Learning About the Place of Women in Forestry and Land Use Debates on British Columbia's West Coast

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Cet article rapporte une étude sur les enjeux et les actions des femmes rurales qui ont appuyé l'industrie forestière au nord de la Colombie-Britannique en 1990. Les recherches sur l'activisme de ces femmes ont démontré deux courants d'action. Le premier est basé sur une idéologie écoféministe et sur leur supposé appui de la protection environnementale, le deuxième met l'accent sur le support que leur classe sociale et leur communauté était supposé leur avoir apporté dans les conflits industriels. Des femmes vivant dans les villes forestières ont participé au projet de recherche de l'auteure et ont révélé qu'aucun de ces deux courants n'exprimait adéquatement la complexité des positions de ces femmes, de leur identité et de leur action politique dans les débats forestiers.

> *And if we get one more park, I personally will vomit in the premier's office, on his shoes.*
>
> *Every forester is an environmentalist. It's the preservationists that cause all the problems. The problems are the extremists that just feed off of emotion. They don't really have the facts.*
>
> *I'm a firm believer in special places being preserved, but I certainly believe in a working forest.*

What *is* the place of women in forestry and land use debates? This paper offers a post-hoc reflection of a research project in which I tried to understand the perspectives of women who supported industrial forestry on northern Vancouver Island during the 1990s—a time when British Columbia's forest industry was being dramatically reconfigured. Like other coastal communities in BC, residents of forestry towns on northern Vancouver Island ("the North Island") (Figure 1) were shaken by environmental protests during the Clayoquot Sound in 1993, beleaguered by on-going trade disputes with the United States, thinned out by the continuous downsizing as a result of new harvesting and processing technologies, worried about the recognition of legal rights of Aboriginal peoples, and concerned that social attitudes favouring wilderness protection would overshadow resource production on public lands. Indeed, during the 1990s, several new acts, policy initiatives, and planning processes were introduced to protect forest ecosystems by reducing harvest levels, increasing the level of protected areas, and raising standards and enforcement of harvesting regulations. These initiatives also increased the technical requirements of many types of jobs, requiring workers to gain certification to use/maintain certain equipment, or to ensure their work was in compliance with new standards. Government-induced changes met with massive public protests from men *and women* living in forested rural communities who argued that forestry communities and culture were now the endangered species in need of protection. Despite the fact that historical rates of overcutting, technological, and market changes all contributed to changes in the industry, workers and companies united against government and environmental organizations to retain their hold on remaining stands. Rural residents lashed out against what seemed to be the only visible targets: government and environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) who were promoting enhanced environmental protection. Or so I first thought.

My study took place over three years, from 1996-1999.[1] During this time, I analyzed policy documents, Census data, and undertook a participatory research project with student research assistants and local research participants to conduct 50 interviews, three focus groups, and two research workshops with women living in nine forestry communities on northern Vancouver Island (Figure 1). It was estimated that 51 per cent of employment income came from forestry occupations in 1996 (Horne).[2] I focused primarily on women who worked in forestry-related occupations (government, industry, non-governmental organizations) and/or were partnered with men in

forestry. Forty-one of the 50 women interviewed fit into this category.[3]

Many of the women in the study took part in front line protests in support of forestry at the BC Legislature, in Clayoquot Sound, and/or during local events. But these activities were not their only or most important forms of community activism. Indeed, 40 of the women who were publicly active took part in 74 local voluntary organizations.[4] I use the term "activism" to include mobilization by groups or individuals as a political means of challenging or actively affirming the status quo (after West and Blumberg). This includes public policy arenas as well as private places considering the family and household as important sites for activism (Gibson-Graham 1996; Maroney and Luxton). Within this broad definition, women in this study confronted unequal relations in their home life (including leaving their partners), provided food relief for friends, organized writing or speaking workshops, worked on women's health issues, wrote letters to provincial politicians, as well as held the line in public protests.

Situating Myself in the Research Process

If you're coming up here to point out all the errors of our ways, you better be careful because you're in a logging town.

Because I was entering hot political territory, I believed that ascertaining the place of women also required me to learn about my own situation in relation to forestry, land use, and women's activism. At the time of the research, I was living about 400 km away in Vancouver and working at the University of British Columbia. According to some women I interviewed, I lived in the largest clear-cut in the province. When I came to do the fieldwork, I brought with me my university education and job security. My own position in forestry and land use debates was ambivalent. Initially raised, then schooled, to promote environmental protection, I was also taught to empathize with others, particularly those of different situations of which I have no experience. This personal upbringing was congenial with feminist research methodologies that have sought to gain sympathetic understandings of women's lives. Yet, I had no sympathy for industrial forestry. The women I encountered spoke plainly, in language that was sometimes bitter and sometimes downright bawdy. They hardly wanted my sympathy.

To address my anxiety and their questions, I prepared a script. In a training booklet I prepared for local women researchers, I wrote:

> My objective is *not* to state that some women are right, while others are wrong; but rather, to uncover the points of diversity and similarity among women. With such information, I hope to contribute to discussions about the social issues that accompany environmental policy and land use change that are sensitive to the diversity of women's perspectives and experiences. (Reed 1997b: 3)

Sincere words. Platitudes maybe. Nevertheless, I remained confounded by how to interpret the perspectives and actions of these women.

My solution was to explicitly consider domestic and everyday lives of women within environmental policy debates, to illustrate how changes in policies affect social relations at regional and community levels as well as within households and for individuals. This is consistent with other feminists who have challenged the public/private divide that characterizes social life and who have used multi-scale analyses to explain individuals' actions, behaviours, and meanings (McDowell; Neis). This multi-level analysis that expanded ideas about activism helped me to advance two central theoretical arguments related to social marginalization (see Reed 2002-03, 2003) and embeddedness. I focus on the latter one here.

"If you're coming up here to point out all the errors of our ways, you better be careful because you're in a logging town."

Locating Women Conceptually

I don't think that a lot of people who live in ... the largest clear-cut in BC—Vancouver, Victoria [understand] ... all they do is put down cement or pavement ... they don't even allow a tree to grow back. So if the population keeps cutting down the trees in those clear-cuts down there, maybe they're going to lose sight of what a real forest looks like.

I began with the understanding that geographic and social characteristics intertwined to shape the conceptual place in which forestry-town women are situated. As Melody Hessing and Michael Howlett point out, "the southern and urban concentration of the population [in Canada] creates a physical and symbolic distance from hinterland areas of resource extraction and economic wealth creation" (36). Physically, urban residents have easier access to public forums, politicians, and civil servants as well as to international audiences to ensure that their issues are advanced on political agendas. But I believe that the social distance is even greater where forested landscapes have become, for many urbanites, landscapes more strongly valued for their ecological and other intan-

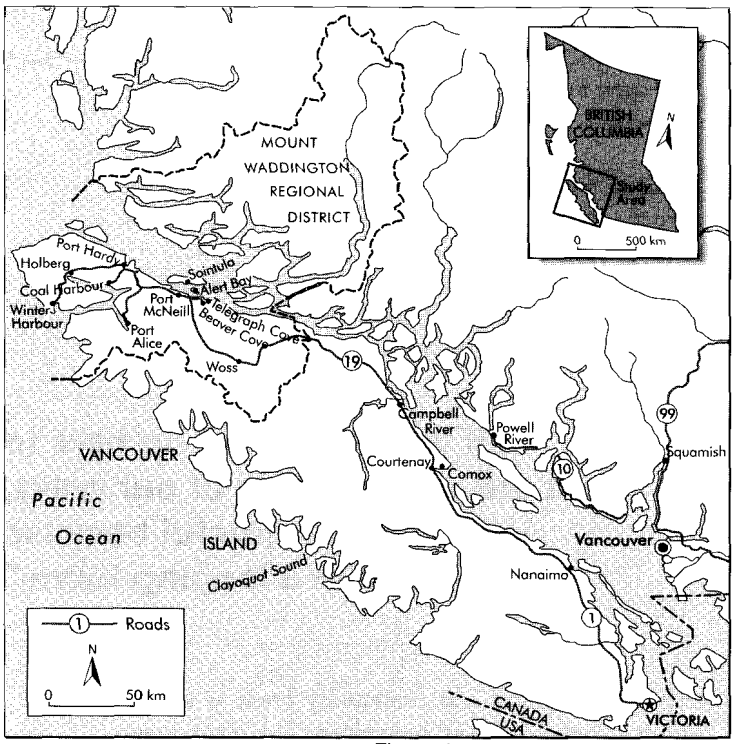

Figure 1.

gible benefits while they remain valued for their productive and economic attributes for rural residents whose livelihoods are more directly tied to resource production. This is not a neat dichotomy as elements of each interpretation rest within each social group. Nevertheless, there remains a bitter divide between leisure and labour, urban and rural, and interpretations of the pristine and the sullied (Carroll; Carroll, Daniels and Kusel; Proctor; White; Hayter).

Placing women within the rural landscape is challenging. It has long been reported that traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity are strong in rural places, where women are seen as the primary caregivers and nurturers and men as the providers and decision makers (Gibson). These conceptions are reinforced by a dominant ideology that still locates women's "rightful" place in the home and by a relative lack of employment prospects for women outside the home. Women are often viewed as secondary actors—in the labour force, in politics—and their actions are condoned so long as they do not upset longstanding gender ideologies (Gibson; Seitz; Warren). Women experience a double bind, marginalized in their own communities and isolated from the sites of political and economic power within a regional or national economy. There has been very little written about the cultural diversity of rural women's lives, particularly in forestry towns. However, it is safe to assume that Aboriginal, Chinese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, and Japanese-Canadian women who laboured in forestry towns have experienced even greater marginalization than their Euro-Canadian counterparts. This assumption was reinforced by one Aboriginal woman who commented,

This community, this area, [is] male oriented—forestry, fisheries—it's really hard to get in, even if you are smart. It think it's even harder if you're Native.

Two sets of stories have predominated in academic accounts of rural women's activism. The first is a labour-studies story in which women take part in political protests to protect social class and community culture. Some authors portrayed rural women as conservative, ambivalent, passive, apathetic, and/or as victims of their social and physical environments (e.g. Little), while others who focused on industrial disputes in resource towns portrayed women as heroines who have shed their passive subject positions in times of economic strife and taken action on the basis of their class affiliation, joining "their men" in working class struggles to retain male employment, family incomes, and ways of life (e.g. Ali; Maggard). Both positions, however, view women's activism in relation to their dependence on the means of production: that is, their reliance on men's income and employment.

The second set of stories is found in ecofeminist literature that promotes and celebrates women's role in environmental protection. One group of authors celebrates women's cultural or symbolic links between women and nature (e.g., Salleh; King) while others suggest that women's social location transcend boundaries of race, ethnicity and class to favour environmental protection (e.g. Merchant; Seager; Sturgeon). In both cases, women's subject position as nurturers and caregivers in the family has been extended to notions of community and environmental care. The literature argues that when practical-domestic concerns affected the safety, security, and welfare of the family, women become mobilized to act politically (West and Blumberg). However, as I reviewed my own set of data, I found the categories too limiting. As the examples below illustrate, "my" subjects simply did not fit.

Seeing the Trees Among the Stories of Forestry-Town Women

Women of this study were well educated and knowledgeable about the industry. Thirty-five per cent of interviewees had some university education. They knew that structural changes were happening in the industry and that their communities needed to diversify if they are to survive. The majority spoke openly about the huge profits and waste of the early years, the fact that the old growth is declining, and that logging companies are only grudgingly changing their practices. "The logging itself has changed, the jobs have changed, because the wood, for the most part, the wood has got so much smaller" said one woman. Another reminded me that, "They [loggers] have tunnel vision, many of these old-time loggers. They've been doing the same thing since they were 14 years old. They don't know any other way." Still another suggested that the logging companies were not doing enough:

... they're still logging too big a clear-cut in some places.... And I think the logging companies are very good at getting away with whatever they want to.... I feel the environmentalists are doing a good job by being their watchdogs. I really do.

Some of these women had taken part in smaller-scale, local environmental actions while others spoke harshly of they ways in which influential community members had invoked an unhealthy silence about the changes confronting them.

and the decreased ability to undertake proper field analysis. Thus, they faced uncertainty with compassion and anxiety for their fellow community members, primarily men working in the industry.

From the interviews, I also generated detailed stories of individual women (see Reed 2003). A few were like Betty[5] who lived out the stereotype of the "traditional" family life. She was active in Canadian Women in Timber (CWIT), a pro-industry group that supports fairly traditional interpretations of appropriate roles for women in forestry and family settings. In her words, "we've got a

"Men are perceived as being more competent ... men will promote men under the buddy system.... I'm not saying that women can't get where they want to go, but usually they have to work harder, be smarter and they have to be lucky."

Women within the industry were also dissatisfied. Women working as registered professional foresters spoke out about the sexism within the forestry profession and the difficulties they faced being taken seriously.

There's a tendency for a lot of the guys that may not really know you, especially if they're new, to call you the secretary. You know, if you're a woman, and you work, then you must be the secretary.

Men are perceived as being more competent... men will promote men under the buddy system.... I'm not saying that women can't get where they want to go, but it's usually they have to work harder, be smarter and they have to be lucky.

Yet, women from all backgrounds spoke compassionately about the fears and concerns that loggers had for their jobs, for their health (physical and mental), as well as for their local environments.

A lot of these men, they take pride in their work.... These guys are environmentalists. You know, they really care about their job and how they do it.

We had one guy, an IWA [union] worker, who was actually out counting owls... He really enjoyed it. We would run into him, and he's say, "Oh, yeah, got a great horn today." There's so much knowledge, like those guys know the woods.

They also spoke about the increased stress on professional foresters and waged workers, the fear of new legal sanctions if they make mistakes, the increased paper work and/or technical requirements to meet the new standards,

little bit of time, why don't we do something ... maybe if we say we're wives and moms and raising kids and stuff, it would put a little different perspective on it [industrial forestry]." Others who supported forestry in other ways found CWIT "too traditional" (their words).

Some women, such as Carole, argued strongly that forestry had built "men's communities" on northern Vancouver Island. She told me: "it's been a male domain, and this, the north end [of Vancouver Island], is a male community." For evidence, she pointed to the relative lack of well-paid, career-developing job opportunities for women, as well as to drug abuse and male violence against women that she attributed to "a forestry lifestyle."[6] She spoke of years of abuse she endured with her former partner before she left him to raise their children alone. Nevertheless, she was a spokesperson for the local chapter of the "share-the-resource" (pro-industry) group within her community. Yet, she was concerned for the impacts that changes in the industry would have on her community. Her concerns were mirrored by another who said:

Families split up ... women go on welfare, and then they're encouraged to retrain, and then they basically leave the community to attend [a college or training centre] ... and then they don't have the family support, and then the fathers lose contact with their children, and it puts tremendous pressures on the families to have the women leave. I've seen that happen over and over. Also in small communities, especially one-industry towns, they only employ males in the jobs that can support a family.... There's very few jobs for women; then that means that women leave to find jobs. And it's hard. It's hard on the families. And it's not fair to the kids.

Annie, Barb, and Ferron were also married to men in

the industry and were active locally, regionally, and even internationally to protect the forest industry. They had become local or industry spokespeople. Yet, none of these women was dependent financially or emotionally on their partners. Annie described the need for women to move beyond emotional dependence, Barb refused to believe that women needed "special treatment" (her words),[7] and Ferron spoke about the need for families to plan during the good times for the inevitable financial instabilities of the industry.

Women were active across a range of issues and strategies. Women who were not in paid employment said that volunteer work helped them improve social, organizational, and technical skills, gain greater self-esteem, and gave them a sense of place within a male-dominated community. Yet, they acknowledged that their work was constrained by the male-dominated employment structure and by the local culture. For example, women's efforts to distribute food hampers andorganize "Forestry day" celebrations were gratefully received; however, their efforts to establish a food bank were thwarted by the local union. Similarly, when local male leaders were invited to community development meetings, they told the women they were not interested in joining "women's knitting circles." Nevertheless, I found women who supported their partners in the industry but publicly challenged the industry or local sexist culture in letter-writing campaigns or by protesting industry practices.

Many women considered themselves feminists and took actions consistent with this identity. Furthermore, they contested the idea that they did not actively protect the environment.

Women seeking to protect industrial forestry have been classified on the right wing of these debates (see Seager; Switzer). So I was surprised when one focus group began with a woman whose first words were, "I am a feminist." She was greeted with nods around the table. I found that many women considered themselves feminists and they took actions consistent with this identity. They worked to improve conditions for women, providing safe places for women who were subjected to violence, arguing for better health services, addressing employment disparity within their communities, and working on gender-specific community development issues. Furthermore, they contested the idea that they did not actively protect the environment. While many women protested against wilderness preservation groups, they undertook many daily activities to protect nature. One woman, who told me, "my kids would eat Bambi," kept constant watch for whales to support scientific research, others worked with youth to restore local streams and fish populations and to encourage nature appreciation. One of these told me her work simply grew "out of my love of that stream." Others described their motivations as promoting family cohesion, youth well-being, environmental protection, and community development. Many women—even those in the industry—spoke of a love of nature and a regular and on-going intimacy with the non-human environment.

> *People don't have much idea of what you're doing. You're not here just to make money. I went into forestry, you know, because I love the woods, and I always have.*

Some challenged urbanites (like me!) to become knowledgeable about and active in protecting their own local environments.

It became clear that the threats of environmental regulation intersected directly with women's interpretation of their quality of life and rural culture. Quality of life is difficult to discuss because, as Laura Pulido suggests, the associated issues are construed as apolitical, or as serving the blatant class interests of the privileged. But for forestry-town women, these issues included basic services such as access to educational opportunities, to medical care, to good jobs, and even to the peace and quiet of small-town or rural life. Changes in environmental regulation were linked to changes in public health and social services because they were all happening simultaneously, and any change that would affect economic well-being would affect social well-being as well.

Additionally, regulatory changes threatened to destroy rural identity within forestry culture. As pointed out earlier, women were repelled by some aspects of this culture and worked to change its sexist, violent, and exclusionary aspects. Some took logging to task. But many of these same women were also supportive of cultural ideals as they spoke with pride of their partners who faced danger and physical challenges in their daily work. They spoke of the value of the family wage, the rewards reaped by hardworking and honest men, the importance of community supports, and the love of nature that they shared with all their family members. Environmental regulation threatened these aspects of the very fabric of their way of life for which they had strong emotional attachments. The social harvest is a bitter one:

> *...we hate environmentalists. We hate Greenpeace. We hate, you know, those type[s] of people that [are] dictating to us people who live here what we should do. I mean, it's an awful thing, but that's what the change in the forest industry is.*

Amidst the changes they sowed in forestry, environmental organizations and government initiatives typically ignored or dismissed the attendant social issues. This omission—or assumed arrogance—was the root of unrest

within the communities I encountered.

Previous academic explanations emphasized "traditional family norms" (labour studies) or "environmental sensibilities" (ecofeminism) as motivations for women's activism. These did not account for the multiple layerings that shape women's lives or the multiple forms or sites of women's political activism on Vancouver Island. Women gained strength of conviction through their employment affiliations and spiritual beliefs, their scientific knowledge, or extensions of their maternal roles. Frequently, they held multiple, not singular, motivations. None of these could be easily fixed or collated under simple headings such as "conservatism" or "maternal politics." For people living in these communities on northern Vancouver Island, family, place, and lifestyle were intimately interwoven. As a result of these more diverse stories, I sought other theories to explain women's perspectives and actions.

The Embeddedness of Women's Activism

I began to view women's perspectives and choices for activism as nested within local social and spatial contexts. In my case, details of these contexts relate to local effects of restructuring of the forest industry, changing ecologies, reorganization of government environmental and social policies, geographic and social isolation, the availability of physical and social infrastructure, local labour practices, community social norms, and gender ideologies and practices within households. These factors inscribed women's identities and shaped their motivations for, and choices about, forestry and political activism. I found that women's support of workers, forestry practices, and forestry culture was not unified, conservative, progressive, or crassly material. Rather, women's activism, both individual and collective, could be more accurately identified as heterogeneous and contingent, complex, contradictory and *embedded* in place and in social life.

My conception of embeddedness was consistent with the idea of feminist environmentalism, proposed by Bina Agarwal in the context of women's organizing in India. She argued that women's social relation to the environment are made and reinforced through daily activities in specific localities. Feminist environmentalism encouraged me to make links between the individual, the household, the community, and beyond to understand the intersections of gender, environments, and public policy. This allowed me to open a wider range of social actions, to avoid fixing women's perspectives, and to overcome simple dichotomies of "progressives" and "laggards" (Harding), "victims and "victors" (Kettle). It also provided an opportunity to consider how consistencies as well as contradictions in women's situations produced both opportunities and constraints for choice and agency (after Gibson-Graham 1995; Liepins).

The idea of embeddedness within specific situations of place and social relations may bridge the gap between feminists primarily concerned with women's connections to economic and social life (e.g. labour studies scholars), and feminists concerned with women's connections to their non-human environments (e.g. ecofeminist researchers). Embeddedness may also help to maintain an engaged and sympathetic, yet critical and skeptical, understanding of the complex and contradictory nature of women's lives that is attempted by feminist research methods (Reinharz,; Moss, Eyles, Dyck and Rose; England). By listening and considering alternative viewpoints, feminist researchers can help build an environmental movement that goes beyond ideological positioning and invites multiple others to take standing in ongoing debates.

Women's activism, both individual and collective, could be identified as heterogeneous and contingent, complex, contradictory and *embedded* in place and in social life.

Embeddedness and Policy-Making

To return to the question that sparked this paper, "what *is* the place of women in forestry and land use debates?," I suggest there is no singular place, but many places. Perspectives and actions of women in forestry communities challenge both environmentalism and local social relations, and demonstrate how forestry and land use are inseparable from social issues that rural residents confront when their livelihood is threatened.

From a theoretical perspective, this nuanced interpretation helped me to generate a conceptualization that was more satisfying theoretically. However, it did not generate clear policy choices. Policy-making is premised on generating consensus on simple realities. But I offered none. I provided only complexity and contradiction. Policies were needed on many fronts. A conceptually simple (yet practically challenging) strategy would be to make the impacts of forestry changes on women's lives more visible and distinct from (even if intertwined with those of) men's by careful monitoring that attempted to be free from gender-bias (see Eichler).[8] Additionally, while there were fewer jobs for women in the woods, there were greater opportunities for women to become involved in the regulation of forestry or in community economic development. These opportunities could be realized if employment equity were an explicit goal of public and private sectors. Realization of such a goal would require monitoring of policy impacts by gender and identifying and redressing built-in inequities of government programs that reduce women's access to income support, training,

or job opportunities. Such efforts would have a greater chance of success if they are coupled with programs dedicated to improving broad-based services including better transportation networks, improved infrastructure, and better access to health care, elder care, and child care. Finally, decision making processes such as land use planning processes, must include women at the outset, along with a serious commitment to address what is perceived as "softer" or "indirect" community issues that accompany economic and land use change (see Vosko and Bueckert; Reed 1997a; Neis).

The research I conducted did not adequately address some key local issues: it did not create jobs; it did not feed a family. While David Demeritt suggested that participatory research can aid in "trust building, mutual understanding, and social learning ... [that] can be as important for participants as the substantive results" (326), I am acutely aware that mutual understanding and concern do not feed a family. And when research does not feed a family in a public policy context in which communities believe that they are threatened by actual or imminent (nutritional or political) starvation, processes of trust building erode. So does the perceived public value of research. As Barbara Neis pointed out, an explicit link between academic work and public policy can improve each domain and can heighten the accountability of academic research. Therefore, I am dissatisfied with my initial efforts to situate my own position within these debates. This was an important element of generating empathy and guarding against my initial biases, to be sure. But I am convinced that I became pre-occupied with theoretical concerns over identifying public policy options. New funding initiatives for research require us to work with our community groups and to demonstrate our social relevance more effectively. Feminist scholars (especially those working in the academy), who initially began with the idea that they might improve women's lives, must move beyond reflexive study that situates our efforts within theoretical debates or tries to demonstrate immediate connections (and disassociations) with our research subjects. Rather, we must consider more explicitly how our theoretical advances might be more closely allied with public policy choices and how we can use our own geographic and social locations to promote positive change more directly.

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[1]I would like to thank the women I interviewed, research assistants (Janice May, Meija Heimo, Mary Pullen), as well as the cartographer who completed the map for this paper (Keith Bigelow).

[2]This number was even higher for particular communities, for example, 58 per cent for Port McNeill and 84 per cent for Port Alice (Horne).

[3]A detailed description of the methodology is available in Reed (2003).

[4]This tally excludes activities in community events, Aboriginal organizations, and organizations related to children and sports (e.g. parent advisory committees, brownies, sporting teams).

[5]All names have been changed.

[6]I do not personally agree that these issues are distinctive characteristics of forestry culture, but I use this example to illustrate how women spoke out about problems that *they* attributed to forestry culture while they simultaneously supported industrial forestry practices in public land use debates.

[7]Despite widespread support for the industry, Barb's position that women had equal opportunities in forestry communities was clearly in the minority. Of women in the paid workforce whom we interviewed, Barb was a singular voice on this point.

[8]Barbara Neis's work points this out in relation to fisheries on the East Coast. I thank a reviewer who suggested that I refer to her work.

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