

Muskoka forest wins global kudos

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PARRY SOUND - The French-Severn is the largest public forest in North America to meet tough international standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council. Trees cut from this

forest can be sold to environmentally sensitive companies thanks to the careful removal of specific trees - leaving the forest to grow and regenerate naturally, writes Kate Harries. [\[Full Story\]](#)



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French-Severn forest wins prestigious designation

KATE HARRIES
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PARRY SOUND—Every tree is considered — for its commercial value, for its parenting potential, for the shelter it provides and even for its sheer beauty.

"These guys aren't much now, but one of these years they'll be wonderful trees," says Ken Webb, senior technician with Westwind Forest Stewardship, contemplating a stand of yellow birch in a woodlot just off Highway 69 south of Parry Sound.

They'll stay. Some of the maples that stretch 20 metres up around them will be thinned out. It's part of a process that has made the French-Severn the largest public forest in North America to meet tough international standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council. Trees cut from this forest can be sold to environmentally sensitive companies.

"It's a huge deal," says Tom Clark, an ecological consultant and member of the board of Westwind, a non-profit firm that manages the crown land under a licence from the Ontario government.

"It puts what we're doing into an international context."

Careful removal of specific trees leaves a forest that will grow and regenerate naturally and provides a continuum of wildlife habitat. In modern forestry, it's a new approach, the polar opposite of a clearcut, which is how most of Ontario's forests are harvested — 88 per cent according to a report by two environmental groups. Clearcuts leave the land vulnerable to erosion, reduce the range for wildlife and alter the species composition of the forest.

The Forest Stewardship Council was set up in 1993, following a meeting in Toronto sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund that was a response to the degradation of tropical forests and the need to identify wood from well-managed forests.

Since then, the organization that is now headquartered in Mexico has certified more than 27 million hectares in over 54 countries.

It took four years for Westwind to achieve the prestigious designation for the French-Severn forest, which comprises 855,000 hectares of crown land.

Westwind was born out of the chaos of the mid-1990s, when the natural resources ministry was cutting staff and turning over responsibility for publicly owned lands — where 90 per cent of forestry in Ontario occurs — to the forestry industry. The logical licence holder here was forestry giant Tembec, which harvests about 40 per cent of the French-Severn.

But the uniqueness of this forest is that much of it is a cherished backdrop to a cottage country landscape.

The forest is a patchwork of crown land covering about half of the Parry Sound-Muskoka area. That prompted some ministry staff members to come up with another plan.

Tembec, along with about 20 smaller forest companies, became a partner in a new, non-profit company, and FSC certification became a goal around which cottagers, environmentalists and industry could find common ground.

Now Westwind, with a staff of seven people, manages the forest, oversees community liaison and ensures that logging is done according to local plans and provincial rules

One of the ministry staffers, Chris McDonell, works for Tembec and chairs the Canadian arm of the Forest Stewardship Council. Certification makes good business sense, he believes. "It puts us in the forefront of being able to demonstrate to consumers that we practice responsible forestry."

The FSC seal of approval, stamped on flooring, furniture or paper, means that a rigorous audit has verified high standards of both environmental protection — avoiding chemical pest controls and promoting native species — and social responsibility, involving local stakeholders, including aboriginal groups.

The French-Severn forest is a patchwork of publicly owned land that covers about half of the area bordered north and south by the two rivers it is named after, and by Georgian Bay to the west and Algonquin Park to the east.

Westwind works with eight First Nations as well as many other groups who use or care about crown land — hunters, anglers, snowmobilers, cottagers.

In the forest, Webb has come across a mature, seed-bearing cherry. "I want more cherry here," he says. "Cherry's funny, the seed can sit for 20 years without germinating ... Sugar maple is so prolific it'll just keep rolling in."

The young maples surrounding the parent tree are marked for removal. When they're gone, the increased light from the opened canopy will bring up a host of cherry seedlings. Other values enter the equation. A flourishing American beech is riddled with a line of pileated woodpecker cavities. "Those are the ones I like," Webb says, explaining: "A living cavity tree is better than a dead one. It lasts longer." The management plan calls for six cavity trees a hectare.

Global positioning systems and computers have revolutionized forest management. Webb can punch in instructions for a crew to take out some under-growth to give cherry seedlings a better chance, or mark the location of a red-shouldered hawk's nest so a protective reserve of trees is left around it.

The growing popularity of commodities like organic vegetables and fair-trade coffee demonstrates that consumers are beginning to factor in ethical issues as well as price when deciding what to buy.

But when it comes to wood products, the increased level of consciousness is more prevalent in Europe, says Hans Djurberg, forestry expert with Ikea, one of the largest home-furnishing retailers in the world.

Consumers here aren't very aware of these issues, he believes. That means that "it is the responsibility of the retailer to deal with these issues on behalf of consumers."

The furniture company requires its wood to come from well-managed, preferably certified forests, he says. It purchases very little from North and South American sources. The Westwind story is an encouraging sign, Djurberg says. "I know they're one of the pioneers when it comes to FSC certification in North America." He also praises Tembec for breaking new ground with its commitment to FSC.

Tembec continues to blaze a trail.

It signed an agreement with the World Wildlife Fund that commits it to seek FSC certification by the year 2005 for 13 million acres of forest managed by the company in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia — equivalent to about half the area that's been certified so far worldwide.

Webb, a senior technician with Westwind, has been a tree-marker for 30 years and now trains others in the knowledge-intensive task of deciding what should be harvested.

In 1976, as a natural resources ministry tree-marker, Webb selected what would be harvested, what would be left to produce seed, where to open up the canopy to promote regeneration, where to leave cavity trees for wildlife habitat.

A quarter of a century later, he likes what he sees — a healthy forest.

"For the most I feel like I did the right thing," he says.

"Up in here we've got a lot of density and a lot of quality, some yellow birch down there, black cherry here, red oak up there.

"We've got some good quality young stems coming up."