

When Forest Management Becomes Personal

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA



Report to the BC Community Forest Association

by Meike Siegner

March 2019



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— Meike Siegner

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Preface

IN 2018, THERE ARE 58 COMMUNITY FORESTS operating across British Columbia (BC).¹ Community forest agreements (CFAs) allow local people to create multiple benefits from and share decision-making rights for their local forests. Community forests may be formed by local governments, community groups, First Nation Band Councils, or a combination of the three, and can be held by a range of legal entities, such as cooperatives, limited partnerships, or societies.²

Despite differences in their ownership and legal nature, community forests share the goal to engage in commercial forest operations in a manner consistent with locally agreed upon values and objectives (Bullock, Broad, Palmer, & Smith, 2017).

Since the inception of the CFA tenure program, twenty years ago, successful examples of community forestry have demonstrated how local efforts to utilize forest resources can spur innovation in forest practices and value-added enterprise, put people in the community to work, and provide resources for initiatives in areas such as education, recreation, and relationship-building with First Nations (Ambus, Davis-Case, Mitchell, & Tyler, 2007; Furness & Nelson, 2016; Siegner, Panwar, & Kozak, 2017).

At the forefront of these efforts are the people who are endowed with the mandate to put into practice agreed upon community values and aspirations. Community forest managers are faced with the challenging task to create viable business opportunities, while also managing for diverse social, environmental, and cultural community values.

1 Community Forest Indicators 2018. <http://bccfa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BCCFA-Indicators-2018-Sept-12-web.pdf> [accessed, March 9, 2019]

2 Community Forest Guidebook II (Mulkey & Day [editors] 2012). http://bccfa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/FS30_web-proof.pdf [accessed, Jan 21, 2019]



Running a community forest operation requires a combination of entrepreneurial spirit, hands-on forestry knowledge, and a fair collection of people skills that allow for the creation of trusting relationships with local partners and community members.

This report is written to inform about the diverse work of community forest managers in BC and seeks to inspire readers that want to learn more about effective leadership in community-based social enterprises.

Drawing from a qualitative study on managerial decision-making in community forests in BC, this report will grant readers insight into the nature and scope of the managerial role in these organizations, and how management can effectively balance business and community goals and values. Decision-makers at the local and provincial level can learn about the experiences of community forest managers in engaging with this new form of forest tenure. CFA Boards can gain insight into the skills and qualifications that these individuals bring to their jobs. Community members can learn about how managers ensure involvement at the local level, and students in forestry and related fields may find that running a community forest might just be their dream job.

Part I of the report presents an overview of the managerial role in community forests. Part II summarizes insights about the nature of the work that community forest managers perform and concludes with an outlook on the future of leadership in BC's community forest sector.

— Meike Siegner, March 2019



Running a community forest operation requires a combination of entrepreneurial spirit, hands-on forestry knowledge, and a fair collection of people skills that allow for the creation of trusting relationships with local partners and community members.



Managing Community Forests

“Community forest managers are dynamic individuals. They are foresters willing to take on the complex task of running a business.”

**— Emma Neill, MFLNRO
Forest Tenures Branch**

AS LOCALLY-ROOTED BUSINESSES, community forests reinvest in the organization — instead of seeking maximization of profits — and engage participatory decision-making around local forestry activity (Teitelbaum, 2014).

Simultaneous emphasis on locality of forest business operations and community participation makes community forests a valuable model for sustainable development, but it also brings with it unique implications for the managerial role in these organizations.

Community forest managers are not only accountable to a board of directors, which represents locally agreed upon social, ecological, and cultural forest values, they also must ensure that the community at large is engaged in decisions that relate to fulfilment of these values. Instead of relying solely on their own priorities and direction, they must engage local people and create opportunities for public participation in forest decision-making and benefit sharing.

Furthermore, safeguarding local values and fostering engagement requires community forest managers to carefully balance these goals with financial sustainability (Fig 1.). Because of their proximity to the local community, community forests face numerous harvesting constraints (water, recreation, visuals). The margins for alternatives to industrial-scale forest operations are thin and can pose dilemmas between social, environmental and economic ideals.

THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Commercial and social goals hold different implications for decision-making. Revenue-generating activities, which require rapid action and are measured in standardized metrics, may run counter to the long-term oriented, trust-based strategies commonly associated with the fulfilment of social values. Many community-based enterprises seek to combine both, which requires management to find common ground between the social and commercial side of the business (Tracey et al. 2005). A preference for efficiency may trigger a narrow focus on marketability and profits, while too much emphasis on democratic process could jeopardize the financial sustainability of a project (Cornforth, 2014). Therefore, management, first and foremost, acts as successful cultivator of relationships. Managers that are profoundly familiar with stakeholders’ differing social and commercial expectations are better able to build synergies between goals and judge situations according to their social and financial demands respectively.

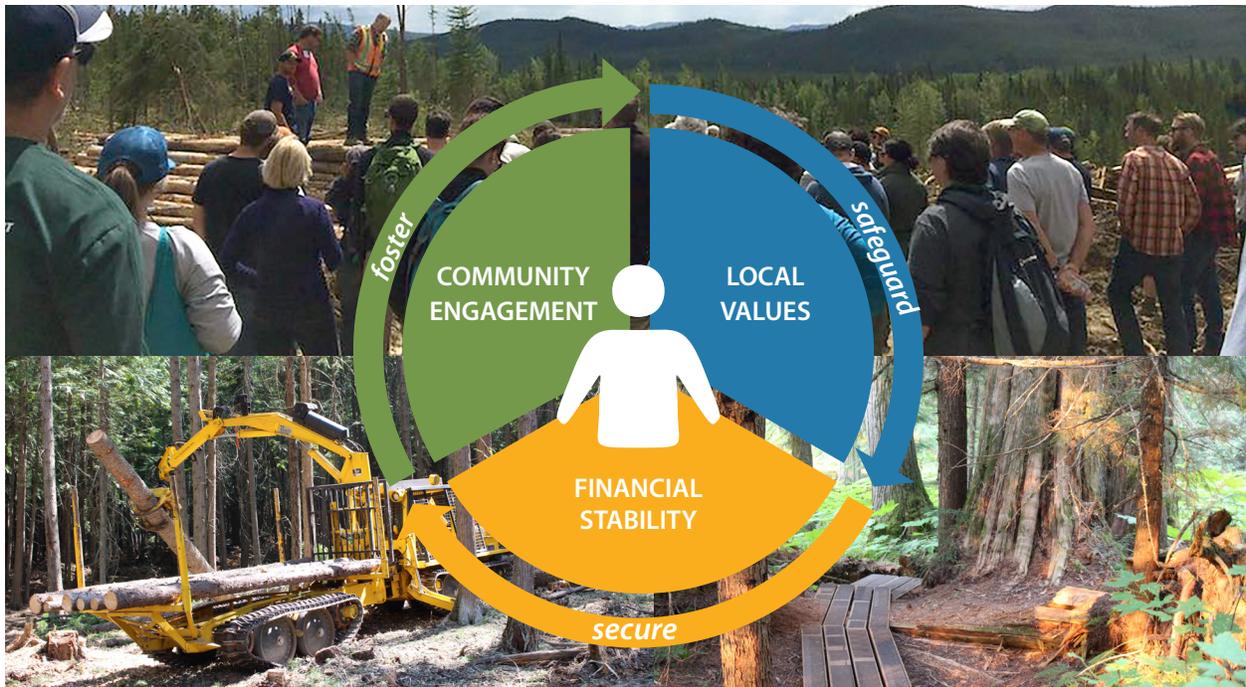


Fig 1. The managerial role in community forests

For example, should management, endowed with the task to hire locally, rely on traditional harvesting techniques if these are the only available skills in the community, or should they bring in fallers trained in sensitive harvesting methods from elsewhere to meet set ecological standards?

Or, should management push local peoples' level of comfort with the harvesting rate to save costs and create potential for more social investments in the community, such as infrastructure development, or education? Finally, should logging be pursued when prices are high, even though proper community consultation would require a different planning horizon?

Dilemmas and trade-offs between goals occur in all managerial decision-making. However, community forests simultaneously emphasize local values, community engagement, and financial sustainability. Therefore, they rely on management that is able to create savvy solutions to these multiple goals when planning, staffing, leading, and controlling forest operations, and motivating others. Besides forestry skills and the willingness to take business risks, community forest managers need to demonstrate effective communication and people skills to understand local concerns and accommodate the needs of various stakeholder groups.



“The trees are easy. In a basic sense, we count them, every year they get a little taller, a little bigger, but honestly, it’s all about meeting the human expectations.”
— Tom Cole, Cheakamus Community Forest

Seven things to know about the work of community forest managers

1 Diverse backgrounds

The administrative freedom that comes with managing are-based forest tenures provides managers with plenty of opportunities to experiment with novel ideas for bridging social, economic, and ecological aspects of forestry.

Although community forest managers typically hold a forestry degree, they might not necessarily follow a straight career path from graduation, to working in the industry, before taking on the role of running an organization that oversees an area-based forest tenure. Some received their education in the social sciences or liberal arts, prior to pursuing a career in the forest sector and harness these skills in their work with local communities.

As relatively new and often grassroots-based organizations community forests also attract and retain talent, by giving individuals the opportunity to receive training on the job and gradually grow in their leadership role.

Others transitioned from jobs in the forest industry to managing a community forest. The administrative freedom that comes with managing are-based forest tenures provides managers with plenty of opportunities to experiment with novel ideas for bridging social, economic, and ecological aspects of forestry.

“I went through an unconventional path into forestry. I started out studying anthropology and environmental ethics, and then got into forestry. I worked in forestry operations and planning and eventually became a forest manager and consultant.”

— Erik Leslie, Harrop-Procter Community Forest Cooperative



Erik Leslie

“I was almost three years through a degree in criminology and that really helped me to get a better feel for the social aspect that it takes to manage an area-based tenure.”

— Frank Varga, Burns Lake Community Forest Ltd.



Frank Varga

“As the manager of a community forest there are a lot of different initiatives that you can get involved in, which is why I enjoy the work.”

— Dave Gill, West Bank First Nation Community Forest

2 No such thing as a typical day

Running a community forest involves a broad skill set. The small size of these organizations requires management to wear many hats. Tasks range from hands-on forestry operations and administrative work to planning and facilitating development of strategic plans in collaboration with the board

One must not be surprised to find the manager starting out the day in the local forest hills conducting timber surveys, spending the afternoon negotiating logging prices with contractors and the evening in the town hall to present to the community a newly developed fire-risk reduction plan. While some might get bogged down by the sheer breadth of activities that fall under the managerial role in these organizations, community forest managers often thrive in the midst of the different tasks they pursue and perceive their work as positive challenge that offers opportunities for personal and professional development.

3 Community forest managers find meaning in their work

In line with studies that highlight the sense of purpose that employees find in organizations that hold values beyond profit at their core (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006), community forest managers find a sense of fulfilment in their work and are intrinsically motivated to help bring positive change to the communities they serve.

Aside from overseeing commercial forestry activities, managers work with local groups to deliver multiple forest values to the community. These close collaborations allow them to get to know the communities they serve and to support local needs as part of their leadership role.

Despite the many tasks that community forest managers must juggle, their work also comes with an amount of freedom that, in many respects, can be likened to that of business owners. As relatively young organizations, community forests offer their managers the opportunity to explore novel ideas together with the board and community members. This may entail experimenting with progressive forestry techniques, developing not-for-profit business arms in areas such as employment or education, attracting local clients, and building partnerships with other social enterprises.



Mike Francis and crew

“One of the things that kept me in the position for ten years is that I have lots of flexibility. More so than I would have if I were to work for a major licensee. In 2016 we ended up buying a little band mill and it’s been great to have that variety of activities.”

— Mike Francis, Lower North Thompson Community Forest Society



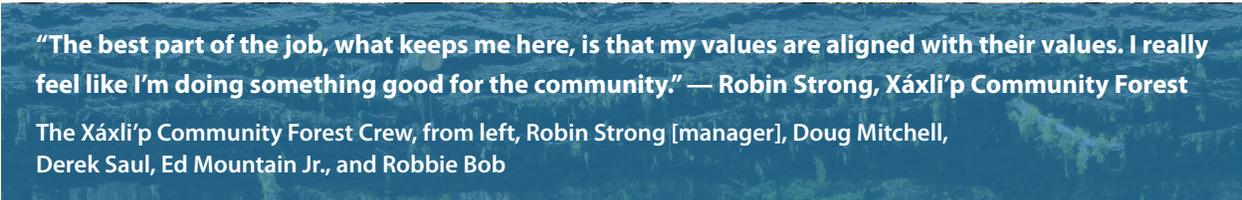
"I can make a difference here, through forest education, for example. That's one of my passions. To me, this is a dream job."

— Daniel Gratton, Creston Valley Forest Corporation

4 Community forest managers search for linkages between goals

Aligning the multiple social and commercial goals of a community forest is a tricky task and requires management to look for mutually beneficial solutions that meet the demands of various local groups that are associated with the business. Achieving agreement on forest management among local stakeholders can be a lengthy undertaking and might conflict with the need to put local contractors to work on time. Or, operational aspects, such as visual quality management, can lead to competing interests if a silvicultural approach conflicts with community members' aesthetic preferences or recreational activities.

While there are no simple recipes on how to resolve such goal tensions, community forest managers focus on developing trusting relationships with the community which allows them to create linkages between social, environmental and commercial goals when embarking on a project.



"The best part of the job, what keeps me here, is that my values are aligned with their values. I really feel like I'm doing something good for the community." — Robin Strong, Xáxli'p Community Forest

The Xáxli'p Community Forest Crew, from left, Robin Strong [manager], Doug Mitchell, Derek Saul, Ed Mountain Jr., and Robbie Bob





“The recreation groups needed roads which they didn’t have money for, or expertise. There was some nice wood in this area. We could have harvested more, but it’s all about working together. So we got what we needed and now they have a bike park that is attracting people.”

— Craig Prior, Valemount Community Forest Corporation

5 Community forest managers are good listeners

Community forests are rarely spaces in which traditional, top-down decision-making is practiced. Managers are well-aware of their duty to keep the community engaged and actively seek opportunities to gather ideas and listen to concerns from the public.

Instead of relying on the use of professional jargon, managers focus on explaining relevant forestry concepts to the local public. This is being done through a variety of activities, which may range from organizing field tours to writing reports and minutes in a manner that avoids shortcuts and provides definitions of forestry terms. Aside from public engagement, managers work with boards and senior staff that represent local interests and bring a range of expertise to the organization. Community forest managers know how to harness this knowledge to improve decision-making and realize innovative ideas in an effort to make their organizations places of collaboration and mutual support.

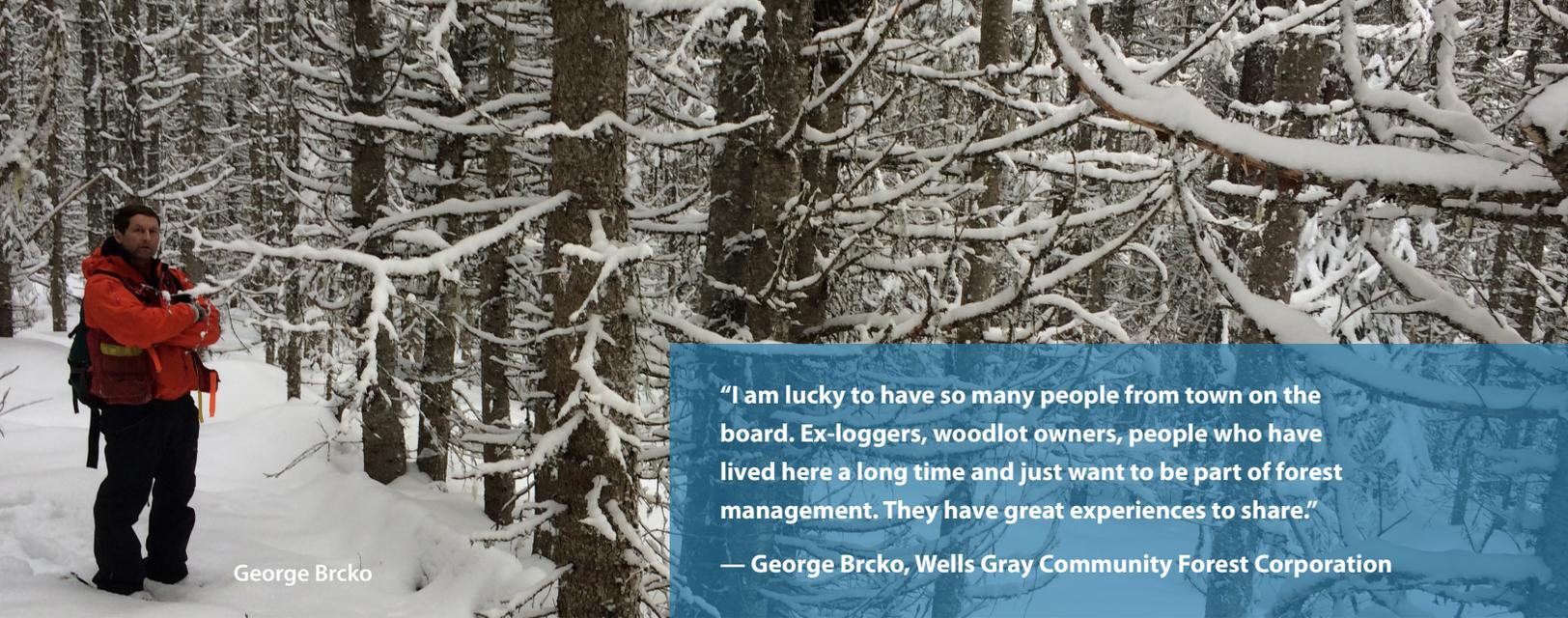
“Community engagement isn’t just a duty. I have been finding it to be really helpful. The people here know their forest. They come and say: “Look, this is a neat spot for recreational activity”. And we take the GPS and go out and track these trails.”

— Ray Thiessen, Dunster Community Forest Society

“I enjoy the social role that comes with the job. I am vested in what is going on and it is nice to get direct feedback, have continued discussions.”

— Frank Tiramani, Vanderhoof Community Forest





George Brcko

“I am lucky to have so many people from town on the board. Ex-loggers, woodlot owners, people who have lived here a long time and just want to be part of forest management. They have great experiences to share.”

— George Brcko, Wells Gray Community Forest Corporation

6 Running a business for the community is no easy matter

Despite their diverse skills and the motivation that managers in community forests bring to their jobs pursuing business opportunities in community settings comes with its challenges (Siegener et al. 2018).

Management is not only required to juggle a heavy workload that stems from their nature as small organizations. The managerial role also includes the need to incorporate often diverse stakeholder perspectives into decision-making while always being responsible for the fiscal bottom line of the business.

Research on community-based natural resources management has cautioned that communities should not be romanticized as a unified whole, but instead make up contested environments, made up by different actors that hold multiple, at times competing, values and views (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

Finding common ground amidst local diversity of interests can be a challenging task for management in community forests and requires patience, active listening, and the ability to perform solid decision-making where rapid action is required.

Besides performing diverse tasks and interacting with multiple stakeholders, the locality of these businesses can affect their work-life balance. Many managers reside in the same community where the forest operation is located. They are thus required to develop a sense of comfort with being the face of the local working forest, much like a counselor represents decisions of municipal government, or a principal is held responsible for the quality of teaching in the local school. They may encounter situations where they are approached by community members in public spaces, outside their official work hours, such as in the local store, or during town meetings that may not be officially related to the community forest, but require them nonetheless to give spontaneous statements on behalf of the organization.

“When you deal with natural resources, it’s a hot topic. I didn’t realize it as much until I started this job. Over the years I learned to meet with people, listen to their perspectives. But also realized that I can’t back down. You have to come to some sort of agreement.”

— Daniel Gratton, Creston Valley Forest Corporation



Daniel Gratton visiting fuel mitigation site



Heather Beresford on a field tour with community members

“I can’t say I always love it, but I really like being the face in the community that people can come to and say: ‘Heather, what is going on?’ We don’t always agree, but being that accessible person that they can come talk to instead of a company from somewhere else is a good thing.”

**Heather Beresford,
Cheakamus Community Forest**

7 Community forest managers are connected

Despite the challenges described above, community forest managers are not alone. Aside from interacting with their communities, they get inspiration for their work from participating in activities organized by the British Columbia Community Forest Association (BCCFA), which represents community forests across the province. Through the Association, managers meet on a regular basis to present ideas, discuss challenges and explore opportunities for partnerships with like-minded community leaders.

The annual Conference organized by the BCCFA has grown into an important platform for exposing the achievements of community forests and allows managers to connect with policy-makers, researchers and forest professionals from different fields, share insights and receive new inspirations.



LNTCSociety receiving the 2018 Robin Hood Award for Excellence in Community Forestry



2017 BCCFA Conference in Tumbler Ridge

A new breed of community business leaders

COMMUNITY FORESTS ARE SPACES OF INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION. These organizations are managed by dedicated individuals from various backgrounds that share an intrinsic motivation to contribute to positive change in the communities which they serve. They bring to their job a broad skill set that allows them to blend hands-on forestry skills, with the pursuit of business opportunities and the development of trusting relationships with community members seeking to take active part in the management of their local forests.

By placing engagement with local stakeholders at the heart and center of the organization, community forests build foundations that have the potential to foster ecological and social resilience, particularly in areas such as fire-risk, or climate-change adaptation and management.

“One of the reasons why we have been successful is because we look at things from a long-term perspective. This allows us to build capacity from within the community.”

— Gord Chipman, Esketemc Community Forest



It is precisely this joint focus on locality and innovation that attracts a new breed of forest leaders. Community forest managers immerse themselves in the community to learn about local needs and values, which allows them to identify forest management strategies and business opportunities that create community benefits for the long-term in areas such as local employment, education, as well as cultural preservation and self-determination.

These individuals enjoy the challenge to seek synergies across social and commercial goals.

They seek genuine connections with the people and cultures surrounding their organizations. Most importantly though, despite the demanding nature of their work, the managers seem to see their job not as mere duty, but as a source of joy and satisfaction.

As such, the managerial role in community forests not only serves as template for leadership in the forest sector, but as an inspiration for the varied community-based social enterprises that are on the rise across Canada, and elsewhere.

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British Columbia
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Association**
local people, local forests, local decisions

The BC Community Forest Association is a network of rural community-based organizations engaged in community forest management, and those seeking to establish new community forests. We represent over 90 rural and Indigenous communities across our province. We share a vision of a network of diverse community forest initiatives, where local people practice ecologically responsible forest management in perpetuity, fostering and supporting healthy and vibrant rural communities and economies.

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Forests and Communities in Transition (FACT) includes the FACT Lab and the FACT Network. FACT is a University of British Columbia Faculty of Forestry initiative dedicated to research, dialogue and knowledge exchange. We aim to foster a global network of researchers and communities working in partnership with governments, non-government organizations, academia, industry and others to contribute to the development of more resilient and liveable forest-dependent communities.

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