

The Forest Communities Program

Despite the pressures of development, forests continue to exist as symbols of peace and tranquility in a complex world. But the reality of most forested areas in Canada is that there are many groups competing for access to their material and spiritual assets. Managing these diverse interests while protecting the ecology of the forest is becoming an increasingly sophisticated undertaking.

In 1992, Canada's involvement at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro included a commitment to work toward a Sustainable Forest Management approach. Shortly before that event, Natural Resources Canada launched the Canadian Model Forest Program as part of the federal Green Plan. This 15-year experience has seen the establishment of 11 Model Forests and three special project areas, ranging in size from 100,000 to nearly eight million hectares. Each Model Forest is managed by a nonprofit organization comprised primarily of volunteer representatives from local stakeholder groups – each with its own concerns – and all have worked toward developing and sharing long-term sustainable management solutions. Together these organizations make up the Canadian Model Forest Network (CMFN).

In *Canadian Model Forest Network Achievements*, department staff credit the 500-plus partnerships that have become engaged in the project with advancing knowledge, innovation and best practices in forest management [NRCan 2006]. Through membership in the International Model Forest Network, the CMFN's work is being shared with forestry experts in 19 countries. In May 2006, CMFN members formed a new nonprofit partnership organization to provide a continuing platform for partnership development and the coordination of sustainability efforts nationally and internationally.

Says Canadian Forestry Service Director of Programs Brian Wilson: "CMFN has delivered a lot in terms of behaviour change on forested lands, innovative management practice tools and community engagement. It has demonstrated that integrated land management is the best approach to sustainable forest management. In the three, five-year cycles that the program operated under, the network benefited from the many results generated by a diverse research and demonstration base."

Benefits of participation

Gene Kimbley, General Manager of the Prince Albert Model Forest in Saskatchewan, feels that the partnerships forged through the CMFN have bred an entirely new understanding among the players involved. Says Gene: “As First Nations people, the chance to sit with representatives from industry and the federal and provincial governments, and to see and hear what was going on in the landscape and the research was exciting. We had not had the chance to work with this type of a group before, and they hadn’t had the chance to work with us. The projects that got started through the Model Forest program and the networking on which they were based soon made it clear that there was a new movement in the works.”

Carl Smith, President of the Manitoba Model Forest agrees. Says Carl: “Once the partners broke down the barriers and became educated about one another, we were able to address long-standing issues. This program has been able to carve out new ways of operating, which sidestep questions about traditional leadership. We work in a consensus way and everyone is interested in being part of a solution. We are also excited about the fact that area youth are very involved in our operations.”

A second benefit has been the gradually widening awareness and appreciation of the work done by the CMFN. In New Brunswick, for example, the Fundy Model Forest has been educating students about its work. Two school boards have joined as Model Forest partners. Says President David MacLean: “We’re drawing in organizations that represent a shift away from viewing forests simply as sources of pulp and paper and two-by-fours. Education, ecotourism and finished wood product opportunities are attracting a new set of players. Their interest is also founded on our track record of innovative

Stellar achievements of the Model Forests

Though there were literally hundreds of projects undertaken by the 11 participating Model Forests, each developed at least one initiative that assumed greater prominence and will continue to influence the direction of future work. In brief:

1) McGregor Model Forest (BC)

Members produced a process and software system for incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge into the forest’s scenario planning exercise. One of a number of innovative tools developed by the “McGregor Approach” scenario planning predicts and analyses various future forest conditions. (www.mcgregor.bc.ca)

2) Foothills Model Forest (AB)

The grizzly bear research program aims to provide resource managers with knowledge and planning tools that will ensure the long-term conservation of grizzly bears in the Yellowhead Ecosystem. Attracting attention from a diverse group – scientists, biologists, veterinarians, conservation organizations, forest and oil and gas companies – the program’s findings have already led to changes in resource company operations. (www.fmf.ab.ca)

3) Prince Albert Model Forest (SK)

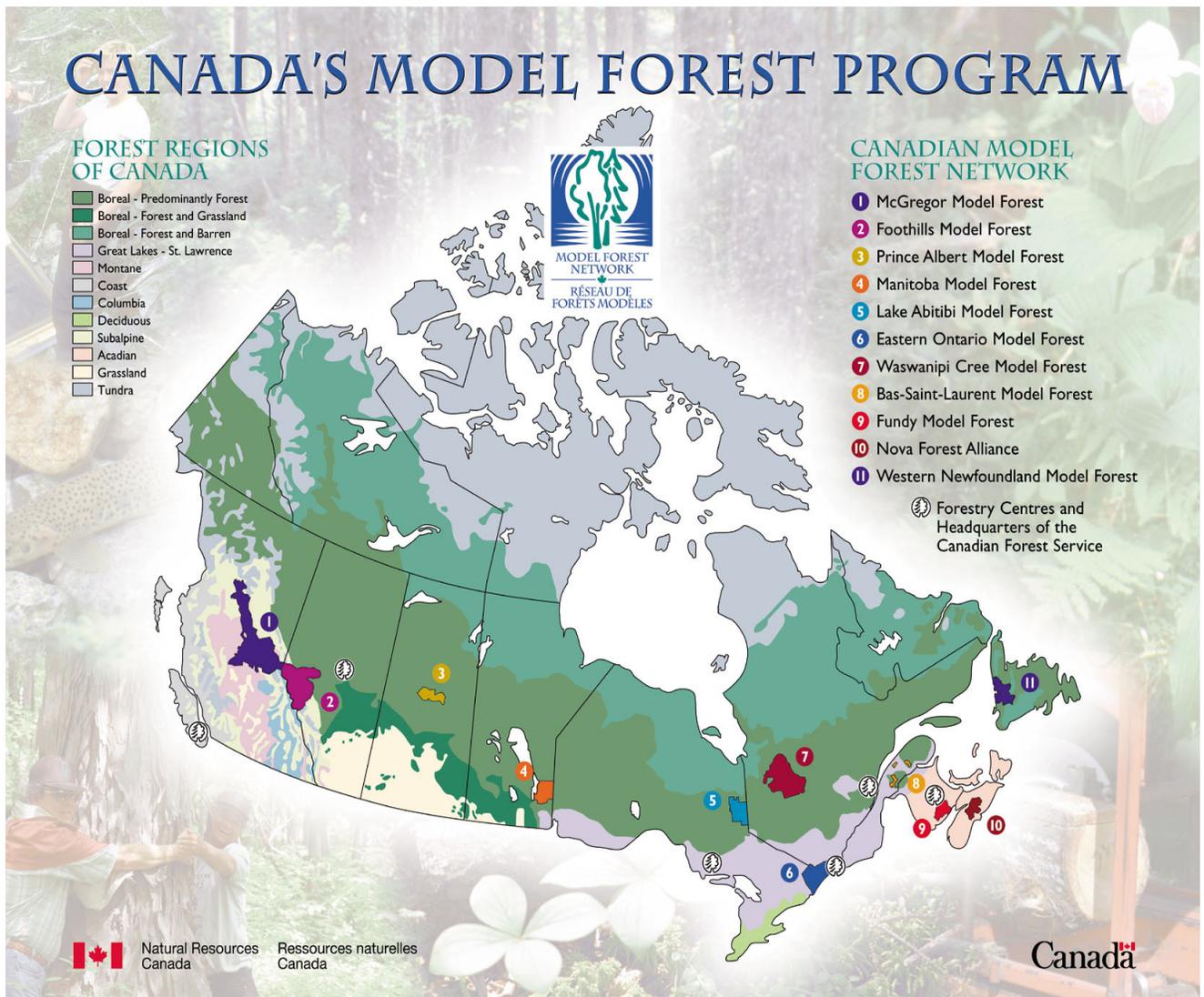
Three levels of Aboriginal government and three levels of non-Aboriginal government have endorsed an ecosystem-based management plan for this forest. The planning process itself, which solicited public input at the outset and carefully weighed stakeholder concerns, has since been adopted by the Saskatchewan government. (www.pamodelforest.sk.ca)

work, like the computer mapping process developed by Dr. Paul Arp, a watershed management professor at the University of New Brunswick. His process has enabled us to provide industry and road builders with detailed depth to water maps across full forested landscapes, which identify wet areas and small, unmapped streams. Companies in Nova Scotia, Maine and Alberta are now also using the mapping process originally tested in the Model Forest.”

4) Manitoba’s Model Forest

With input from the provincial government, forest products companies and university researchers, members have produced prescriptions for site preparation and harvesting which are meant to mimic the effects of wildfire and other natural disturbances. The goal is to make them look, feel and thrive like a natural forest.

(www.manitobamodelforest.net)



Successful partnerships and wider understanding of sustainable forest management processes sparked interest outside the confines of the 11 Model Forests and generated a series of projects called “Beyond Our Borders.” First Nations representatives in Saskatchewan, for example, were interested in the results of the elk herd restoration project that took place in the Prince Albert Model Forest and asked provincial forestry officials if they would launch a similar project to rehabilitate a moose herd. Says Gene Kimbley: “It was the first time a First Nations group had proposed such a partnership. That project is still ongoing, and members of the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation have also joined in.”

The network’s members have collaborated with one another on projects of shared interest, drawing on international experience and sharing the results with government and other agencies. Because several CMFN sites had identified private woodlot owners as fundamentally important to the forestry sector (they produce 20 percent of Canada’s most valued wood fibre), CMFN and the Canadian Federation of Woodlot Owners jointly commissioned a report entitled “Meeting the Stewardship Challenge.” Partly as a result of their higher profile and an increased recognition of the role woodlot wetlands play in cleaning our water, woodlot owners in Ontario will become more involved in efforts to secure safe water supplies. Says Eastern Ontario Model Forest Manager Brian Barkley: “Our work has provided a forum through which woodlot owners can communicate with provincial standing committees. Their voices and experience have helped effect changes in the way government views and funds programs which encourage good forest stewardship.”

The notions of broader dialogue and participation will be incorporated into the CMFN’s next phase.

5) Lake Abitibi Model Forest (ON)

A First Nation and other non-Aboriginal communities are modelling how forestry projects have an impact upon their local economies. They have jointly developed a Community Development Model (CDIM) and an Aboriginal CDIM, which forecasts the amount of provincial and federal tax revenues that various projects will generate. (www.lamf.net)

6) Eastern Ontario’s Model Forest

Some 24 landowners in this model forest became one of the first non-industrial private woodlot owners groups in Canada to achieve forest certification under the conditions defined the Forest Stewardship Council. (The FSC is an international nonprofit organization devoted to encouraging the responsible management of the world’s forests.) Landowners are hoping that certification will create a demand for certified forest products, and that it will also act as a tool for sound forest management and as a means of securing wildlife habitat. (www.eomf.on.ca)

7) Waswanipi Cree Model Forest (QC)

The Cree in this forest area had found the planning process used by trappers and forestry companies to be at odds with Cree traditional roles, so invited stakeholders to discuss how the process could be improved. The new set of guidelines, developed by the Cree and representatives from forestry companies, the provincial and federal government and Laval University will enhance Cree participation in the forest management planning process. (www.aboriginalcollections.ic.gc.ca/forest/)

A sector in transition

A stronger Canadian dollar, high energy costs and international competition for markets collectively have resulted in mill closures across the country. These stresses and the recently-unveiled Canada-US softwood lumber agreement demonstrate the continuing need to re-balance the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental.

Brian Wilson from the Canadian Forest Service says: “The Earth Summit concerns in 1992 grew from the looming threats posed by climate change and deforestation. The sustainable forest management actions it generated reflected an ecology-centred mindset. Today’s issues include more competition and consolidation among forest product companies, an aging and shrinking workforce and a greater diversity of interest and opinion about how forests are to be managed and their benefits shared.”

In response, and subject to Treasury Board approval, the Canadian Forest Service is planning to launch the Forest Communities Program (FCP). Set to begin in April 2007, FCP will offer \$400,000 per year over a five-year period to each of up to ten partnership groups to help communities establish work done at the landscape level – an industry term that places an integrated, balanced emphasis on ecological, social and economic considerations when determining how communities can benefit from the forest resource. FCP has attracted interest from both the existing Model Forest projects and new potential partnerships since the call for proposals was made in the summer of 2006.

FCP will continue to share the knowledge and tools it generates with international Model Forests and other international organizations. Successful applicants will be required to join the

8) Bas-Saint-Laurent Model Forest (QC)

Thanks to the trust built among project partners, 76 woodlot owners in this model forest agreed to voluntarily conserve wetlands on their property. Each was provided with a personalized guide which included a survey report, site pictures, a protection and enhancement plan, and a declaration of intent. Further partnership links forged outside the forest resulted in another 125 private woodlot owners volunteering to conserve their wetlands and support ecosystems.

(www.foret.fmodbsl.qc.ca)

9) Fundy Model Forest (NB)

A woodlot owners’ co-operative and a group of researchers developed management plans for private woodlots that will contribute to the sustainable management of watersheds. Members of the public were heavily involved in the initial planning and later evaluation of the watershed management plans. Researchers also developed a computerized process for mapping the location and depths of water across the landscape – a process which was eagerly adopted by forest industries and governments in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Maine.

(www.fundymodelforest.net)

10) Nova Forest Alliance (NS)

The Model Forest project in Nova Scotia put together a best practices manual which was adopted by numerous forest products companies in the province. It was supplemented by classroom and field training to increase understanding and adoption of the practices described. Nova Scotia has a high proportion of private landowners that were supported with a conference and the creation of a large-scale central resource.

(www.novaforestalliance.com)

existing network and the new program's ultimate goal will be to promote efficient governance structures and innovative resource management practices.

Says Brian Wilson: "Internationally and domestically, natural resource-based communities are dealing with industry transition and growing pressures on the forest resource. These forces require that we adjust relationships, articulate and broker diverse interests, and adopt integrative approaches which more fully connect our environmental and human relationships. We are adopting a more holistic understanding of resources and eliminating constructs where air, land and water are viewed as separate management issues. Everything is linked, so the key is to find the best ways to manage the forest resource – in the interests of all Canadians."

Forest-based opportunities

The proposed Forest Communities Program will continue its predecessor program's track record of engaging diverse groups in decision-making. It also will encourage participating communities to focus their energies on emerging forest-based opportunities. These might include, for example, expanding knowledge and tools for the valuation of environmental services, and community opportunities in tourism and bioenergy (wood fibre and oil products from wood waste as power sources).

Though CMFN project managers are brimming with new ideas for FCP projects and partners – both within Canada and outside – they are also cautiously optimistic that the brand identification built from the original program will move with them into the FCP's five-year mandate and beyond.

11) Western Newfoundland Model Forest

The concept of defining stakeholders' values as the first step in establishing an ecosystem management framework was identified as a best practice by the Model Forest and later adopted by SFM planning teams across the province. Forest managers have been helped to improve district plans using tools such as a database which maps and overlaps characteristics and assets of the forest landscape. (www.wnmf.com)

The CMFN also has three special projects operating in PEI, Labrador and on Vancouver Island.

(source: "The Canadian Model Forest Network")

Brian Barkley in the Eastern Ontario Model Forest believes that the CMFN work has taught members how to develop, maintain and renew functional partnerships. Says Brian: "The fact that we have a really broad base of diverse partnership means that we no longer have any fear about reaching into unknown areas. We believe that the Forest Communities Program can become an important platform within the Model Forest movement and, in turn, remain a critical part of the global community of practice."

In 1992, there was an assumption that the forestry sector's economics were resilient enough to withstand whatever downturns might occur and that it was important to focus on environmental sustainability. However, recent events have shown that significant forest sector adjustment is under way. The real strength of the

CMFN and the Forest Communities Program will be their ability to attract new participants that possess an inherent ability to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability in the work they undertake.

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Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'communities stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

References

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