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Natural forests provide a service that has value


Neil Dawe, Oceanside Star

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Town of Qualicum Beach Councillor Barry Avis recently presented a resolution to the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities' (AVICC) convention, one with potentially far-reaching environmental implications.

The resolution calls on senior levels of government to declare a moratorium on the sale and land transfer of all land currently zoned as Forest or Resource Land, as well as on development approvals for forest lands within the original E&N land grant area. The delegates unanimously endorsed the resolution, which is significant for two reasons.

First, the public good took precedence over individual and corporate rights. Nature always favours the population over the individual, but our society more often than not puts individual and corporate rights ahead of the public good. This has led us, in part, to our current environmental predicament.

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know about them.

Forested landscapes, for example, provide critical services from wildlife habitat and diversity to watershed services, such as water storage and purification, control of ground water and surface flows, water table regulation, erosion control, buffers from storm and drought events, and stream bank stabilization.

Carbon sequestration or storage is another vital service ecosystems provide. Forest vegetation absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, locking the carbon in the trunks, branches, leaves, roots and soils. This helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are currently causing global climate disruption.

Converting forests to clear cuts or housing and other developments releases the stored carbon and returns the carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Even when trees are replanted there are no net carbon sequestration benefits over the first 10 to 20 years.

Most of us know our forests are a source of raw materials for our economy.

But those raw materials are part of the forest ecosystem structure that also provides the ecosystem services vital to Earth's life-support systems. So economic production has a cost of diminished ecosystem services; the larger the economy grows, the greater the costs.

Our economy measures the benefits of the goods and services we produce but usually not the costs of ecological degradation. Because we don't pay for ecosystem services, although we enjoy their many benefits, ecosystem services do not work well within the market.

As a result, markets tend to favour the conversion of raw materials to goods and services for the economy, rather than leaving them in their natural state for the provision of their life-supporting ecosystem services.

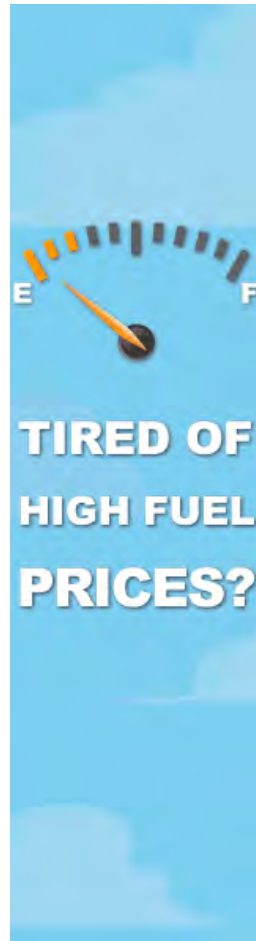
So how do we determine how much of our forests and other natural ecosystems we should use for economic production and how much we should leave intact for the provision of ecosystem services?

Answering that question begins with recognizing the importance and value that ecosystem services provide for the common good, even if they are not part of a market economy.

This is what took place at the AVICC convention with the resolution Avis tabled and all community delegates agreed upon: a recognition of the significant values forested landscapes provide to us all, irrespective of who owns them and despite the exclusion of those values from the marketplace.

Now we must ensure that the province listens and establishes the moratorium, a significant step in moving us towards a sustainable society.

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