

# Experiencing Community Forestry: A Co-op Student's Account of Cortes Island's First Year of Operations

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Zoltan Mityok

Student no. 11846128

Bsc. Natural Resources Conservation

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## INTRODUCTION

As with all experiences in life, reflecting back on past accomplishments and challenges relating to professional employment is an opportunity to learn from the past, gain insight to use for the future, and potentially share those insights with others. It cannot be truer for contemporary life, where many people currently find themselves transitioning through many different professions and fields of study throughout their careers. Consequently, what many modern individuals may be finding more valuable than specific technical skills learned are the transcendent qualities that may grow and develop during a work term. These qualities, or transferable skills, include confidence, adaptability, and sociability. As a co-op student facing these volatile times in our society, it has been a privilege to try my hand at professional forestry work with the newly licensed community forest on Cortes Island, British Columbia. Throughout my work term I have had the opportunity to acquire new and hone old technical skills and knowledge, while improving the more transferrable skills previously mentioned. While outlining the organization's structure, values and goals, individual and collective responsibilities, my academic and professional goals will be related to each aspect, and how these different aspects have greater prepared me for the professional world at large.

The nature of the subject of this report can be said to be experiential, a broad overview of the technical work done by all those involved confined to the experiences accounted by one co-op student. It is for this reason that the themes of personal growth and transferrable skills are highlighted, to ensure that the intended audience of such a report is clear: other co-op students inclined to learn about community forestry from the stories and observations of their peers.

Before this summer of 2015, I have already had a great deal of experience working with trees and forests as an assistant arborist, an employee of the U.S.D.A. in Wyoming, USA, and

as an intern in Mackenzie, B.C. for a large land management consulting company. Therefore, I can say with confidence that working for the Cortes Community Forest General Partnership (CCFGP) this summer has been a co-op work term experience like no other. While the aforementioned work experiences were exciting, nothing can be more rewarding than being a part of a project newly formed, with so much yet to do and investigate; requiring particularly innovative thought and effort to help the project succeed.

I and my fellow co-op student were graciously welcomed by the CCFGP in a manner of gratitude and hospitality that surely carried the spirit of a people who believe in community. The appreciation of our work and presence was exceptional. All facets and phases of the project – from preliminary planning to harvesting to post-harvest sampling and surveys – were conducted by people who were keenly aware of our position as co-op students, and therefore have made every effort to provide training, background knowledge, and inclusion in their respective tasks. No co-op work term has encompassed such a wide exposure to different tasks and fields of expertise. I have worked closely with and have been a part of many plans and discussions with registered professional foresters, fallers, waste survey technicians, scalers, engineers, biologists, mill owners/operators and brokers. Such a list of professionals is not even exhaustive!

In summary, this co-op work experience has been a humbly rare and phenomenal opportunity that I hope I have taken full advantage of this summer, by rising to the occasion when facing challenges, welcoming the high level of independence and responsibility with enthusiasm, and making many friends and connections along the way.

## COMMUNITY FOREST OVERVIEW

The Cortes Island community has a noteworthy history of opposing logging from larger-scale companies by self-organizing in effective and innovative ways, yet the island also has facilitated local forestry operations for generations, as evidenced in the contemporary landscape (Bullock & Hanna, 2012). In the spirit of the island's culture of independence and self-reliance, the work to collaborate and create a community forest began as early as the 1990's. Preliminary management plans, memorandum's between indigenous and non-native community members, and the creation of the Cortes Ecoforestry Society were some of the moves made during this time, culminating into what is now the Community Forest Agreement (CFA) held in equal partnership between the Klahoose First Nation and the Cortes Community Forest Co-op ("About", n.d., para. 1-7).

The CCFGP is the legal entity comprised of the Co-op and the Klahoose Forestry No. 2 Ltd Partnership, with membership including more than 200 islanders represented by an executive board of 6 directors ("Cortes Community Forest Cooperative", n.d., para. 1-3). In addition to board members and residents of Cortes, a general manager for the community forest's operations is a necessary part of the cooperative's structure. The general manager provides the vital role of retaining cohesive relations between technicians, contract specialists, community and board members.

The efforts made by the people of Cortes Island to organize and apply for a community forest license led to the Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO) Minister Steve Thompson granting such a tenure in September of 2013 (Brennan, 2013). An annual allowable cut (AAC) of 16,000 cubic metres was applied to a 3,869 hectare area, where the CCFGP may now act upon their vision, their values, and their goals, as quoted from their

website:

“The stewardship and use of forests and forest lands in a way, and at a rate, that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfill, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic and social functions, at local, national, and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems.” (“About”, n.d., para. 8).

Before working for CCFGP, I was already deeply interested in community forestry, taking the initiative to register for courses focusing on the subject at UBC. Consequently, it is no surprise that even in the earliest days of joining the co-op program, I have expressed my ambitions to my co-op coordinator about finding work with a community forest. If previous studies along with recent and personal history have been any guide, community forests across Canada are much more difficult to find employment with compared to larger-scale forestry companies. After learning more and more about the history of Cortes Island’s CFA, I believe the degree of time and effort put in to creating community forests indicates how such a form of governance is indeed challenging, and in some cases unprecedented. Therefore, community forests have both the potential to be innovative, inspiring and unifying, as well as the liability to make mistakes and become divisive. Such novelty and larger stakeholder numbers and diversity certainly generate a degree of risk in a project, and for that I have the deepest respect for those who have ventured into this form of governance.

## DIVISION OVERVIEW

Within the cyclical chain of forestry operations, the segment of the chain which my division was most involved with was initial field data gathering and reconnaissance.

Where the need for contract specialists arises, the CCFGP staff and operations are managed flexibly enough to locate, accommodate and utilize the skills of these different specialists who may have very different professional backgrounds. Everything from biologists, heavy machine operators, brokers and scalers were involved with the summer operations of the CCFGP.

Because the community forest is quite new – its first season of operations being the summer of 2015 – all current employees were given ample opportunity to be a part of all the different tasks associated with multiphase project development and management. It can be said therefore that my and all the CCFGP staff's division was essentially within the forest operations sector, mainly reconnaissance, timber extraction and development as well as environmental assessment. Reports for specified portions of the community forest area and maps indicating timber quality and other land features were the final deliverables for the work conducted. A database was developed to be honed and updated for years to come, and community consultation and meetings remain a vital part of the decision making process where any and all people involved with the community forest are obliged to be a part of.

The mandate remains for the CCFGP: to have an Eco-system Based Approach to keep the forest living and growing, generate jobs and revenue for and within the community, and keep unified and balanced between two cultures working together in equal partnership (“About”, n.d., para. 9-11).

This mandate has been challenging for me to reflect on. I believe that Cortes Island is a

community that reflects and is a microcosm of all that western Canadian society as a whole has come to value, and struggles to balance. Monetary value has its place as a significant priority, and the CCFGP strives to create revenue for the community as project plans are made as efficient as possible, with all safety, environmental and quality standards being considered and met. Valuing sustainability – that jobs and ecosystems may continue to thrive in the future – and environmental stewardship is certainly something I witnessed as being incorporated in decisions and operational practices.

At this point, I would say that my work experience was eye-opening. After gradually learning how CCFGP operates, the abstract academic notions of managing land for sustainability as well as profit became concrete challenges that you would observe staff and managers negotiate with on a daily basis. My professional goal of understanding the forestry sector more objectively was accomplished, and this new understanding has brought about a greater degree of wisdom, tolerance of others opinions, and maturity in me. In this way my own experience on Cortes Island has been extremely positive, my only concern being whether Canadians and islanders of Cortes will continue to demand a high level of environmental stewardship without sacrificing an acceptable degree of competitiveness and prosperity determined by the people, and will that be enough to curb the trend of environmental degradation and declining employment opportunities.



## POSITION OVERVIEW

On a day to day basis, my central task was assisting in all aspects of forestry development planning, including: preliminary field reconnaissance, resource inventory mapping, road and cutblock layout, total chance planning, stream and water feature surveys, GIS mapping, plantability surveys and community consultations. Based on the particular concerns of community members, from biologists to local sawmill owners to concerned citizens, additional tasks would be required such as mapping trails, surveying chanterelle mushroom patches, and noting any and all wildlife sightings of significance. I found that working for a community forest instills a greater sensitivity to diverse opinions and priorities, as the community was less concerned with immediate monetary gains and more focused on building a local economy. Such visions for the future require progressive, entrepreneurial and optimistic individuals, and they have inspired my work to be more than work; I felt rather like a fellow collaborator in a new and adventurous project, which is a gratifying feeling indeed.

I was designated as a Forest Technician/Assistant Engineer, meant to assist in all aspects of multiphase project development using the Project Management Approach and total chance planning, methods that offer flexibility when designing cutblocks and other forestry features. Also, safety meetings were conducted as a discussion, where anyone may bring up concerns and ideas for improvements.

The degree of technical training, independence and performance expectations has truly been character building for me. Multiphase project development and management includes layout design, where I was made to think on my feet and judge where boundary lines should be placed based on species composition, proximity to streams, and terrain. Timber typing and the categorization of high to low potential areas for harvest introduced me to all the knowledge required to judge the quality of a stand of trees. Ecological assessments related to my own

studies of the BEC system and soil physiology as a conservation student which was rewardingly relevant. My 'bush sense' vastly improved as the physical work made me fit, the need to orientate myself made me focused and aware of my surroundings, and the ever-changing technical challenges and problems helped my problem-solving skills greatly. I learned all the radio, safety, vehicular and sampling protocols that gave me a self-reliance and confidence that I have continued to build upon in each of my co-op experiences. Lastly, the challenges faced and overcome with others allowed me to relate and bond with my peers, making interpersonal skill an enjoyable aspect to improve upon.

With regard to any cons, I believe it is fair to say that the first year of the community forest's operations inherently came with a degree of trial and error. Many aspects of forestry operations were challenged by locals, unique requests and conditions were adhered to by the CCFGP that required flexibility, openness, experimentation and negotiation. On a day-to-day basis, the only disadvantage that this periodic climate of uncertainty created was that some tasks and projects simply required revision or repealing. On the whole however, this sensation of adventurous frontier work and novel governance was the most enjoyable aspect of my work term.

My bachelor program in conservation required that I attend a number of forestry courses in the first few years, which have instilled in me an interest in tree biology, forest ecology and forest land management issues ever since. Therefore, it was crucial to have this experience with CCFGP, as my interest in conservation continues to be the depleting forest resource base and to understand the issue from as many perspectives and experiences possible. Working for a community forest as socially responsible as the CCFGP has made me appreciate the situation that kind and decent Canadians face working in all resource sectors, while my own resolve to work with those focused on environmental stewardship remains strong.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDENTS

After being an integral part of Cortes Island's very first year of community forest operations, there is no doubt that the educational and professional experiences gained has improved a vast array of my transferable skills such as leadership, as well as my technical skills including report writing, map producing and field assessments. My interest in community forestry has done nothing but increase during this work term. Now having worked with a larger industrial forestry company as well as a community forest, I can appreciate the differences between the two methods of organization even more so. The fact that I have been present for the CCFGPs beginning has also evoked within me an appreciable degree of attachment, curiosity and investment in the community forests future. My hope is that the CCFGP continues to succeed and gain traction in the years to come, perhaps acting as an influential model for other communities to follow as an alternative way of doing forestry.

“Things turn out best for those who make the best out of the way things turn out.”

– John Wooden

I first heard that quote from a previous co-op work term, from my supervisor in fact. I think it rings true now more than ever, which is why I focus on the more transferrable skills that I have bettered on Cortes Island. For the changing world that we live in, for the uncertain futures we face, I would advise future students not to stress overmuch if they feel they haven't learned the appropriate technical skills of forestry or conservation just yet. In time, such skills and knowledge can be acquired. However, if one learns early to be positive, resilient, confident, and unafraid of nature or uncertainty, then all manner of opportunities to receive training, knowledge and/or skills will be made available to you.

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