



Wetlands, grasslands key to diversity

By SARA GRADY

Over the past few months we've been explaining the various Environmental Goods & Services that BC's forests have to offer, and the role our woodlot program has in protecting and fostering them.

EG&S can be broadly defined as naturally occurring and engineered environments that provide: "goods" such as fresh water, clean air, and cultural resources; and "services" that help maintain biodiversity, purify air and water, generate and renew soil and vegetation, recharge groundwater, create recreational opportunities and provide pleasing views.

In this edition, we're going to explore three facets of EG&S that might not instantly come to mind when considering the importance of forest stewardship.

British Columbia's grasslands occupy a deceptively small footprint – a meagre 1% of our land base in comparison to the 60% carpeted with trees. Yet, they play host to a disproportionately large number of unique flora and fauna that are integral to the health of our ecosystem. For woodlot owners in the province's South and Central Interior, this requires delicate management of the non-timber resources on their Crown land.

Residents and travellers in the interior could easily take our sweeping grasslands for granted: monotone landscapes with bunchgrass, blue fescue, low shrubs and mosses don't necessarily inspire the same awe and respect as a towering old growth forest. But their role in the environment is vital. Those low, hardy grasses protect the



Jean William picking high bush berries and wild tea in the tradition of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) First Nation.

ground from erosion, filter water that travels into our streams, capture carbon, provide food for wildlife and cattle, and play host to 30% of our province's endangered species. And they're Mother Nature's equivalent of a residential interface in a woodlot.

For woodlot owners like Mike Anderson, who manages his own license (WL387 at Tunkwa Lake) and one for the Skeetchestn Indian Band in the Thompson-Okanagan, caring for this delicate and rare ecosystem is part of a broader picture. He sees the long-term opportunities this region has to offer for outdoor recreation – building a dude ranch, forging riding trails, creating a safe and ecologically sound place where people can explore the unique vegetation and wildlife, and its diversity unmatched in the country.

The grasslands in his backyard are home to over 25 species on the "Red" and "Blue" lists (the Ministry of Environment catalogues species that are either extinct in the wild, Red, or on the verge of extinction, Blue), including the Sandhill Crane and Flamulated Owl, as well as a multitude of animals on hoof, wing and paw, and countless reptiles and insects, all of which are interdependent.

Unchecked recreational use, such as ATV traffic, can have a lasting negative impact on the soil and vegetation, and erode wildlife habitat. It's not uncommon for woodlot owners to have to intercept "weekend warriors" and remind them that their activities, while innocuous on the surface, are doing significant damage to this dry, fragile landscape.

At the other end of the spectrum, the wetlands in British Columbia are under equal stress and also provide both environmental goods and services. While they occupy only 5% of BC's land base, the literal trickle-down effect from headwaters to the wetlands is substantial. Virtually every living creature in BC will interact with a wetland or waterway in the course of its life-cycle. And the stability and well-being of these areas is, to varying degrees, in the hands of woodlot owners, and other companies harvesting timber from BC's forests.

For Mike, who has a wealth of hands-on knowledge, as well as certification as a Registered Professional Forester and Biologist, the practices required to preserve riparian habitat are commonsense: leaving a 50 metre buffer between lakes and cutblocks to provide habitat for birds and protection for moose and deer; **(Turn to Page 2)**



Mike Anderson walking on the grasslands of his woodlot (WL387) at Tunkwa Lake.

leaving trees and vegetation intact next to streams to stabilize the shore and attract the insects that fish and birds rely upon. These steps are logical, but not always practiced.

In the early days of commercial logging, companies would think nothing of driving skidders and other heavy equipment through a small stream, logging right to a river's edge, or using a waterway as a waste disposal. Our understanding of the "downstream" effects of destroying or altering these delicate ecosystems was minimal, and what we did know wasn't always given the appropriate weight or attention.

Woodlots have always been held to a very high standard with regards to riparian protection, and over time these careless practices have been regulated out of existence for all companies. The Forest Practices Code became law in 1995, setting high standards for conduct in the forest, and has evolved into the more all-encompassing Forest and Range Practices Act (2004), necessitating an even greater level of professionalism and public accountability.

This is good news for those of us who rely on

our streams and lakes to provide a safe, stable source of drinking water, and for the wildlife that share our forests. For those who live off the land in our province, this is especially heartening.

As mentioned earlier, cultural heritage resources are considered an environmental "good", and this doesn't refer to artifacts or archeological sites. First Nations in BC rely heavily on healthy forests: they provide abundant hunting grounds, clean streams and lakes for healthy fish, and thriving trees, plants and shrubs for food, medicine and ceremony.

Just ask Jean William, an Elder of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) First Nation. In addition to being a "Speaker" – one who is fluent in the Secwepemc language and teaches it to others – she runs a "Little Chiefs Program" for children ranging in age from toddlers to grade two. This entails taking the children into the woods to learn about the sustenance, medicines and ceremonial plants, roots and berries that can be gleaned from the forest.

They gather soapberries, high bush blueberries, huckleberries and Saskatoon berries, sage and

juniper roots, even "pitch gum" – the sap from trees that has multiple uses, including toothpaste and glue. They learn to cut, dry and preserve salmon, moose and deer, and learn to identify the kinds of woods used for smoking meats.

For Jean, who was raised by her grandparents according to Secwepemc traditions, a healthy forest provides a safe place for the next generation to learn about the heritage and culture of her nation. Woodlots are required to locate and identify First Nations cultural heritage resources on their land and provide a transparent plan for protecting them. But a woodlot doesn't have to overlap a First Nation territory to have an impact downstream.

Luckily, the woodlot program embodies the tenets of stewardship that encourage more than management of timber for profit: woodlot owners manage their land with the understanding that they're managing it for the entire province.



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