry sector unions, weaknesses in the environmental movement (Wilson 1987), struggles between state agencies (Wilson 1998), shifts from Fordist to flexible production (Hayter), the use of corporate front groups and sophisticated public relations methods (Goldberg). While each of these is necessary for a full accounting of this politics, here I want to argue alongside those that have turned to the cultural analysis of resource worker and environmental communities.

**The Politics Of Place: A Cultural Turn**

Increasingly social scientists studying forestry and other resource sector politics have argued that significant cultural differences between the hinterland communities and the urban centres where environmental groups have drawn significant support have limited the appeal of environmental
politics and movements. For example, Trigger argues that the struggle between “urban-based environmentalism and rural communities is rooted in a competing identity politics whereby the ‘moral challenge to rural communities’ advanced by “urban-based environmentalism is inverted by those working in the [forest] industry”. In British Columbia this cultural explanation is well rooted in the popular imagination as is evident in the following explanation of the sometimes rabid anti-environmentalist stance of workers and others in Squamish, B.C.:

[Squamish] is still a forest based community in a very real sense. Historically, it was a forest–based community. It’s becoming more and more of a satellite community for Vancouver but still in all, historically, and until really recently, it was a forest based community there – loggers and sawmill workers and pulpmill workers who were really hit. I guess there was a few fishermen and so on. But from a really working class community, a really forest-based, working class community. And right on the edge of Vancouver. On the one hand here is this highly concentrated working class town and right next to it is the beast (Vancouver) […] You can see all of this stuff that is happening down here – They see what’s happening and its scares the fucking begeeshes out of them […] There’s also overlaid on that a really definite class division and a really definite regional division. So that you have on one side, to put it in its starkest form, you have university educated, middle and upper class, green-leaning, urbanites, and on the other side you have industrial workers who have grown up and lived all their lives in a small town outside of the Lower Mainland, or outside of the major metropolitan centres. So that you have a huge class and cultural division (Moore).

As others studying hinterland communities have noted, at the heart of this cultural difference are attitudes towards work and the forest within which much of this work takes place (Dunk 1994). Though we might note the exceptions above, forestry workers, and resource community members more generally, have a more utilitarian, understanding of the forest, reflected in the more common term “bush” and in recreational patterns (fishing, hunting, motorized transport vs. nature viewing, hiking and backpacking). This utilitarian stance reflects the fact that the forest is their workplace or at least the source of the material upon which they directly work and is difficult to square with those who seek to “preserve” forests (which most often preclude even the indirect activities such as hunting and snowmobiling).
Also central to forestry workers culture is an understanding of manual work in either forest or mill as “good work”. While my interviewees referred to economic need they also spoke of the inherent dignity of their work. One logger spoke of his colleagues, “I think that most people that work in the industry are very proud of what they do. They’re proud of the fact that they actually do that. Most people – if you took 90% of the people of a major city or even 90% of the people in this town – they would say: ‘Get lost!’ I couldn’t work out there” (Moore). Another speaking specifically of his job as a faller remarked, “It’s a good job. It’s well paid. It’s also […] it’s kind of independent, you get to run your own […] you’re a boss in a sense. Fallers historically have been kind of independent. They have often been kind of these sparkplugs catalysts for different labour disputes” (Moore). Many others argued that their work was central to the provincial economy, that “They do something, they create wealth for this province. That’s the thing; that we create wealth. This is where the dollar is created here. People don’t seem to understand that” (Moore).

It should not be surprising, then, that when directly confronted by environmentalists who have portrayed logging as inherently destructive, and who see no choice but an immediate halt to this work, the debate over forestry in the Elaho shifted to open conflict. A principal figure in the blockade expressed candidly how emotionally charged it was to face environmentalists who saw it as their duty to stop him from working.

That [the blockade by environmentalists and the counter-blockade by workers and supporters] was right on the tree farm at 27 mile. We were just going to work and there, all of a sudden, there was a bunch of people chained at a barrel […] I’ll never forget that day because I realized right away why and how people go to war. I could never understand that before. [Another added:] I’m in tune with what goes on in the bush. I have been for years. And yet, I stood on a picket line, keeping the Greenpeacers from blocking logging because I knew these were guys that I knew that had the right to go to work. So I took a political stand there even though I don’t want an old growth tree chopped down (Moore).

Though structural explanation might describe a pattern of intersecting and diverging interests of forestry workers and environmental groups it is this cultural analysis that helps us understand the persistence and ferocity of the conflict. However, while identifying a cultural rift between rural and urban communities and positing this as an explanation for the conflict between
forestry workers and environmental movements is something of an advance over the most crude structural reductionism, it does land us in a similar place – the conflation of forestry workers with their industry – only now this is accounted for by a particular identity politics rooted in place. This cultural reductionism, I argue, does little justice to voices of the workers we have heard above.

More than simply an ‘identity politics’ rooted in a particular place, the environmental politics forestry workers in Squamish, and workers in resource-based hinterland communities more generally, are grounded in a working-class history and culture of resistance. This is not perhaps the most popular position – especially when speaking of environmental conflicts that many in the social sciences and in the environmental movement consider to be post-class, post-industrial or post-modern. However unfashionable though, placing the voices of forestry workers within an understanding of working-class history and culture does shed considerable light upon the “contradictions” that run through forestry workers’ discourse. More importantly, such an understanding might be necessary if we are to find a way out of the conflicts that continue to hinder those seeking environmentally and socially progressive solutions to the problems of Canada’s hinterland. In the debate over the forests of the Elaho, for instance, environmentalists could only explain workers’ dismissal of scientific arguments as proof they were ‘dupes’ of their employer or simply hostages to their paycheque5.

5 A self-identified labour and environmental activist in Squamish revealed a frustration with environmental groups that came into town made important arguments for the preservation of local areas but did so in a manner that was either condescending or outright hostile to local workers,

[A Vancouver based environmental group] had a meeting at the totem […] It was probably before the blockade. A couple of loggers came […] And it was [a group spokesperson] who got up and did his – interestingly enough – rant about the wise – use movement and basically, with a few loggers in the room, said to them: “You’re nothing but puppets of the Moonies”. You know and I stood up and said, “You’re making a serious mistake underestimating the sincerity of the local grassroots people. Now I happen to think you’re right, this whole thing has been manipulated from all sides, but you’re not going to have dialogue telling people that they are mindless puppets […] of the Moonies”. So I think that mistakes gets made on the environmental side as well – treating loggers and their supporters as though they are stupid, manipulated (Moore).
skepticism takes on another light when one acknowledges that workers in the mills and woods have long faced engineers, efficiency experts and other ‘scientists’ in the service of their employers. The spread of high-lead logging in the 1930s brought not job-loss, work speed-up and clearcutting but also a significant rise in worker injury and death (Rajala 1998; Moore).

The history and culture of working-class struggle also helps us understand the passion which Squamish workers exhibited in their “blockade” of the road leading into the disputed area. While rediscovered in the so-called “new movements”, workers have a long history of placing their body in the way of employers. The slippage between the term “blockade” and picket line evident in the earlier quote is significant – the effectiveness of this action owed much to the cultural memory of picketing and its importance to working class struggle.

This blockade, was only one expression of the broader defense of what workers considered “good work” and which is often misunderstood as simple economic compulsion or crass materialism by many environmentalists. However, long before the environmental movement came to be understood as a threat, workers in Squamish, and in the forest industry more generally, were forced to defend their work against the deskilling and job-loss that has accompanied each new round of restructuring in the mills and technological change in the woods. Moreover, as many workers in Squamish reminded me, the cyclical nature of this staples industry is never far from workers minds. As one worker lamented, “I know that even with all my seniority that every five years or so I’ll be laid off”. In recent years capital has shifted production around the globe in search of lower labour costs and environmental regulation. In the context of the commodification of their labour and the physical and mental dangers that accompany their jobs, the fact that forestry workers have fought to maintain dignity and respect for this work is most understandable as is their reaction to groups who intentionally or not belittle this work

6 On a more somber note, environmentalists reacted, most correctly, with surprise and horror to an attack on a camp set up by activists in the Elaho Valley in which several activists were assaulted and their camp destroyed. Without any nod to justification however, this violence can, and must, be placed within the context of the violence of work in this industry which continues to be one of the most dangerous, indeed deadly, forms of employment in the country. Related, a volunteer at a women’s centre feared the violence against women that would follow shutdowns or layoffs in the forest industry.
Finally, a return to class reminds us that forestry workers’ environmental discourse must be understood within the previously mentioned political economy of the forest industry. This industry has created not only a “geography of difference” but a “geography of dependency”. The words and politics of forestry workers are shaped by this geography – their struggles over wages and the conditions and control of work have taken place not only against foremen and bosses in the woods and mill floor but against the owners and executives in Vancouver and Toronto. If forest workers and others in resource dependent communities are indeed quick to identify environmentalists and others from outside their communities as “others” this owes something to longstanding grievances over this dependency. Here we find ourselves back then from whence we came, in the territory of political economy. The question begs then – does this class context suggest more than simply a more nuanced understanding of forestry worker politics and are there ways to avoid the bitter inter-movement conflict that is the hallmark of hinterland environmental struggles? With much caution I must answer, yes.

Though often misconstrued as simply pro-industry rhetoric, forestry worker’s discourse is in fact loaded with culturally specific messages of resistance and these messages reveal conflicts with forestry capital no less profound than those upon which environmental struggles are waged. If such messages are misinterpreted or simply overlooked it is, I would argue, because they are being viewed through the largely middle class, urban eyes of much of the environmental movement. At the very least there is a need for a “class-informed” translation of the struggles of both forestry workers’ and environmentalists. What is increasingly clear, however, is that if this translation is to take place (and I believe it must if we are to preserve both natural environment and community), it is that forestry workers’ themselves will need to do much of this cultural and political work. An environmental movement especially if it is based in urban centres and populated the middle-class is ill prepared to address the everyday concerns of forestry workers and their families in the language and metaphors available to such workers.

7 Dunk makes such an argument in his description of Northern Ontario forestry workers.
Works Cited


