

# Old Growth Forests

## British Columbia, Canada

**B.C. has an estimated 25 million hectares (62 million acres) of old growth—about the size of the United Kingdom or the state of Oregon.**

British Columbia is one of the few jurisdictions in the world that still has large amounts of forest that have never been logged, including abundant old growth forests. B.C.'s approach to forest conservation and management ensures that the province will always have large amounts of old growth forest.

### B.C.'s Old Growth Forests

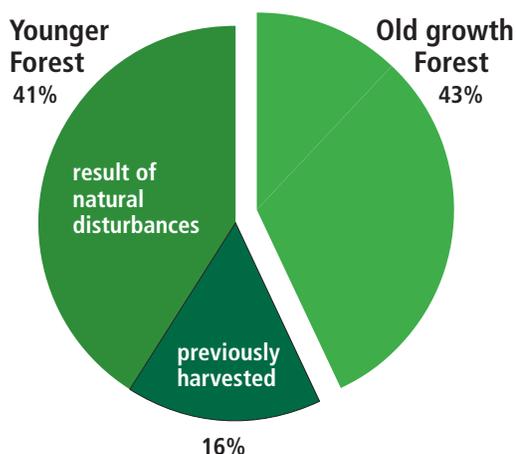
Old growth forest accounts for an estimated 43 per cent of B.C.'s forests. That is 25 million hectares (62 million acres) of old growth—about the size of the United Kingdom or the state of Oregon.

Old growth forests typically contain large trees, and dead and decaying

woody materials, with the most ancient forests supporting species not found in younger forests. While most older trees are large, growing conditions can also result in old trees that are quite small. Also, while many original (never harvested) forests are old growth, others are young as a result of fire or other natural disturbance. These younger forests also provide important habitat conditions that wildlife depends on, which may not be found in older forests.

In B.C.'s Interior (non-coastal) areas, where fire is a frequent and natural occurrence, old growth is defined as forests over 120 or 140 years of age. More of these forests are reaching older ages as a result of fire fighting. In the 1800s, for example, fires burned, an average of 500,000 hectares (1.2 million acres) of B.C. a year. Today, on average, natural disturbances and harvesting together affect only about half that amount.

In B.C.'s coastal rainforests, old growth is defined as trees over 250 years, with some trees reaching more than 1,000 years of age. Although fires are rare, wind or slides can affect individual trees or patches of trees, often producing mixed-age forests. Old growth accounts for about 54 per cent of the coastal forest, or 3.9 million hectares (9.6 million acres).



Old growth forests account for about 43% of BC's forests. The remainder of B.C.'s forests is younger due to natural disturbances (such as fire, wind, or disease) or harvesting.



**B.C. is one of the few places in the world with large amounts of old growth forest.**

## Conserving Old Growth

Protection of old growth forests has been one of the priorities in B.C.'s doubling of its parks system over the past decade. About four million hectares (10 million acres), or more than 15 per cent of the province's old growth, is now protected, and the amount will increase as land use planning is completed in coastal areas. Aside from parks, another 11.5 million hectares (30 million acres) of old growth is expected never to be harvested, largely because the timber is inaccessible or uneconomic to harvest. Altogether, that means about 15.5 million hectares (40 million acres) of old growth will likely never be harvested.

Where harvesting is taking place, laws ensure that harvest levels are sustainable over the long-term. Less than one-third of one percent of B.C.'s forests are harvested annually. Most harvesting takes place in forests that have never been harvested, as commercial harvesting is relatively new to B.C., and many second-growth forests are too young to harvest. Harvesting in second-growth forests will continue to increase, eventually replacing the harvesting of original forests.

B.C.'s forest practices regulations help conserve old growth and the characteristics of older forests. B.C. has been assessing entire watersheds or groups of watersheds in order to retain an appropriate amount of old growth or mature forest across the landscape. Old growth management areas are being established to help conserve biodiversity at the landscape level. At the stand level, forest managers are conserving biodiversity

by retaining patches of trees, and leaving coarse woody debris on the ground. In addition, special practices are in place to help conserve habitat for wildlife species that depend on old growth.

## Further Reading:

Wells, R.W., K.P. Lertzman, and S.C. Saunders. 1998. *Old Growth Definitions for the Forests of British Columbia*, Canada. *Natural Areas Journal* 18(4): 280-294

MacKinnon, A, and T. Vold. 1998. *Old-Growth Forests Inventory for British Columbia*, Canada. *Natural Areas Journal* 18(4): 309-318



About 15.5 million hectares (40 million acres) of old growth forest are either protected in parks or are located in areas where harvesting is not expected.