

Endangered species and clear-cutting?

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Despite the recommendations from the Lahey report calling for reducing clear-cutting on Crown land there appears to be no letting up on this absolutely non-ecological approach to forest management in most forest types in Nova Scotia. But as long as the primary forest industries are producing wood chips for burning to generate electricity whether here or overseas, sending wood chips over-seas for the manufacture of chipboard or supplying pulp and paper mills, clear-cutting is the only economical way to harvest trees. But why does it make sense to drastically reduce clear-cutting on Crown Land? It has dire consequences for many species.

Ecological forestry is forest management that emulates natural processes in our forests. Natural processes operating in the past meant that when Europeans colonized Nova Scotia half of the woods was old-growth. Old-growth forests are generally not the most species-rich ecosystems, but they provide habitat to many species that depend on old forests. The most critical organisms in forests are not the mammals that we tend to identify with nor the many songbirds in our forests. Fungi, lichens, insects and a myriad of other invertebrates, which we tend to find uninteresting if not creepy, are the species that depend on and are necessary for the maintenance of old forest ecosystems. These species number in the thousands and a large proportion of these we haven't even discovered yet. A study of dead-wood loving beetles, carried out by me my students funded by then, DNR in the late nineties, found during a single summer of research about 250 different species of beetles, and two of these were unknown to science. There are many other species in our forests that we have not discovered, let alone know what the impact of clear-cutting has on their populations. Older forests have the potential to provide habitat to many species. These species tend to have slow growth rates and are not good at moving from one location to another.

Old-growth forests have been reduced to less than one percent and is becoming an endangered ecosystem. Department of Lands and Forestry argues that we have species at risk legislation and forest management decisions take this legislation into account. However, for species to be listed under this legislation we have to know they exist and we have to have data to show that they are endangered. But we have no data for the vast majority of species other than for so-called charismatic ones like lynx, boreal felt lichen, mainland moose and a few others that have been listed as species-at-risk. For many of the endangered species, although legislated, there are still no management plans in place. And since we don't even know all the species that exist in Nova Scotia how will this legislation help. The easiest way to ensure that most species remain intact in the province is to make sure that the habitat is here and that can be achieved by drastically reducing clear-cutting of old forests on Crown Land.

One percent old-growth forest will not maintain all the species that depend on older forests. Old forests on Crown Land selectively cut for value-added industries could maintain habitat for most species and while provide meaningful jobs.