

Saving the bears, and the people too

VICTORIA – I had a chance to sit down with representatives of the Central and North Coast First Nations last week to talk about the first year of the new land use plan for their region.

To millions of people around the world, this is a nice story about “saving the Great Bear Rainforest.”

For the rest of us B.C. residents, whether we realize it or not, it's the biggest aboriginal land settlement in the province's history, as well as one of its biggest park dedications. It hands substantial control of an area twice the size of Belgium to remote coastal native communities, and does it without a treaty.

For Art Sterritt of the North Coast First Nations and his Central Coast counterpart, Dallas Smith, it's about one last chance to save their civilization.

B.C.'s latest job creation numbers are impressive, but unfortunately they don't mean much in Sterritt's home town of Hartley Bay, or the people Smith represents in Alert Bay or Bella Bella. While populous areas of B.C. enjoy full employment, and the employment rate for off-reserve aboriginals has increased 5.5 per cent to 58.5 per cent, Central Coast



Tom
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B.C. Views

communities still have unemployment of 70 to 80 per cent. On the North Coast it's worse than that.

Pilot projects are underway for shellfish farms, and low-impact logging, much of it done with helicopters. Log harvesting can extend even into the protected areas, which will continue to be a source of monumental cedar for traditional use as they

have for 10,000 years.

With little fuss, last year the forests ministry issued a log export licence to the Heltsiuk First Nation to help establish a log sort north of Bella Bella that will enable small-scale commercial logging.

The need for jobs is more urgent than the usual gripes over logging, or log exports. The reasons why are vividly set out in a new book called *Dances With Dependency*, by a North Coast aboriginal lawyer named Calvin Helin.

Helin doesn't pull any punches in recounting the history and the current state of aboriginal life in his native B.C. and around North America. He details how aboriginal populations are rising rapidly at a time when the general population is aging. A resource boom centred on northern and western Canada means

the aboriginal workforce is urgently needed. And if aboriginal people don't go to work to support themselves, they and their culture might not be the only thing destroyed. The welfare burden could wreck Canada's economy in the coming years.

Helin says things no non-aboriginal person could get away with. He caustically describes the “Indian industry” and chiefs who have defined their whole mission as extracting welfare money from the Canadian government. After meticulously relating the rise of the Indian Act, residential schools and their corrosive effect on generations of families, he writes:

“A less charitable view of what has happened is that the whole welfare trap and its impacts have made indigenous people fat, slow, lazy and as many youth now argue, stupid. It is not very likely that the current crop of indigenous people could compete with their own vigorous ancestors.”

The book doesn't directly mention B.C.'s new relationship, with millions invested for capacity building, forest tenure agreements and so forth. But it endorses such strategies as the only ones that will work, along with the creation of true property rights and aboriginal governments that encourage entrepreneurial activity instead of trying to run everything themselves.

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OPINIONS

Aboriginal ancestors involved in manufacturing, business

Helin highlights success stories from Osoyoos Indian Band and New Zealand's Maori

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Helin's book is above all a challenge for aboriginal people to recover their pride and self-sufficiency.

It deserves to be widely read by B.C. and local politicians, and by aboriginal leaders as well.

A head for business

Helin objects to the stereotypical image of aboriginal people as being inept at business, an image typified by the story of native leaders who sold most of the city of Victoria to colonial governor James

Douglas for 24 pounds sterling.

His Tsimshian ancestors were sharp fur traders, who were involved in manufacturing and other businesses in the 19th Century.

Modern success stories such as the Osoyoos Indian Band's on-reserve winery and other businesses are detailed, as are U.S. economic successes (without casinos) and the Maori experience in New Zealand.

Despite a wealth of technical detail and hundreds of footnotes, the book is engaging and beautifully illustrated. Explaining his choice of terminology, Helin recounts how his people came to be

known as "Indians" because Columbus got lost.

"The running joke is that we should be thankful he wasn't looking for Turkey."

The big story

Agriculture and Lands Minister Pat Bell noted that when it was announced a year ago, the Great Bear Rainforest land deal was the talk of New York, Los Angeles and European cities.

He said he received an e-mail from then-tourism minister Olga Ilich, who was in Turin, Italy for the Olympics when the agreement was unveiled.

"She said, I don't know what you just did, but you took the Olympics off the international media for the last 24 hours."

When he got home to Prince George, "the story was on page five and it was maybe 80 words."

Sterritt and Haida chief Guujaw have been invited to the South Pacific island of Palau to speak to indigenous leaders about the success of their project, and how this aboriginal-ecological revolution can be accomplished elsewhere.

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