

Wilkinson's ideas before his time

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In an era of "cut and get out" logging in the 1930s, Merv Wilkinson was carefully managing his 70-acre forest, Wildwood, for the future.

Wilkinson raised the eyebrows of local mill owners for his unusual forestry practices, such as refusing to cut down his biggest trees. Little did Wilkinson know that decades later Wildwood would be a mecca for people interested in alternative forestry practices.

As a young man in the 1930s Wilkinson went to work in the huge Powell River Pulp and Paper Company mill. The harsh working conditions at the mill motivated him to purchase a 70-acre property in Yellow Point, the area near Ladysmith where he grew up. Wilkinson and his new wife moved to the property in the late 1930s with the intentions of setting up a farm.

The Wilkinsons took an eight-week course at the University of British Columbia that taught farming skills such as horticulture, pruning, livestock care and mechanics. When one of the professors discovered the Wilkinson's property was thick with old-growth timber, he guided Merv towards a course in forestry. A native of Scandinavia, the professor translated a Swedish forestry course because none were available in English.

Swedish forestry was rooted in the principle that what you left behind in the forest was more important than what you harvested, the opposite of B.C. practices at the time. Wilkinson embraced the principles he learned and took them home to Wildwood.

Wilkinson made his first cut in 1945 after surveying the property to hand pick trees for harvest. Trees that were diseased or growing too close together were felled, leaving behind the largest and healthiest parent seed-trees. The parent trees were scattered around to reseed with wind rather than planting. Also, Wilkinson made sure he never cut more timber than the forest produced by estimating the annual growth and cutting less.

Over the years Wilkinson successfully used other methods of sustainable forestry such as keeping trees of a variety of ages and species, promoting healthy soil by leaving a sufficient amount of dead trees on the ground, carefully planning roads to minimize root damage, and refusing to fall during nesting season.

Merv Wilkinson and Wildwood catapulted into worldwide fame in the 1980s after being featured on a CBC TV show.

Wildwood was soon teaching thousands of students and foresters from across the globe how to balance logging and ecological preservation. Internationally renowned environmentalists David Suzuki and Jane Goodall also visited Wildwood and were intrigued by Wilkinson's accomplishments and the unlimited possibilities for integrating his methods with current forestry practices.

Wilkinson's efforts were further recognized in 2001 when he was honoured with both the Order of British Columbia and the Order of Canada.

Wildwood grew from humble beginnings into an outdoor classroom under the nurturing hand of Merv Wilkinson. The 70-acre property has garnered an international reputation as an eco-forest and model for sustainable forestry.

The BC Forest Discovery Centre can be reached at education.bcfdc@shawlink.ca or by calling 250-715-1113.

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