

## **Presentation to the PEI Public Forest Council**

Charlottetown  
15 February 2005

Dr Irene Novaczek, Director  
Institute of Island Studies UPEI

Thank you for this opportunity to present feedback to the Public Forest Council on the discussion paper, *Creating a Vision for the Future*.

At the Institute of Island Studies we are interested in the unique features of islands and what this means for the management of natural resources. Prince Edward Island shares a common challenge with other small islands around the world: that of conserving and managing forests and soils on a land base that is, by definition, limited and vulnerable. In our case, we have a greatly diminished forest resource when compared to the virgin Acadian forest that clothed the island prior to European settlement. Our forests are diminished not only in quantity but also in quality. Yet, on a small island, forest integrity is especially critical for conservation of clean and abundant groundwater, for control of soil erosion, maintaining air quality, ameliorating local climate, supporting wildlife including wild edible and medicinal plants, enhancing the landscape and for many other physical and spiritual values that are integral to the identity and the quality of life of islanders.

In meeting the challenge of maintaining healthy forests, Prince Edward Island has certain advantages. As a small jurisdiction nested within a larger federation we have access to funds and technical support from a federal government. Being a coherent jurisdiction at the provincial level, our government has potential to coordinate land use planning for the entire island, and our relatively small population means that we all have the potential to participate in and influence municipal and provincial policy development. Islanders also have a tradition of community volunteer activity, including very valuable volunteer work on forest restoration in our riparian zones.

The Institute of Island Studies has a mandate to facilitate the development of progressive public policy. We have been interested in forest policy on PEI for many years. In 2001, the Institute published a document that laid out the history of forests and forestry on PEI and flagged a number of key issues of the day under the following three categories: Sustainability, Role of the Landowner, and the Role of Government. I see that the same themes re-emerge as common threads running through the six critical issues that are now on the table for discussion.

When we developed the forests background document in 2001, we drew from the recommendations of the Round Table on Resource Land Use and critiqued their analysis and recommendations, especially their rejection of tax policy as a tool for forest conservation. It seemed to us at that time that taxation could indeed be a useful tool for

encouraging better forest management. In addition, there was an especially critical need to develop better government-landowner relations. It is gratifying to see in the history presented in this 2005 document, that landowner-government relations has been a focus for ongoing work. However, it is also clear, judging from the recent rapid clearcutting of forests on PEI, that the process of relationship-building and collaborative management for long term sustainability needs even more effort.

In addition to publishing a background document, the Institute of Island Studies in 2001 facilitated a public forum which brought together many of the key players in forest conservation and management, to discuss and debate various strategies for advancing public policy related to forests. The key themes drawn from the various presentations to the forum were : the need for education; and the need to revamp forestry approaches and practices on PEI. In the area of education, some speakers called for the greater education of the general public on the role, importance and nature of forests; others called for forestry-related curriculum in the school system; some spoke of the need for education within the forestry sector, especially for landowners wanting to develop more eco-friendly management strategies. Finally, it was noted that PEI lacked an adequate pool of skilled and educated forestry workers. Although some progress seems to have been made, much more remains to be done in the area of education, and this is flagged by the Public Forest Council. I would urge the council to strongly recommend collaborative action by the various departments that have responsibility for forested lands and for education, to work with municipalities, school boards, tertiary institutions, woodlot owners' associations and environmental NGOs to address these varied education needs.

With respect to forestry practices, it was noted in 2001 that PEI is lagging behind in terms of adopting modern approaches and practices. Some of the harvesting practices used by forest contractors were described as deplorable. Clearcutting was seen as an overused, inappropriate and unnecessary approach, given that better alternatives were available. Reforestation that focused on development of even-aged softwood plantations was also widely rejected; much more ecologically appropriate approaches are necessary to restore ecological integrity and to diversify potential forest products. In addition, participants pointed to fragmented leadership on forest policy, exclusionary and non-transparent government process, and exclusion of concerned citizens outside of the industry from the policy debate and decision-making process. Through lack of care and respect, a pattern had been established of distrust, conflict and rejection of responsibility for degraded forests. Ultimately, the result has been lip service to sustainable forestry against a background of continued clearcutting, intensive application of pesticides and plantation development.

The key issues of concern in 2001 are amply reflected in the six key issues outlined by the Public Forest Council; indeed they have not only been captured but thoughtfully presented in very constructive ways. In 2001, we concluded that islanders need to learn from our past, admit our mistakes and move on. We also need to accept our inherent limitations, in that we should not be trying to compete on price with mainland jurisdictions that can offer much greater volumes of low priced, raw wood. Instead, we need to identify and build upon the many strengths and potentialities inherent in our

unique brand of small islandness. We should look for leadership not only from government but also from those landowners and organizations who are already piloting new and more sustainable approaches to forest management. This represents a break from island tradition that is bound to meet resistance from people who simply want to continue doing what they have always done because that seems most easy and comfortable. This attitude can be found not only among contractors and landowners but, as was pointed out in the 2001 public forum, also among government employees working in forestry. Again, the result is lip service to new approaches against a background of business as usual. Collectively, we must find the will to change not only our minds but our actions.

It is safe to say that, on this and any island, public forest land is a critical resource that must be carefully conserved and, where necessary, remediated and restored. In 2001, the Province undertook to develop a new, broadly based vision for forest management that recognizes values other than timber, pulp and firewood. This vision is now being brought into reality through the current public process. Public land should provide examples of optimal, responsible management that serves the needs of all islanders – not just humans but all species who share this limited space. Efforts to purchase and conserve intact forest land, especially unploughed lands, is an appropriate role for government provided that covenants are placed on such lands to prevent them ever being clearcut or otherwise degraded. In purchasing land, the government should be strategic, maximizing the return on investment by purchasing land that allows for development of contiguous wildlife friendly areas. This is particularly needed in central PEI where forested land is relatively scarce and generally degraded. Research on the minimum size requirement for such wildlife habitats in our particular context is required.

However, it is not enough for government to act. The role of individual landowners is critically important owing to the relatively small proportion of land that is publicly owned. In 2001, the Province of PEI expressed an intent to work with and provide support to landowners in developing woodlot management plans. At that time it was noted that the localization of ownership of forest land in many private hands makes it necessary to develop a highly participative model of forest management. Private ownership was also acknowledged as a potential strength. For example, it is a form of insurance against widespread and rapid adoption of potentially unsuitable new technologies.

A participatory approach is certainly required to engage private landowners in the process of conserving and developing contiguous stretches of rich forest habitat. This task will also require public education. Islanders need to understand the great value of investing tax dollars to develop an integrated system of protected and restored forests. Where individuals are invited to sell productive land to government or to a land trust, or put their own land under covenant so as to preserve its forest values, publicly funded incentives will sometimes be necessary, and tax shifts will not always be revenue neutral. In order for forests to be conserved and managed to provide ecological services for the long term public good, we all need to support the spending of tax dollars where that is needed to assist landowners to develop ecologically sound management methods. PEI

landowners and their land will benefit from tax relief for old growth forest and for woodlots that are being restored for the broader public good, that is to say, for provision of ecological services. PEI would also benefit from increased incentives to plant diverse native species; to restore and expand agricultural hedgerows as a form of wildlife corridor linking forested areas; and to promote horse logging and other selective harvesting approaches. Government assistance may be needed to train artisans and establish markets for diverse, sustainably harvested and value-added wood products; and for investment in research into non-timber forest products.

Critically important is to imbue in young people a respect for forests and a desire to engage in the work of forest conservation, management and restoration. We currently face a shortage of skilled labour for forestry. There is something wrong with an education system that teaches students to see the skilled labour involved in fisheries, agriculture and forestry as low class or menial. There is also something very wrong with a society that fails to value and reward the essential work that secures clean air, water and food to fulfill our basic needs. Reversing these modern trends is a huge challenge, and reforming our education system will be a key element in the process.

Those of us who do not have the privilege of owning forested land nevertheless have important roles to play. For example, when we purchase wood, we can ask for products that are cut and milled locally, and look for certified wood coming from sustainably harvested trees – and not grumble about the added expense but accept it as a small price to pay for the many benefits we gain from well managed, productive forests. We can also lead future generations by example. Planting trees on arbour day, restoring hedgerows with diverse native trees and shrubs, taking children out to experience old growth forests, joining or supporting our local watershed enhancement groups – these are some of the many direct actions individuals can take. Governments can tap into citizen power for forest restoration by promoting such activities and by increasing the support for the work of land trusts and watershed restoration groups.

Apart from the need to reorganize societal priorities, which is a long-term and complex challenge, there are other, practical, short-term steps that can be undertaken by government and civil society working together. Concrete action will often require collaboration among government departments and with civil society. Integrated land use planning and zoning in rural and urban jurisdictions is essential to avoid the gradual gnawing away of woodlands by urban sprawl and uncontrolled settlement in unincorporated areas. The province needs to ask itself: do we have the optimal governance structures and processes in place to facilitate this essential collaboration?

In addition to providing carefully designed incentives, it is important for governments to remove any existing incentives for less desirable practices. For example, industry should no longer be rewarded for planting even-aged monocultures of non-native softwoods. Tax breaks or incentives that enable the use of pesticides on forest land should be abolished, as should any incentives that promote the use of large scale mechanical harvesters. Certification systems must be approached with care, lest they serve only to greenwash poor practices. However, establishment of carefully selected and appropriate

forest product certification systems does have potential to provide a market pull and increased profit margin for sustainably produced forest products. The government should also consider the merits of preserving forest values, especially for tourism and ecological services, by banning the introduction of any genetically modified woodland species.

In closing, I would like to commend the Public Forest Council for their fine work to date and for providing a forum for public input on this critically important issue. The Institute of Island Studies looks forward to working with government and non-governmental organisations to facilitate improvements in interagency collaboration, secure forest industry sustainability, and improve environmental quality and quality of life for Islanders.