

“Queen Charlotte Islands – Remote islands of British Columbia, Canada”

It was March in 1981 and I was in the middle of my PHD degree program of study in Satellite Image Analysis at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. One evening I got a call from Bill Carr, a fellow graduate student, asking if I could join him the next day to assist with his research project in the Queen Charlotte Islands – all expenses paid. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. But first, I had to find someone to take over my seminar the following day. Luckily, Peter Murphy volunteered to lead the seminar, just 30 minutes before Bill was ready to leave! We picked up Dr Chris Marchant at his office in the botanical gardens and proceeded to Vancouver International Airport, where I spent my last \$5.00 on a roll of film for my camera. We boarded the Pacific Western Airlines flight to Sandspit, the main town and only airport in the islands. We made a brief stop in Port Hardy on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. The route along the beautiful, rugged coast of British Columbia was spectacular, with stunning views of towering snow-capped mountains and deep, emerald green islands.

We landed in Sandspit under mostly sunny skies, which was rather unusual for the region this time of year. As the plane taxied to the tiny one room terminal building, there was a sudden “flurry” of activity around the airport. We picked up our bags and were met by a couple of the management staff from Crown Zellerbach (CZ), one of two companies with timber harvesting leases from the provincial government of British Columbia. Our first stop was at the small airport café for lunch – the menu consisted mostly of burgers (727, 737, 747)! We enjoyed the burgers with the CZ foresters, while we watched all the activity as the Pacific Western Airlines jet prepared to return to Vancouver. Suddenly, as the jet lifted off the runway, people around the airport quickly disappeared. The daily flight to and from Vancouver is one of the only links the islands have with the outside world, along with the British Columbia ferry from Prince Rupert three times a week.

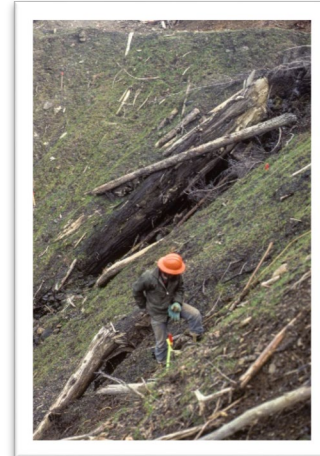
[See map on last page]

After lunch, the staff took us to the “Moresby Island Motel” across the road from the airport, one of only two choices for accommodations. The motel was quite basic, just a series of interconnected mobile home trailers, but the setting beneath the tall Sitka Spruce trees was gorgeous. The rooms were simply furnished but comfortable – typical of a logging camp. After we had checked into our rooms, our “hosts” from CZ drove us to the research project site, a large landslide that needed to be “revegetated”. The route took us along gravel roads through several recently logged areas, and along the way we spotted several deer. At times, we also had beautiful views of the rugged, snow-capped peaks on Graham Island across the Skidigate Channel. Once we had unloaded our gear at the project site, we headed back to Sandspit, very much a small logging town. Most all of the houses in the town were located along either side of the one and only paved road on the island – a recently paved road that extended for just 10 miles. From almost any place in town, there were beautiful views of Graham Island across the channel. As evening approached, we were invited to the CZ logging camp cookhouse for dinner. The food was basic home cooking, such as roast beef, pork chops, fried chicken, and baked potatoes – and lots of it! We all enjoyed a hearty meal that night, and as we were leaving the cookhouse, the cook insisted that we take a sack full of pastries and fruit as “snacks” for the evening! After dinner, I took a short walk through town to a large grove of ancient Sitka Spruce along the edge of the beach – a beautiful, long arc of sand.



A brisk offshore breeze from the south signaled the approach of a Pacific storm as waves began to pound the shore. Behind me, the sun finally disappeared below the horizon and a gorgeous sky filled with millions of stars and a brilliant half moon slowly appeared, softly lighting some high cirrus clouds. As I retired for the night, the sound of the wind gently blowing through the Sitka Spruce trees was lovely.

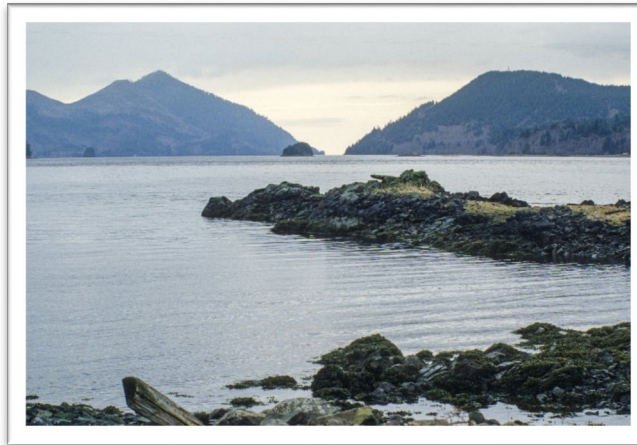
I awoke the next morning at 5:30am for breakfast with Bill at 6:00am – a “hearty” logger’s breakfast of ham, eggs, bacon, potatoes, pancakes, and toast, along with a sack lunch that the cook said we must have for the day’s work! (No one ever goes hungry in a logging camp!) After breakfast, we loaded our gear into the truck and headed for the research project site to begin the work of planting new trees and shrubs to revegetate the steep mountain slope that had been recently logged. However, along the way we suddenly had a flat tire and had to borrow a spare from a CZ road maintenance crew. When we finally arrived at the site, we spent the rest of the morning planting the upper face of a huge landslide – over a thousand feet down an incredibly steep slope of very unstable loose rock and soil! Most of the time we just tried our best to keep our footing and avoid sliding downhill! Several times we had to use ropes to move up and down the steep slope.



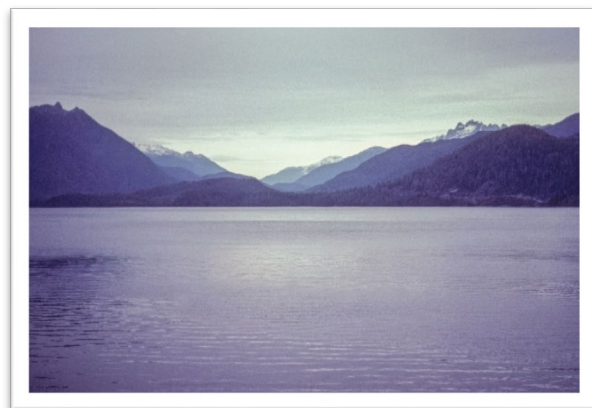
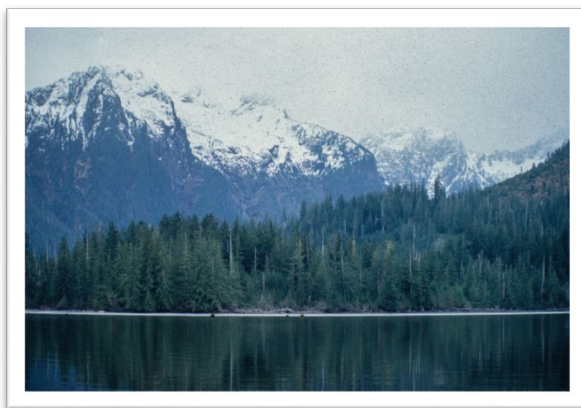
Meanwhile, a couple of large eagles circled overhead, always keeping an eye on us. (Perhaps they thought we might “stir up” some food for them) As noon rolled around, we sat on a log under sunny skies and ate our enormous sack lunch from the cookhouse – sort of a “picnic” in a way! Later in the afternoon, we finished planting the rest of the young tree seedlings and shrubs, then headed back to town. As we approached Sandspit, we saw a large beautiful eagle slowly “gliding” over the beach, barely

6 feet above the surface, as if it was “suspended” in mid-air – the offshore breeze seemed to hold it gently in its hand! (It was a mesmerizing scene to behold)

Back in the motel, I took a long shower, and then met Bill and Chris for dinner at the camp cookhouse. Once again, there were hefty portions of BBQ ribs, lasagna, roasted chicken, and prime rib, as well as all the side dishes you could imagine! Everything was delicious and served on a huge buffet. Once again, George the cook, would not let us leave the cookhouse without another sack full of “snacks” for the evening! Later, I took a long walk on the beach and watched as the rugged mountains on Graham Island slowly drifted into the hazy sunset – a beautiful way to finish a tough day. (No satellite TV at the motel)

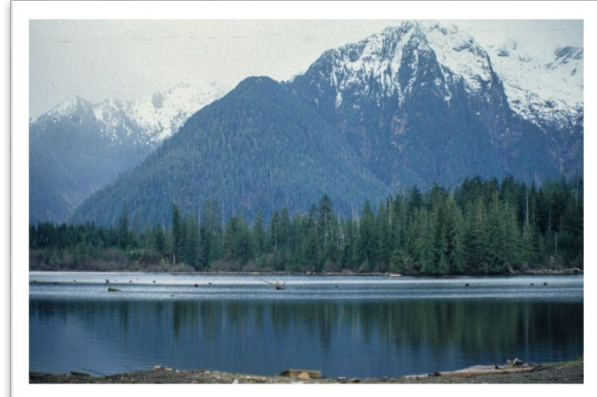
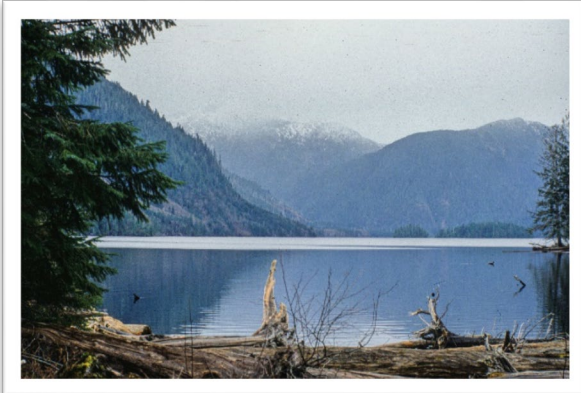


We were up the next morning at 5:30am for another monster breakfast at the cookhouse. Our job for the day was to construct a small greenhouse in which to raise tree seedlings and shrubs for future revegetation. On the way, we surveyed several old landslides along Hays Bay Road that had been revegetated three years before. We spotted quite a few deer in the area as we drove to Deena Bay. There we assembled the greenhouse kit on a beautiful site among a large grove of old-growth Sitka Spruce near the edge of the beach. After having assembled the greenhouse, we drove back to Sandspit and changed our flight reservations to depart one day earlier – Friday rather than Saturday. By the point, we were just in time for lunch at the cookhouse – another monstrous meal fit for a logger! After lunch, the chief forester for CZ, invited us to join him to tour a future regeneration site on nearby Graham Island. We boarded a small ferry to the island and then drove to the tiny village of “Tlell” (pronounced Tell). On our short trip to Graham Island, we had incredible views looking down Skidigate Channel – snow-capped mountains laced with wisps of clouds and fog. In the distance, a soft blue haze outlined a series of mountain ranges, each succeedingly higher and further away, almost seemingly endless!

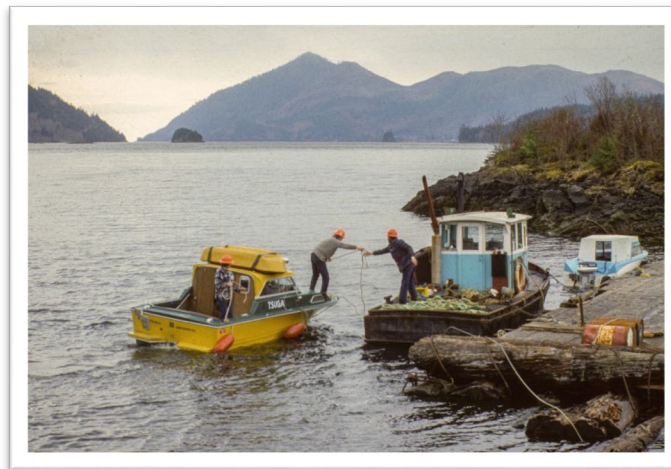


After surveying the site, we headed back to the small ferry dock, just as the British Columbia ferry from Prince Rupert arrived. Once we were back in Sandspit, Ron, the chief CZ forester, and his wife Kathy invited us for dinner at their home. It was a delightful, relaxed evening as we enjoyed the home cooked meal. And later we played cards around the fireplace.

At 6:00am the next morning, I joined Bill and Chris for breakfast at the cookhouse, and later we met up with Ron for a trip to the Moresby Island logging camp for a meeting at Sewell Inlet with foresters from Raynier Canada. From there we followed a huge off-road logging truck on the main haul road to Mosquito Lake, a large body of water situated below some of the highest snow-covered peaks on Moresby Island – a beautiful spot! Ron tried some fishing for trout, but the fish had other ideas that day.



Then we continued on to the logging camp where an old cedar shake mill was still operating. The camp was located at the head of a narrow inlet from the Pacific Ocean and surrounded by rugged snow-covered peaks. It wasn't long before dark, heavy clouds began to move in, threatening rain and snow. The Raynier Canada foresters arrived by small boat and together we all surveyed two trailers that were to be used for housing a crew of tree planters who would be arriving in a few days.



One of the trailers had a lock on the door that was broken, and as we entered, we found evidence of recent bear activity. And in addition, we discovered three dead mice in the refrigerator! (How they got there remains a mystery) Meanwhile, three large eagles soared overhead, so maybe the mice had been hiding?

Soon it was time to bid farewell to the foresters from Raynier Canada and head back to Sandspit for our return flight to Vancouver. Along the way we spotted more deer and got a brief glimpse of a large Black Bear. We arrived back in town just in time for lunch at the cookhouse. And as we left, after another hearty logger lunch, George once again insisted upon giving us a large sack of delicious “snacks” for our

journey back to Vancouver. Then the time came to check in for the Pacific Western Airlines flight, and to bid a fond farewell to Ron, and especially to George, an exceptional cook at the CZ logging camp cookhouse! The flight was almost full, and as the plane took off, heavy clouds hung over the peaks of the highest mountains in the Queen Charlotte Islands – an ominous sign of a strong incoming Pacific storm. Once again, we made a brief stop in Port Hardy before continuing on to Vancouver. As we flew south down the Strait of Georgia, following the rugged coastline of the British Columbia mainland, the skies began to clear and reveal a gorgeous landscape of beautiful emerald green islands and snow-capped mountains. We landed in Vancouver under brilliant blue skies, and the warm weather made it feel like a wonderful spring day. Even some of the Rhododendrons were beginning to bloom – a sure sign of spring!

Back at my apartment in Vancouver, I reflected upon my time in the Queen Charlotte Islands. It had been an incredible experience to see a part of the world that very few people see, especially to have been invited to see it very much as a local, not as a tourist. The CZ foresters were very welcoming and gave us a glimpse of their isolated life on the islands. Even though our stay on then islands was brief, I felt as if I had been a special guest of the people I met, especially George the cook! It was certainly clear that he took a great deal of pride in his cooking, just as a gourmet chef would, in spite of his remote location.

My short trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands was a most enjoyable and memorable one that I have come to treasure in my memories. In later years, I would once again see the Queen Charlotte Islands, but from a distance aboard the Alaska ferry. As other passengers gazed out the window at the islands, I saw them from a much different perspective – I had been there!

