

# Reading the Soil

Visiting Vancouver Island, **Annegret Heinold** meets the ‘heroes’ and ‘heroines’ replanting clear-felled forests in dangerous, inhospitable conditions



A planter prepares to leave the cache and start planting

**O**n this day, Siegfried will plant one and a half hectares of rough ground with 1330 trees. At noon he says: now I am starting to get tired, now begins the struggle, now I have to be careful not to get hurt. At the end of the day he will be exhausted and content. And have about \$400 more in his pocket.

The tree planters in the Canadian wilderness are today's cowboys. They move with their jobs: from January to May planting on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and during summer in the interior of Canada. They live in camps, motels, in houses rented for some weeks, and many of them who do the job permanently don't have a steady home, and their belongings are in storage units or on their trucks.

It is a hard job. They only get paid for the

trees they plant. They walk 16km a day carrying a weight of a ton and bend down on average 200 times an hour, helping to support wood in the life of our Earth. Where forests are harvested – for furniture, for books, for toilet paper – grow new forests, though, of course, a planted forest will never have the diversity of a natural forest, as Charlotte Gil writes in *Eating Dirt*, here book about treeplanting and planters.

## Nootka

It is a cold winter morning. We meet at 7.30am at the marina of Tahsis. Twelve people fit into the boat, including Lawrence, the owner of Nootka Reforestation, a business reforesting the West Coast of Vancouver Island, plus 10 tree planters and myself. Not everybody fits into the cabin, but the smokers sit outside voluntarily. Jody, the only woman in the crew at the moment, wears a face mask to keep out the cold, and is looking at the passing coast of the Tahsis Inlet. Chris unpacks a sandwich. Nearly everybody has a coffee mug. It is around 0°; we are all dressed warm, in layers, so you can adjust clothes to changing temperatures during the day.

After a 45-minute boat trip we reach the dock at Mooyah Bay on Hesquiat Peninsula, right after Nootka Island, on which Captain Cook landed in 1778, and the reason Tahsis calls itself 'The Birthplace of British Columbia'. Now we are really in the bush. Two trucks take us on logging roads to the 'block', which means the ground to be planted.

Today is a special day. It is the fourth of the tree planters' shift, with the fifth on the West Coast always a day off. Everybody hopes that they will finish this block today, and the checkers are arriving for a final quality check for the contract.

## Drop-off point

The planters are dropped by Lawrence at the different places on the block. At the roadside is the 'cache', a supply with the seedlings to be planted. The baby trees are in boxes of 300, wrapped in plastic foil in bundles of 10. Today they are planting fir and cedar, in a ratio of 40% fir and 60% cedar, 900 trees per hectare. The baby trees are handled like eggs. They are kept cool, and even in the cache they are always covered after handling with a special tarp, so the sun cannot heat them up. The boxes are covered with wax so the seedlings are



protected of humidity and rain. The tree planters look over the ground and say: this is cream, which means good ground, easy to plant, and not frozen. It looks completely inaccessible: trees, parts of trees, branches and wood everywhere. The logging companies log all trees but take only the big and nice ones. Some of the wood residue will be gathered at the roadside and burned. The rest just stays where it is.

The tree planters pack their bags. Everybody has their own equipment, carried on their hips with shoulder straps like a backpack plus a short shovel with a small head, the classic tree planter shovel. The trees are put into the bags separated by variety and it begins. Calk boots, which have spikes for better grip, hi-vis vests and hard hats are mandatory, even for me.

I put my foot on the block, at least I try, but the ground is indeed even rougher than it looks. This is cream? How does bad ground look, then? Even more inaccessible, says Chris, steeper, with hardly any soil visible. But the ground here on the coast is always difficult. This is the reason why only tree planters with five years of experience planting in the interior are hired to plant here and is why the pay per tree here is at least double the interior rate.

## Three point rule

I am glad that I was able to get into the block and am happy that I found my way back to the road. I only risk a second try because up in the block is a 1000-year-old stump and I really want to touch it because such an opportunity is rare. I try again. This time with the rule, three points of contact with the ground (from Siegfried), a tree planter shovel as support and the advice to kick the calk boot heavily into the wood (both from Chris) it is lots better but still difficult. I am standing in the block and think: and this for eight to 10 hours a day, with weight on the hips and working at piece rate, in cold and rain! Bending down every 20 or 30 seconds and putting a tree into the ground and pressing the soil. Sweating under the hard hat. Yes, it is a hard job. Dangerous. Well paid but dangerous. Sometimes I wonder if it is really worth it, says Graham, when I meet him later at the cache where he fills his bag with seedlings.

The quality check is done by two women who are flown in by a float plane. With the help of a plot cord, a 3.99m long piece of string, they mark an area to be checked. Are there

## Women Planting

Annegret Heinold finds the women who plant

**W**hat makes a woman choose a job where she spends hours and hours alone in the wilderness, hiking the bush in cold and rainy weather? A job where she has to wear hi-vis vests, hard hat and calk boots, a job that brings her to her physical limits. Every day. A job that demands an extreme mobility and where you sometimes don't know where you'll work tomorrow, where you sometimes have to sleep in camps in the middle of the wilderness, places without showers, and often not even a mirror except for maybe a small one in your purse.

"It feels so much better than doing paper work," says Suzie. It is difficult to find exact numbers, but 30-40 % of the tree planters in the interior of Canada are female, and about 20-25 % on the coast, says Suzie.

"Planting trees is not about physical force but about willpower," says Jody when I ask her if women are as good tree planters as men. She is in her mid-thirties and has been planting trees for 14 years. Before planting, she worked as a waitress in Prince George. After a personal crisis, and the end of a relationship, she became a tree planter. "The first year was horrible," says Jody. "I earned less than before in waitressing. I built tents out of tarps to hide from the rain. I just thought it all horrible. But in the second year it somehow clicked."

## Valuable future

Those who plant trees do something valuable for our future. The trees that are planted today can only be harvested in 50-80 years. Trees are indispensable for the eco system. It is an interesting fact that there are female tree planters but no female loggers.

Jessie is 27 and has been planting for eight years. She likes the challenges of the job, the nature, being outside. She likes the freedom the job gives her. Because it is a seasonal work, she doesn't work for several months in-between. She draws and paints, she tans hides, and at the end of this season, in September, when the last trees are planted in the Nootka Sound, she'll travel. She has never been to Europe yet, and she wants to see Nepal.

"Women are good for the atmosphere," says Jessie. "If there are women in the camp the camp runs smoother, and life in camp is calmer than in an only men camp. That is why businesses like to employ women. We have less broad shoulders and carry all the weight of the seedlings on our hips instead of on our shoulders. And that



squishes your behind and because you are walking the whole day – well – you get sore. And that really hurts."

Through my Internet research on tree planting sites (and from my own experience) I know about the women's problem of getting rid of used tampons in the wilderness because the smell of blood can attract bears. Every female tree planter has a shovel and will bury her tampons.

Last week, Jody planted on the Hesquiat Peninsula. She was flown up to the top of a mountain in the mornings and then worked her way down. Seedling by seedling. At the end of the day, she had to hike through the bush down to the coast to be collected by boat. There were no docks, and the boat rolled with the waves towards the rocks and when it was close enough to shore they had to jump onto the boat. What a day! Driving fifty kilometers to work by boat. Flying with a helicopter to the top of a mountain. Being all day in a breathtakingly beautiful nature. Planting 700 little trees. Hiking for an hour through the rainforest. Jumping onto a boat. Driven home by boat. Why a woman would want a job like this? That's why.

**Details** First published in *Forstzeitung/Austria* (timber-online.net). \* Source: Wikipedia. Links: 78days.ca; canadiantreeplanting.com; tree-planter.com; replant.ca; vimeo.com (Franz Otto the ultimate highballer); vimeo.com (Do it with joy); nootkareforestation.com; Tahsis (villageoftahsis.com).

Numbers



A tree planter plants between a couple of hundred up to several thousands of trees a day depending on the ground, and his experience and knowledge. In the Interior of BC or Alberta 3 000 – 5 000 trees a day are a good daily average, while in the Nootka Sound 1 000 – 1 500 is a good average. 1 000 trees a day – that means 125 trees an hour. 125 times putting the shovel into the ground, bending, putting the seedling into the soil and treading down the soil. This means: bending down every thirty seconds! Payment is per tree, and tree planters only earn money on the days they are out there planting. Bad weather means no money. As tree planters have to pay for their own equipment as well as lodging and boarding their first year is often a write off, and they are making no money. The day on which a new tree planter plants 1 000 tree for the first time is a kind of a mile stone. A good tree planter can make four or five hundred dollars a day.



four to five trees in the area? Are they planted in the right proportion of fir and cedar? Are the trees not planted too deep, first branches in the soil? Is the soil pressed sufficiently so that there are no air pockets? Is there enough soil underneath the root? Are the trees planted in the right soil? How does one know what is the right soil, I ask Siegfried. After a million trees you can read the soil, he replies.

Tree planters

How does one become a tree planter? Many start treeplanting during holidays while at university, and some stay. For those who continue it is more than a job, it is a way of life. The tree planters are a community, whose members meet over and over again, in different places. From January to May they are in Tahsis, Gold River and Zeballos, in the summer in Alberta, and in October in Smithers, in northern BC. They have a bad reputation.

Sometimes they live for weeks in the bush and look the part. They swear a lot. Some motels have two rates, a normal one and a higher one for the tree planters. Lots of their stories start with 'we were so drunk'. Society considers them outsiders and that is how they feel. But, several are vegetarians and many are ecologically conscious. And for those who stay in the job, the job means exactly what they do: plant trees.

Now should be finishing time, but the block has yet to be finished and so everybody is on the last piece and plants the last trees. Now everybody is exhausted. The energy is down but the block has to be planted. And then it is ready – the last tree is planted. Scott says: "Fxxx that was a hard day." He is 49 years old

and has been planting in the area for over twenty years. He is one of the best, say the others. When Scott is walking in the block it looks like he is just walking for pleasure and bending from time to time.

Going home

In the boat on our way back everybody is in happy hour mood. It is not only the end of the working day, tomorrow is the day off. A bottle of whisky and the sheet on which everybody notes their trees planted circulate. Everybody writes down how many firs he planted, how many cedars. Everybody drinks a gulp, the bottle circulates. Some of the men start to make arrangements for playing poker tonight. One man sits in a corner and sleeps. Siegfried, the Canadian, and Marco, the Polish, sit side by side. They have been planting trees together for 14 years. They are both in their mid-40s, and were both in the army. They were in the same war, Desert Storm, but on different sides. Now they are sitting peacefully shoulder to shoulder. "The war is here now," says Siegfried, pointing at the forest on the coast.

Global human-induced deforestation is responsible for 18-25 % of global climate change, say scientists. They also say: reforestation is a measure to limit the damage.\* On this day 10 men and one woman have together planted 14,000 trees. Most of the tree planters on the boat have planted more than a million trees over the years.

When we reach the marina of Tahsis it is getting dark. On the dock five of the men thank me for having been out with them and spending the day with them. But it is me who has to thank them.

Tanglewood

Chris Walker imagines he's a tree but that there are no humans left

I am a tree. I have been standing here, with my kin, on a hillside looking south towards a Gothic revival church tower for about 120 years. I am told by Ancient Wan, my oldest relative, 14yds to my left, that I was planted at the beginning of a World War between the bipeds that used to be quite common around here till 10 years ago. We exchange simple messages through our feathered lodgers who do 'twittering'; don't ask me how it works. For all my life I have stood in all weathers, leaf fall or wet season, trying to colonise our particular species – the oaks – by flinging our acorns as far into the erstwhile barley field that used to exist between us and the abandoned church.

I remember the last bipeds driving up and down the field in huge steel contraptions with black wheels, then 10 years ago that suddenly ceased. Groups of shouting bipeds tried to plough the land with quadrapeds from the nearby racing stables.

The Ancient Wan is rumoured to be at least 200 years old and planted to celebrate something called 'Waterloo'. My age cohort is in early middle age, and spend the growing season sorting out sun and shade quotas for teenagers, 30-somethings and the 60-year-olds recovering from coppicing when 'woodcraft' was fashionable and 'sustainability' became compulsory. Woodcraft youths started coming into the woods a generation ago, spending nights around camp fires, and days turning our small limbs on lathes, reducing us to charcoal. They slapped earth and straw between beams and rafters to make what they imagined their ancestors lived in when forests covered almost all the isle.

Before these folk disappeared they cut down all our most dodgy cousins, the Sitkas, in order to burn them for firewood. Actually, I think it was for organic charcoal for the last licenced barbeques for the last quadrapeds. We were not sorry to see the demise of the Sitka and larch interlopers. I can just remember them being laboriously planted by gangs of locals in the '20s and '30s, when the regime vilified 'desmesne woods' and the caste that fostered them.

Hot summers

In my youth we used to encourage our cousins, ash, alder and birch to sneak in whenever a sitka collapsed from windblow, sheer laziness or in-breeding, leaving a gap to be colonised. Once or twice really hot summers or dry springs got rid of thousands of the blighters in forest fires, so the swallow told us they gobbled up roast insects in smoke-filled skies. The sitka-free hills are now a battleground between all our sort, with oaks flinging out acorns as far as our squirrels are silling to dash into open ground. They do eat most of them, sadly.

Lately, lots of exotic trees and birds have been arriving after the 'monsoon'. I remember when cork oaks turned up in orderly rows this side of the nearest village, followed by olive and that wretch eucalyptus that drops its bark everywhere.

It is getting hot in summer, though the storks that arrive each spring say it's much warmer further south, indeed mainly sand and palm trees. On cool winter evenings when the howler monkeys have ceased crashing through out top storeys, we reminisce about the days when bipeds kept things under control. And I mean strict control; barley and wheat in hedged boxes called 'fields'. Black and white quadrapeds were herded into sheds twice a day and spent the winters inside. Daintier quads galloped around to the



sound of horns and red-coated bipeds showed an interest in holes in coppices, looking for gold, and the foxes told us they laid false trails into badgers' homes. At the solstices, Ancient Wan goes on about people in white togas stealing mistletoe from our eldest relatives; typical.

We suspect Ancient Wan is held upright only by a cage of cousin Ivy, itself as thick as our 30-somethings. There is another Ancient, a beech, two miles away, planted by a grandchild of one of the original Welsh soldiers of Colonel Harrison's Regiment of 'Forty-Niners'. Meals-on-Wings nightingales say it's at least 300 years old. This is actually good beech plantation country, with limes around church greens and beside main streets two outspans wide.

It's hardly worth dropping one's leaves nowadays, the winter is so warm and wet. Monsoon cyclones have also become very tedious, breaking large branches and flooding the fields for weeks on end. When the waters diminish in early summer the only things not green are the egrets attending to the buffalos in their wallows.

Also white, and black, are the curious dwarf waddling bipeds who seem to have interbred with the bird tribe, perhaps genetically modified in the last great rush to provide well-paid jobs for government scientists and parliamentary secretary birds. To judge by their fondness for herding together beside warm water to eat fish and chips we think the human genes are dominant. In another century, 'penguins' will have colonised the Planet again, so I look forward to an interesting retirement if these little people respect the woods and plants that have survived so far.