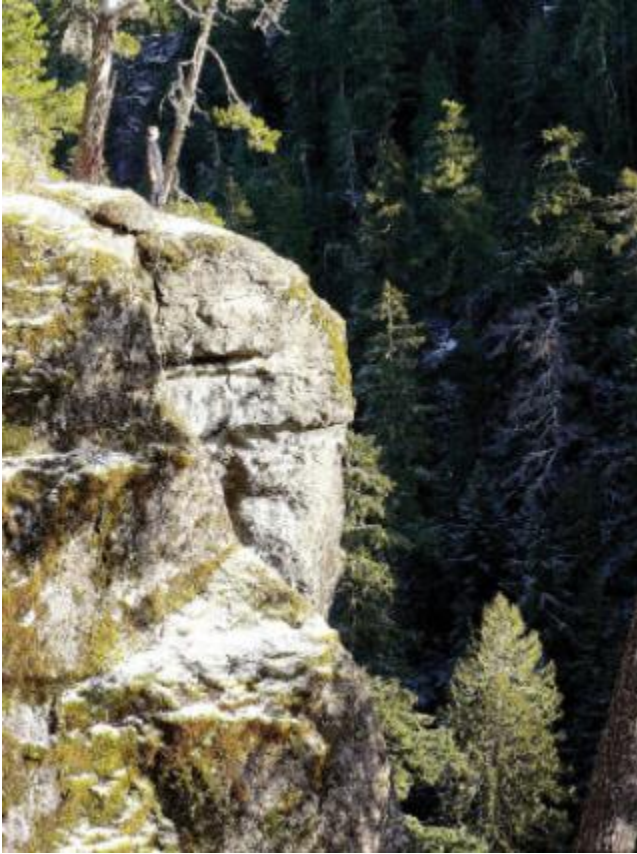


On the Brink

By Neil Horner - Parksville Qualicum Beach News - January 22, 2008



Neil Horner Photo

Hidden gems like the Cameron Canyon off of Highway 4 at risk from logging, say environmental activists

There are no folksy, hand carved signs directing hikers into the Cameron River Canyon. There's no real trailhead and not much of a trail either. You can access the very bottom of the canyon, but you'll want someone who knows the way.

Phil Carson, who works with the Mt. Arrowsmith Biosphere project, knows the path. So does Scott Tanner, with the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, and the two used that knowledge to lead Alberni-Qualicum MLA Scott Fraser and Qualicum Beach town councilor Barry Avis into the depths of the gorge.

Along with local television and print media, the team drove to the top of the hump on Highway 4 and onto a gated logging road. The gate was open and the road was busy with Island Timberlands workers coordinating a heli-logging show on the other side of the gorge.

As Tanner and Carson led the way down a snowy road away from the activity, a skycrane helicopter could be seen crossing and recrossing the gorge, it's rising clatter a constant reminder of just how close the logging has come.

Leaving the road at last, the team paused at the top of a sharp dropoff before tackling the icy slopes of the steep descent into the canyon.

As Carson led the team ever deeper into the gorge, he said he enjoys taking people to see what lies below. He knows you can't see the canyon from the highway and it's pretty far off the beaten path. He wants people to see for themselves what he sees there — the wild beauty of a tumbling river and the quiet power of ancient trees. As well, he said, he wants people to understand the importance of the canyon in the bigger scheme of things.

"We support people coming out and taking an interest in the canyon and taking a look at all the other little pockets of old growth that are left," he said.

Carson is passionate about the canyon, which he said acts as an important corridor for wildlife moving up and down Vancouver Island. Recent changes to the forestry regime, he said, have injected a new sense of uncertainty about the future.

"What's happening in the forest now, as I can interpret it, it's not business as usual," he said. "It's worse than business as usual. We've lost regulatory control and there's no longer silvicultural prescriptions the public has input into. Even if we did it can be changed overnight. We have little tiny areas that were protected before that are now being listed as assets and we don't have even access to see what's going on."

Barry Avis shares that passion, and that concern, noting the canyon carries the water used by the town for which he serves on council. He's worried about the impact on Qualicum Beach if the canyon were ever to be logged, but he sees it as part of a larger problem in B.C. forestry.

"All of our watershed comes from up there," he said. "We are looking at a little piece of property that's special to the area, but that's one little piece of what we're uncertain of. The same uncertainty happens for everything that's going on ... and this one little piece is just an example. If someone can do something there, they can do something anywhere."

As the team continues their descent down the side of the gorge, the cliff suddenly looms, a light but constant drizzle falling from an overhang far overhead. It's wet and it's winter, so the water has turned to ice on the ground. The footing gets ever more treacherous and the pace slows.

Fraser said the Island Timberlands has indicated they have no plans to log the Cameron Canyon, but he takes little comfort from the news.

"I want a formal obligation to say this area won't be cut," he said. "They can say they don't have plans to log it, but all they have to do tomorrow is change their minds, make a plan and then log it. The fact is, they've inventoried it ... and put it out in a prospectus as a forest asset."

Changes to forest and land policy have led to a situation, Fraser said, where offshore interests can dictate what happens in a local watershed.

"The whole ability to do an old growth strategy is in the hands of a company that's divesting itself farther and farther away," Fraser said. "Right now, it's shareholders of a company based out of a tax haven in Bermuda. That's really who is calling the shots. We went from full public control under a TFL a few years ago to it being controlled by a Bermuda based company."

Near the bottom, the cliffside trail levels off by a low overhang in the rock. Rusted debris from an abandoned campsite occupies the shallow cave. Tanner leads the group to a gnarled and twisted tree. It's a yew, he said, one of the oldest, guessing its age at perhaps 1,000 years.

The team completes its descent to the river and Carson leads them to a stand of old growth spray painted ribboned and inventoried. Overhead, the skycrane chops its way across the gorge.

As the team begins its long climb back to the road, Carson remains optimistic about the future of the gorge and other special spots like it.

"The awareness is worldwide now," he said. "I think things don't look like they're going in the right direction right now, but the fact is there's so much community support and good will. People want to see a future for our children, so we have to find some creative ways to solve the problem."

