
British Columbia's Forests and Society: An Overview

It seems clear beyond possibility of argument that any given generation of men can have only a lease, not ownership, of the earth; and one essential term of the lease is that the earth be handed on to the next generation with unimpaired potentialities.

- Roderick Haig-Brown
(British Columbia conservationist and winner of a Governor General's Award. *Measure of the Year*, 1950. Toronto: Collins)

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The Forests

At 95 million hectares, British Columbia is larger than any European country except Russia, about four times the size of the United Kingdom, and larger than the combined areas of the states of Washington, Oregon and California.

About two-thirds of the province is forested, as shown in Figure 3. This makes the province, on a global scale, as important as many forest nations.

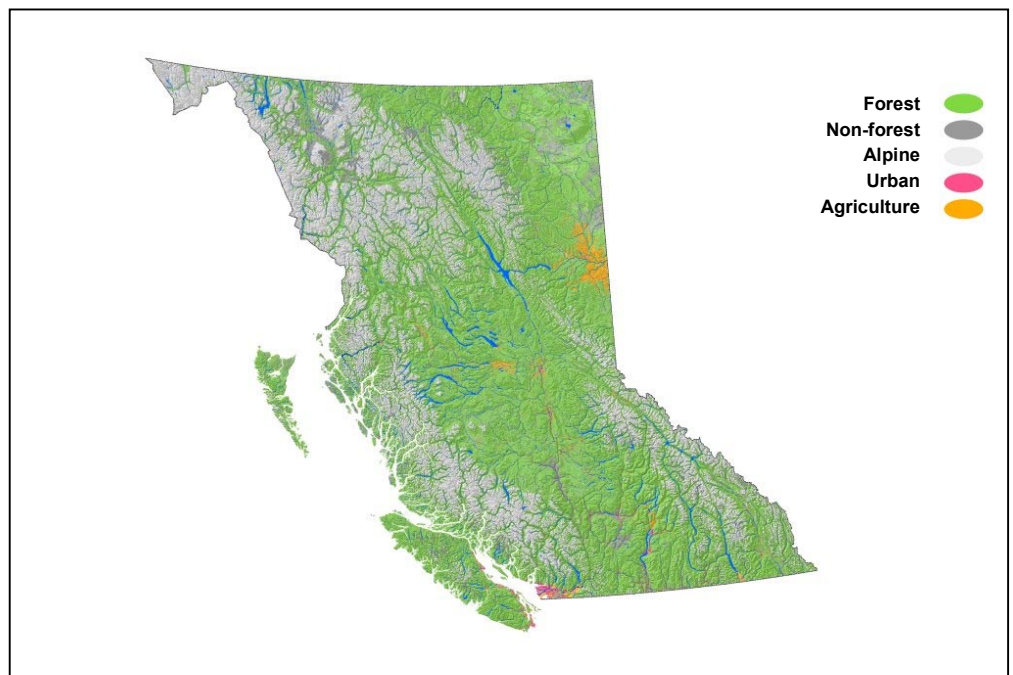


FIGURE 3. Forest land of British Columbia, 2000.

British Columbia is ecologically diverse

The province's mountainous terrain creates a range of distinct climatic zones. Along the Pacific coast, temperatures are mild and rainfall is abundant. The interior plateau, lying in the rain shadow of the Coast Mountains, has a dry continental climate. The northeast, which is part of North America's Great Central Plains, has an extreme continental climate with very cold winters.

This variety of climates, combined with the extensive and varied terrain, has resulted in a complex pattern of many distinct ecosystems. Among them are grasslands, oak parklands, temperate rain forests, dry pine forests, desert-like steppes, boreal black spruce muskegs, tundra and alpine meadows.

The many ecosystems have made British Columbia home to a great diversity of flora and fauna – in fact, a greater diversity than any other province in Canada. British Columbia has an estimated 2,790 species of native vascular plants, 1,000 mosses and liverworts, 1,600 lichens, 522 attached algae and more than 10,000 fungi. As well, 1,138 species of vertebrates have been identified, including 488 birds, 468 fish, 142 mammals, 22 amphibians and 18 reptiles. Invertebrate species are estimated to number between 50,000 and 70,000, including 35,000 insect species.

Three-quarters of Canada's mammal species are found in the province, 24 of which occur only in British Columbia. Some 162 species of birds that breed in British Columbia breed nowhere else in Canada.

The Society

British Columbia has been inhabited for about 10,000 years. When Spanish and British explorers first reached the province's coast in the late 1700s, they found thriving First Nations societies and cultures. Trading posts sprang up throughout the province during the early 1800s, soon giving way to more established towns and cities as settlers arrived in the new British colony from Europe, the United States, Asia and elsewhere.

Before the arrival of Europeans, about 40% of all the native people in Canada lived within the area that became British Columbia. Their population was probably over 80,000, but introduced diseases resulted in severe losses.

The population is concentrated in urban centres in the southwest

The province's total population expanded from 33,000 in 1867 to over 4 million in 2003 (see Figure 4). About half of the population now lives in the province's southwest corner (the Lower Mainland), in Vancouver, Surrey and other communities making up the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

Another 30% live on Vancouver Island (mainly in Victoria and Nanaimo) or in the southern Interior's Thompson-Okanagan region (Kelowna and Kamloops). The remaining 20% live primarily in smaller rural communities throughout the province.

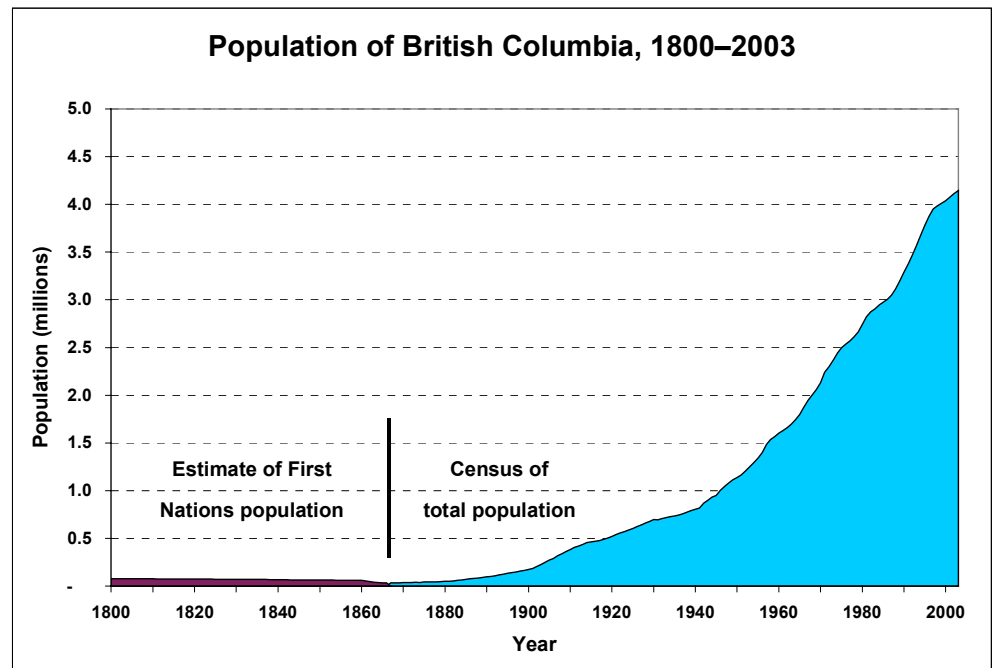


FIGURE 4. Population of British Columbia, 1800–2003.

The growing population has exerted considerable pressure on British Columbia's resources, not only timber, but also water, fish, wildlife, range, wilderness and others. This has often resulted in competing demands and conflicting public expectations for the use of forest resources (e.g., ecosystem and watershed protection vs. jobs and other economic benefits). It has also led to increasing risks of wildfires in the wildland/urban interface.

For thousands of years, aboriginal people depended on the forest for shelter, food, clothing, tools and medicine. The first European settlers also came to rely on the forest – primarily for timber, using the wood to construct buildings, ships and even roads and railway trestles. Industries and communities grew up around timber harvesting and processing, producing logs, lumber, pulp, paper and other products for export and domestic use. Recognition of the value of non-timber forest products and services, such as drinking water and wilderness recreation, is well established and growing.

Today, all communities in British Columbia, urban and rural, continue to have significant cultural, recreational and economic connections with the province's forests.

Forestry is the province's most important industry

The forest sector continues to be the foundation of British Columbia's economy, accounting for 14% of employment and 15% of all economic activity when indirect and induced economic activity are included. Although its significance has diminished as the economy has matured and diversified over the past few decades, the forest sector remains the most important employer in many rural communities.

Sustainable forest management is vital to British Columbians

With about 95% of the province in public ownership, the British Columbia government manages the land in the public interest, trying to balance environmental, economic and social issues.

The government and people of the province have many years of experience in developing and using tools and processes to enable balanced consideration of environmental, economic and social values. The Protected Areas Strategy, Land and Resource Management Planning, Forest Practices Code and Timber Supply Review are just a few of the initiatives begun in the 1990s that support sustainable forest management.

British Columbians, along with buyers of the province's forest products and tourists who come to see its great outdoors, have an interest in the sustainability of the province's forests, because their continuing use and enjoyment of the forests depend on the province's progress in achieving sustainable forest management.