The Trumpeter
Journal of Ecosophy

Accumulated Wisdom
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Volume 39, numéro 1, 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109625ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1109625ar

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

0832-6193 (imprimé)
1705-9429 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Turner, N. (2023). Accumulated Wisdom: Alan Drengson, Merv Wilkinson and Ecoforestry. *The Trumpeter*, *39*(1), 61–69. https://doi.org/10.7202/1109625ar

The Trumpeter
ISSN 1705-9429
Volume 39, No. 1 (2023)

Accumulated Wisdom: Alan Drengson, Merv Wilkinson, and Ecoforestry

Nancy J. Turner

As I was thinking about Dr. Alan Drengson and his legacy, contemplating what I could write about him that would capture his essence, I looked down at a card that was sitting on the table beside me and everything became clear. The card is produced by the Ecoforestry Institute Society. The photograph on the front (Image 1) – taken at Wildwood Ecoforest on Vancouver Island by EIS Board member, writer, and photographer Hans Tammemagi – is of a big, old stump in front of a rustic wooden shed with upright boards as siding and a small wood-framed window. The edges of the stump where the tree had been cut show that it had continued to grow after that, forming the beginnings of a so-called "sealed stump." Emerging from the rotting centre of the stump is a large red huckleberry bush and a little clump of salal with its oval, evergreen leaves. Light green lichens encrust the outer bark of the stump and there is more salal growing on the ground around it. A forest of big and medium sized Douglas-firs and some smaller deciduous trees emerge in the background behind the shed.

Image 1. Hans Tammemagi, *Douglas-Fir Sealed Stump with Red Huckleberry and Salal Growing from It*, 2022, photograph, Wildwood Visitors' Centre, Wildwood Ecoforest gift card series, www.ecoforestry.ca.

To me, this photo perfectly reflects Alan's insights about life: how everything in Nature is interconnected, how humans are a part of ecosystems, and how beautiful and intricate our relationships are with the natural world – with our more-than-human relatives. Alan was co-founder of the University of Victoria's Environmental Studies program in the 1970s and of the Ecoforestry Institute in the 1990s. With his friend and colleague Duncan Taylor, they edited two books focusing specifically on ecoforestry (Drengson and Taylor 1997; Drengson and Taylor 2003). Alan also authored many articles on ecoforestry and human-forest relationships, and was founding editor of the journals *The Trumpeter* (1983), and *International Journal of Ecoforestry* (1989).

It is no surprise, therefore, that this revelation should come to me while connecting with a photo from Wildwood. Wildwood, an expanse of forested land, set alongside picturesque Quennell Lake at Yellow Point near the town of Ladysmith on Vancouver Island, was the home of ecoforester Merv Wilkinson, until his passing in 2011. Merv had purchased the property there in 1938, intending to clear it and turn it into a farm. However, he soon realized that the spectacular big Douglas-firs and other forest species were too magnificent and important to cut. With insights from European forestry, starting in 1945 Merv developed a sustainable forestry practice, learning as he went, refining his methods and ideas to ensure the continued health of the forest. He cut some trees, but taking only the volume of wood that would be replaced by the forest's overall growth of trees. He explained, "[w]ith this system, your land is never out of production — you're always growing trees" (Ecoforesty Institute Society, n.d.).

An obvious kindred spirit of Alan's, Merv became intimately familiar, not only with the trees of Wildwood but with all the diverse life of the forest: the deep woods, the meadows, the wetlands, and the lake. He welcomed Indigenous friends like Dr. Luschiim Arvid Charlie of Quw'utsun Nation and members of the neighbouring Stz'uminus and Snuneymuxw Nations to Wildwood, with respect and appreciation for their knowledge. Merv never planted trees in his Wildwood forest; he allowed them to regenerate naturally, leaving the biggest, healthiest individuals to serve as continuous sources of seed and new tree seedlings – not only renewing the forest but also providing food for the red squirrels, field mice, and birds living at Wildwood. He was out on the land every day, and knew every tree and its history. A keen observer, he was always working to refine his practices to be even more sustainable, to make the Wildwood forest even healthier, more ecologically diverse and more resilient. Merv celebrated all the species living around him: sword ferns and licorice ferns, skunk cabbage, flowering dogwood, bigleaf maple and cascara trees, bitter cherry, and coast juniper, and even the diverse mosses, lichens and fungi of the forest floor, soils, and canopies. He left the stumps and the logs of naturally downed trees to serve as the gardens, the rotting wood providing the perfect medium for berry bushes, like the red huckleberry in Hans's photo.

Merv was also careful to leave standing dead trees – his "wildlife hotels and restaurants" – as habitat and food sources for the birds he loved: the pileated woodpeckers, the owls, and the songbirds. One of the largest of the Old Growth Douglas-firs had an eagle's nest at the top. In the wintertime he would cut a lichen-covered fir tree for the deer. There was one big buck who would appear as soon as he heard the noise of the saw, and as Merv cut the lower limbs of the felled tree, the deer would start browsing the lichens on the upper trunk and branches, trading places as each worked toward the middle from opposite ends. He also maintained areas of brush as habitat and never used chemical pesticides. From the trees that he did cut, Merv often had lumber milled right on site, for use by local community members. The shed in Hans's photo would have been built from Wildwood boards. Along with selective timber harvesting, Merv diversified Wildwood's production, cutting Christmas trees in multi-year cycles, as well as wooden fence posts, firewood, and other forest products.

With his love of forests and life in general, Merv was an educator, through and through. He welcomed school groups, university groups, researchers, and the general public to Wildwood and spent countless hours taking them on tours, inviting them into his spectacular log house ("the homestead") to talk about forests and ecoforestry. As a new professor in the Environmental Studies Program, having been introduced to Wildwood by my friend and colleague Duncan Taylor, I and my classes were welcomed by Merv. He entranced and delighted our students. I would invariably include an exam question at the end of term, something like "[w]hat were some of the ingredients in Merv Wilkinson's recipe for sustainable forestry at Wildwood?" The answers were always enthusiastic: get to know your forest and trees; never cut more wood than you are able to grow; always leave habitat for other species; diversify your harvest; monitor carefully. These are lessons remembered to this day by many of the students.

It's not at all astonishing that Alan and Merv connected, and that Alan was so impressed with Merv and his philosophies. In 1993, in *The Trumpeter*, Alan wrote an article about Merv and Wildwood, following a visit there: "Remembering the Ecological Wisdom of Ancient Forests & Elders." Along with his wife Dr. Victoria Stevens, and their three daughters, and a special restoration forester from the American Northwest, Orville Camp (another wise "elder") and his wife Mary, they spent the day with Merv – a day commemorated in that article. Alan recalled in the article,

> When I came to the North West in the early Forties, there were large, unbroken expanses of ancient natural forests from Alaska to California. We moved to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington in the late Forties. The Peninsula was then covered with old-growth forests, and at their core lay a million acres of wilderness National Park. (Drengson 1993, sec. I, para. 3)

Alan wrote about Merv's philosophy and about his inspiring practices of ecoforestry, exclaiming,

> Wildwood still looks like an ancient, natural forest, even though Merv has been taking wood out of it for fifty years…. These forests [Wildwood and the forests managed by Orville Camp] provide a sharp contrast to the clearcuts and plantations in their surrounding areas. Both have a diversity of species and ages, and a wild feel to them. Both forests have standing elders. (Drengson 1993, sec. I paras. 1-2)

In viewing Merv's and Orville Camp's ecoforestry methods, Alan was struck by the vast destructiveness of dominant forestry methods of the region that he had witnessed over his own lifetime. He wrote:

> Industrial forestry is based on the same approach as conventional agriculture, which relies on heavy machinery, fossil fuels and petrochemicals…. Production must keep up with demand, and the faith is that this will happen efficiently in a competitive, monetarized, market economy. In only four and one half decades since my school days in Shelton, timber based communities of the North West, from Northern California to Southern Alaska, have either all but disappeared or have suffered a steep decline in prospects. Most of the ancient forests on private land have been clearcut, and most of the forests on public land have been too. (Drengson 1993, sec. II, para. 3)

Sadly, three decades after Alan's words were first published, these approaches still predominate, and the destruction of natural forest lands is still rampant at the present time, with only a tiny fraction of our original coastal forests remaining.

Going back to Hans Tammemagi's photo: the stump was of a medium-sized Douglas-fir tree that had been cut by Merv. Here, Alan's words from 1993 touch a special chord:

> Forests are rich in diversity and quantity of places. In some cases they extend habitat possibilities to almost 300 feet above ground over whole watersheds and beyond. Bare ground has only surface area, but natural forests are places of complex, structural networks above and below ground. *There is as much going on below ground as above*. (Drengson 1993, sec. I, para. 12 (emphasis added))

The tree that had been cut reflected the hidden underground fabric connecting trees together with each other and with the shrubs of the understorey, through a network of fungal mycelium. The fungal organisms surround the tree roots, drawing nutrients from individual trees to feed themselves and their spore-bearing "fruit" – the mushrooms that we are more familiar with – and the neighbouring trees. This is why the stump had continued to grow after the tree was cut; it was being fed by neighbouring trees through the mycelial network. Living tree neighbours, as demonstrated by forest ecologist Dr. Suzanne Simard, communicate with each other through

fungal-tree root networks, exchanging moisture and nutrients across individuals and species (Simard 2021). Sealed stumps, seen throughout Douglas-fir woodlands of Vancouver Island, are but one type of evidence for tree communication. Arbutus trees (Image 2), among others, are known to be a part of the linked mycelial system, connecting with other species, and helping to provide nutrients for Douglas-fir saplings, as demonstrated some decades ago by forest ecologist Chris Maser, author of *Forest Primeval*, among numerous other books. Chris had also visited Wildwood in the early 1990s and, as recounted by Duncan Taylor who was there with him, when Chris Maser made a suggestion to Merv that he might leave more woody matter on the forest floor, Merv was quick to take his advice.

Image 2. Nancy Turner, *Arbutus Tree (Arbutus menziesii*) *with Clustered Berries*, November 26, 2007, photograph.

Back in 1993, Alan exclaimed:

> Who would ever have dreamed even a few years ago that the largest single living being, and oldest discovered so far, is not a tree, but a mycelium, living in symbiosis with tree and other plant roots? Who could have said how interdependent trees and fungi are? Or, who would have thought that in a natural forest trees exchange information which helps them to control bug infestations? And what of the role of forests in creating atmosphere, modifying climate, and controlling floods? The Earth's forests are integral to the vast dance of life. (Drengson 1993, sec. II, para. 6)

There are also many unseen parts to the story in this photo, which Alan would have understood and enjoyed. The huckleberry bush and salal growing within the rotting part of the stump are benefitting from the moisture and nutrients the decaying wood provided. The calypsos and coralroot orchids (Image 3) and the ghost pipes, out of the range of the photo, but surrounding the site where it was taken, also connect with the soil fungi to draw their nutrients. The berries produced by the stump-growing huckleberry (Image 4) and salal bushes would be feeding the birds and their babies throughout the summer. And the lichens embellishing the bark of the stump are themselves alliances of organisms – each type composed of fungi and algae tightly bonded together. A closer focus would show tiny ant highways through the mosses on the woodland floor, with nearby thatched ant hills comprised of fir needles and other forest debris – another element of complexity and interconnectedness of the forest ecosystem, one in which both Merv and Alan would have taken delight. The Nuu-chah-nulth expression, *Hishuk ish tsawalk* ("everything is one") sums it up perfectly (Atleo 1999, 2004; see also Martinez 1993).

Image 3. Nancy Turner, *Western Coralroot Orchid* (*Corallorhiza mertensiana*), *Saprophytic Herb from Coral-Like Rhizomes*, June 15, 2012, photograph.

Image 4. Nancy Turner, *Edible Red Huckleberries (Vaccinium parvifolium)*, 2014, photograph.

During his visit to Wildwood and Merv in 1993, while his family was occupied elsewhere, Alan stepped aside and climbed onto a large rock looking down over the forest at Wildwood, just as Merv himself would have done from time to time. The road, Alan noted, "*wound through the forest like a deer trail*." He wrote:

> From my perch I sensed being in the midst of millions of living beings, most of whom I could not, and probably would not ever see with my own eyes. I had thought I knew something about natural forests from a lifetime of first-hand experience, enlarged by reading much scientific and other literature about them. But there a forest glowed in concrete clarity and profound mystery. (Drengson 1993, sec. V para. 3)
>
> In human communities meaningful stories are held together by the elders; they are the continuity the group has with its past, just as children are with the future. They define a community's relationships to time. The community's wisdom is fully embodied in them. Even though an elder might be silent, their mere presence speaks eloquently of the community's traditions. The accumulated wisdom of the elders prepares it for facing extreme conditions, and weathering storms and trials. How the elders are treated reveals the community's spiritual condition. (Drengson 1993, sec. V para. 5)

Alan and Merv were two of a kind – embracing life with a special joy and deep respect for humans and the environment. I feel so privileged to have known them both. In fact, it was Alan who was

the connector for me. Through his work in environmental philosophy and environmental studies he, and our mutual friend Duncan Taylor, introduced me to the concept of ecoforestry, and to the work towards sustainable forest practices being demonstrated by a number of inspiring individuals, including Orville Camp, Chris Maser, Herb Hammond, and Merv. Given the web of interconnections that forests represent, with humans often as a destructive and overwhelming force, it is heartening and reassuring to know that we can contribute to the health and richness of forests while still drawing physical and emotional benefits from them. The key is to embrace the concepts of respect and reciprocity towards our non-human relations – the trees and all the other forest species, as my friend Robin Wall Kimmerer, Indigenous author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, would advise. We need to think less about ecosystem services to humans, and more about human services to ecosystems. We always seem to be taking, and not giving back. This idea was expressed over a century ago in discussions of forests in British Columbia:

> All the efforts of the Dominion must be devoted to production and economy. The vast resources of Canada, to which the term 'illimitable' has been so frequently applied, because of lack of knowledge, must be turned to some useful purpose. Untilled fields, buried minerals or standing forests are of no value except for the wealth which, through industry, can be produced therefrom. (Whitford and Craig 1918, 1)

Alan easily recognized the irony:

> As we walked in Wildwood forest, I reflected on the contrast to walking through clearcuts scarified by machinery and burned. To look at such devastation is overwhelming. Its presence is an indication of ignorance and that all is not spiritually and morally well with us. For thousands of years and generations, countless beings had together created a complex habitat supporting a diversity of life forms. (Drengson 1993, sec. II para. 3)

As humans, we are connected to forests in so many ways. Forests were here on earth long before we humans existed, but for our entire history, forests have been there for us, providing for our needs and inspiring us. I am reminded that some of my Indigenous friends assert, "The trees are your Grandmothers!" My friend Sellemah, Joan Morris, of the Songhees Nation told me, "You have to sing to the trees!" I think Alan and Merv would both have agreed. Our connections are as close as our own tears and the raindrops clinging to the fir boughs after a storm.

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