

COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR LES CHAMPIGNONS FORESTIERS
COMESTIBLES
NOV. 30 - DEC. 1 2009
UNIVERSITE LAVAL, QUEBEC

Jonathan Forbes
Forbes Wild Foods

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to speak.

My own introduction to the forest was when I was 14 and I worked for the summer in a cedar bush with a farmer who was cutting logs for posts and telephone poles. It was hard work, complete with mosquitoes, black flies and mud. But it was important work because it was cash income for a mixed farm and you never knew which way the prices were going to go for livestock or crops. The farmer was careful to log selectively, he wanted this forest to remain productive for the future. We used a horse to haul the logs and the process had a relatively low impact on the environment. For people who have lived on the land for generations, small woodlot management was and is a way of life, and a livelihood.

My detailed introduction to the forest took place under the enthusiastic influence of my mother who was a passionate mushroom hunter. It was with her that I discovered the many species of plants and mushrooms that grew in the forest, and what fabulous meals we could make. Now something about the culture of harvesting and eating wild mushrooms at the time – I knew of nobody, no other family that ate wild mushrooms. People's attitudes to wild mushrooms in Anglo Toronto and rural Ontario could best be described as funghiphobia.

I would like to run a little scenario past you. Say you have a lot of woodlot owners out there plus small mills buying wood from loggers on public lands. Then some of the companies run out of wood and negotiate with the government to get bigger areas to cut, then they buy up smaller companies, including their rights, so they have more fibre, until there are just a few big multinational companies controlling the industry and then they start running out of wood, going broke and shutting down, one by one, all their mills. What kind of a forest industry is left?

Lets jump forward about 20 years and let us imagine Cadbury-Schweppes negotiating to buy the berry harvesting rights for northern Saskatchewan, or Glaxo buying the medicinal tree harvesting rights to the Cape Breton region, or god forbid, Abitibi-Price rising from the dead to buy the mushroom harvesting rights to mushrooms in northern Quebec? This is not a fantasy without precedent.

There are reasons why we have farmer's co-ops, marketing boards, the wheat board, credit unions. Originally they were there to protect small producers from an unregulated and often hostile market. There are reasons why we here to-day need associations and organizations that can develop policies on non-timber forest products.

Before speaking about a policy for non-timber forest products or alternative forest products, I would like to spend a moment to look at some of the historical background of forest policy in Canada, specifically Ontario.

In Canada, forest policy for the last two or three hundred years has been, to a large extent, based on greed. Author Jamie Swift's book written in 1983 on forest policy or the lack thereof, was called 'Cut and Run: The Assault on Canada's Forests', and that pretty much says it all. When it was obvious that large clear-cuts in B.C. were visible to astronauts in orbit around the planet, public concern began to mobilize. In Ontario in the 1980s, it was the destruction of one of the last old growth forests near Temagami, and the resulting public protests that hit the press. Industry at the time called foul, they needed these trees because they were old and needed to be felled and coincidentally they were running out of old growth trees for their mill. Others in the forest industry were still trying to make the argument for clear-cutting the boreal forests as far north as possible. At the same time pulp and paper mills were coming under fire for the pollution of northern waterways. It was clear that the forest products industry felt they owned the woods and resented outside interference in their turf.

Up to this point, the forest industry had been focused on fighting the creation of parks that might limit their control over the resource. Ken Greaves of the Ontario Forest Industries Association addressed a group of northern Ontario municipalities in 1981 arguing against "single purpose withdrawals for uses such as wilderness". He followed this comment with "If we cannot make money, then the forest isn't worth anything."

The sheer scope of forests being felled at this time boggles the mind. The giant Great Lakes Forest Products complex in Thunder Bay alone, was processing 200 square miles of boreal forest every year. Unfortunately, jobs (even unsustainable ones), corporate profits and balance of payments trumped almost all environmental concerns, and the long-term health of communities. As long as government was getting a piece of the action, it was going along for the ride.

Up until the 1980s, much of forest policy was written by and for the forest industry with some minor tinkering by government. However governments were now coming under fire in the large urban areas where a voting public could be influential.

The public concerns articulated at the time were that we needed to protect these

disappearing forests for posterity, for future generations, for wildlife, for science, for their intrinsic beauty. Of course these people were called environmentalists as if that were a dirty word, or tree huggers and sentimentalists. In between were the loggers, sawmill workers and paper workers (many of whom also considered themselves environmentalists) whose communities, often single industry towns, depended on the forests for their livelihoods.

The answer to this crisis in Ontario was to create a Class Environmental Assessment on Forestry. Hearings were organized in many parts of the province. Although the process was thorough, and the final report came out with many recommendations that answered many 'stakeholders' concerns, in itself it was unable to create the conditions for long-term sustainable forestry. Indeed, we need only look at the collapse of the forest industry today to see that even with the best intentions, solutions for a diminishing resource need more than policies written by Environment Assessment processes or Royal Commissions. Governments can accept the findings and recommendations but often it is in the implementation where things can become disappointing.

The problem with governments is that they are elected, on average, for a period of 4 to 5 years. And if they can keep the electorate and the press happy, and if they have a weak opposition, they can get re-elected for another 4 or 5 years. Policies written by one government can be rewritten by the next. Programmes started and funded by one government can be cancelled by the next. Forests, on the other hand, need often 3 to 4 generations to grow.

I find it odd that forest policy in the past did not address the importance of resources, other than the trees that are found in our forests, but I understand why. That's because the resource was controlled by one industry. Perhaps we should be labeling our interests in mushrooms as part of the new comprehensive forest policy, rather than using the negative 'non-timber' forest product.

In the last few years, we have been hearing about non-timber forest products as if this was a new idea. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are of course everything else that lives or grows in the forests and surrounding areas. Indigenous peoples have been living on NTFPs for thousands of years. Many of the forest communities across Canada are populated by Indigenous people, the people who once made their living as loggers, papermakers and mill workers and small-scale tourism operators.

If we define community as all the people in a community, how do we hear all their voices? Only a few decades ago, community input in the north was often represented by the local mill owners and managers, the Chamber of Commerce, possibly a bank manager, occasionally followed by a few 'cranks' such as the lone environmentalist, maybe a tourist outfitter threatened by clear-cuts, possibly the union local in the plant and possibly the local First Nations community offended by the rape and pillage approach to their land.

The principle of local community control, I believe, is a good one. But it must encompass more than just local interests. There is a need for standards that go beyond protection of a few species for a few people, or local business interests. Standards must be holistic, realistic and enshrine diverse use. And this is where provincial governments play a key role. Except in certain cases, like the establishment of National Parks or negotiating trade with other countries or the providing of research and development support such as is being offered through the Model Forest programme, the federal government is largely absent from the policy process. To influence the provincial government process, pressure from below is necessary but not sufficient. It is important to know how your provincial government works.

In the 1990s I had the opportunity to work for 3 different cabinet ministers in a newly elected social democratic government, the NDP, in Ontario right at the beginning of an economic crash. After examining the policies and programmes of the just defeated government, my next task was to offer opinion on possible changes to existing policies and programmes. Then, my primary job was to look at what new policies were needed, or suggested or demanded.

As you may be aware, this party had never been elected to form a government before, so it was a bit short on policies. Where there were no policies meant trying to determine what was in the public interest. That was a difficult job. Which part of the public? How do you determine what will benefit most of the public. Were there winners or losers? Or could you satisfy everybody. I also examined how policy was being developed and who was included or excluded in the process. Then, when the process was underway, it meant looking at the budget implications of new or expanded programmes, what other ministry resources (often staff) would be required, what other ministries should or had to be involved and what were the time-lines for implementation. Finally what was needed to assess the programmes once underway.

So you can see that governments don't take quickly to developing new policies and programmes unless they can see good reason and eventually some votes.

What surprised me at the beginning was just how fast the businessmen with briefcases full of briefs started knocking on the Minister's door. Industries, industry associations and large companies know about power, about how to lobby, they know who to talk to, how to influence.

Community groups, whether it was local social-action church groups, groups representing the poor, environmental groups, union locals, nurses, teachers – in short all those who had elected this government were overjoyed that their people were now the government, so they went back to their own lives and waited for change. These groups, particularly in northern and rural areas, had little to no experience in how to lobby. And the new government had little idea on how to get input from the communities that elected them. Engaging with the public in a thoughtful, thorough and meaningful way became a priority.

I would like to talk about how I think we can engage with provincial governments. I am making generalizations about provincial governments here.

There are two distinct parts of government – the civil service and the elected members. Elected officials may on the surface owe their allegiance to their political party and Premier, but in reality they owe their allegiance to their constituents because that's who elected them and that is whom they will have to face in the next election. If they want to be reelected and most do, they learn to listen and to return phone calls, particularly those who were elected with a slim majority.

With a well-prepared brief and hopefully a good selection of articulate people from the constituency, a meeting with the member in the constituency office on constituency day (usually once a week), you are going to be remembered. Keep in touch with the constituency staff for follow up or information because they are, in most cases, the gatekeepers. They are often under pressure so treat them nicely, even if you find it distasteful.

Cabinet ministers on the other hand usually only listen to their political staff and the deputy, for it is they who sort out the issues in order of importance, and then brief their minister.

Political staff can have a lot of power and influence. Their main job is to protect their minister by keeping them out of trouble and to make the minister look good at public events. Depending on how close the working relationship is between the minister and the deputy, they may or may not act as a screen for information and briefings coming from the bureaucracy. Generally political staff are reachable and it is always worth finding out which one is responsible for the area of your concern. If they are supportive, they can guide you through the process and be there later to answer further questions or explain roadblocks.

Cabinet ministers can be met too, as long as you are willing to book 6 months down the line and have at least a few dignitaries in your group. The short cut here is if you have a group or several groups that reside or have pull, in that ministers riding. In reality most cabinet ministers probably are genuinely interested in creating jobs in a new forest economy, based on environmentally sustainable harvesting. But they may not have any idea about how to do it.

This is where contact with the civil service is important. There are many principled, hard-working, dedicated government employees at all levels that are interested in good policy and effective programmes. The problem is that they are often over worked and may not necessarily have the same knowledge base as you. However, somewhere in the bureaucracy, you will likely find a helpful soul. If they won't champion your issue, they may at least give you a guided tour of who is responsible for what. Developing good relationships with the civil service will help you move forward. But keep in mind that there are many steps up the ladder from reception to researcher to manager to director to assistant deputy minister

to deputy minister.

Articulating possible policy and feeding information into the ministry is also helpful. Articles written in academic journals, newspapers, scientific studies, information on conferences can help stir interest and support arguments.

Since alternative forest products are considered marginal at this time to most provincial governments, we need to explain that this is an industry in its infancy and that it can grow to be a significant part of the forest economy. What we can also do is pull together our research package so that it will impress. For example, FAO documents point out that the estimated value of NTFPs to local economies, often forest communities, is \$120 billion a year. World trade in these products was recently valued at \$11 - \$12 billion. Estimations of the value of these products now harvested in Canada is about \$1 billion. In Sweden 14,000 tonnes of wild berries were harvested in 2000. In Finland 1,100 tonnes of *Boletus edulus* were harvested in 2003, and most was exported. We have the same berries and mushrooms here. We need models, examples from different jurisdictions. We need to provide convincing documentation.

I think everyone who heard the presentation by Fernando Martinez Pena knows what great potential lies in our forests. But keep in mind that probably nobody else does, certainly it is unlikely that many have a grasp of the potential. So one of our key levers in getting attention is broadcasting what is happening in other countries such as Spain. What was the figure? 93 million euros worth of mushrooms from just part of Spain? That kind of case study, combined with information, data on what we have growing here will get interest in any minister's office. Governments have priorities and an agenda. What we have to do is explain how it fits into that priority or agenda.

If we are to develop policies that will ensure sustainable, not sustained, harvesting, then we must look to the forest communities to provide the leadership. Communities have the most to gain by protecting these resources. They are more likely to be able to foster a stewardship attitude so that their resources continue to flourish. However, forest communities are often restricted to enacting policies at the local level with municipal by-laws or with zoning.

Forest communities have little influence in the provincial legislature because they elect very few representatives. So this is where associations, environmental groups, conservation groups and naturalist organizations can have an impact in urban areas. There is strength in numbers and this is where building alliances is essential in taking a good idea and getting it placed on an agenda. The other lever that works well is the media. Journalists love this stuff. They love the environment, love local indigenous wild foods, love the wilderness. What they want are the stories and they want to get out there and see it.

Engaging with communities is often a lot easier and rewarding. People may be

skeptical of what you are talking about but at least they like to listen and they also like to be heard. This summer and fall I had the opportunity to work with a small group looking at NTFPs in James Bay. Part of our work was recruiting members of the Cree community to train as Matsutake harvesters. Most people on the phone were very polite. But in the restaurant, several broke into laughter at the idea. Comments like 'those are caribou food. Who is going to buy those?' It took a good month of watching us work before they started coming around and asking questions, giving suggestions as to where to find some and of course, asking about prices. Engaging with communities, if you are from the outside, comes from talking, talking to everybody and listening carefully. I have found in quite a few communities that they just don't believe that you will hand over the money if they pick the berries. And when you do, things start to move smoothly. And trust is built over time.

The damage to many forest communities because of the collapse of the forest industry is quite staggering. Forest industries have often been the largest employers in many of these communities and there is nothing substantive to take their place. So people in many communities are worried about how to live after the EI runs out. Do they have to move south? Can they get anything for their house? What good are their skills?

For us to go to many communities and talk about harvesting mushrooms that they know little about, we do have a slight problem with credibility. We need to help communities learn about their resources and to build capacity. We also need to be realistic with people's hopes. A paperworker who was making \$50,000 a year or more in the mill needs to know that there is a limit to how much people will pay for wild blueberries. There may be many valuable foods in their community but it will take a while to learn how to harvest and sell them. Policies guaranteeing minimum pricing helps stabilize the lives of people in these communities. Fair trade pricing helps even more.

In Aboriginal communities, on Aboriginal lands, policies must be must be worked out that respect their rights and their cultural beliefs. Some foods cannot be harvested and sold as commodities. Permission is needed to harvest in their territories. Anything else is referred to in UN documents as biopiracy. It is essential that they are not just at the table but that they are at the head of the table.

We have an important obligation that goes with our knowledge. As the world population staggers to new levels and we increasingly devour the earth's resources, empty our oceans and look at diminishing food stocks, we have to step back and ask ourselves some questions. Do we want our new appreciation

of all the wonderful edible things in the forest to turn into a 'green' gold rush?
How can we ensure that a new forest industry is not driven by greed as has
marked the rise and fall of the fishing and traditional forest industries?
How can we empower people in local communities to be able to be good
stewards of the forests?

Programme Blurb

Public policy is often assumed to represent the public interest. Defining what is in the public interest can be a challenge as important players are frequently left out of the policy development process, particularly when it comes to our forests. With high fuel and food costs on the horizon, and the pressure of future food scarcity, it is important to develop public policy that recognizes the need for the sustainable use of NTFPs, their importance to local economies and the benefits of community driven policy.