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Deforestation in British Columbia

As a province in Canada, British Columbia is known as a lush province on the west coast known for the dense wilderness and its sacred old growth forests. These forests and trees range in sizes and have been around for hundreds and up to thousands of years. Not only do these trees produce oxygen and create deaccelerate climate change, but they also stand as homes for British Columbia’s extensive wildlife that take shelter within the forests. Additionally, a vast majority of these forests are located on Indigenous peoples sacred territories which increases the need for protection and appreciation for the sacred land. However, that is not what is being done within our province. One of the greatest injustices currently occurring in British Columbia is the massive amount of deforestation that is currently happening within the province. The impacts of the deforestation can be seen in several ways such as the many climate impacts involved and the destruction of land. Furthermore, the protests surrounding the old growth trees such as the forests in Fairy Creek demonstrate the ways in which indigenous people are not being heard and receiving the respect they deserve for their land. Indigenous people have been utilizing this land since they have been there and are very important as a part of their culture. As time progresses, it’s evident that the deforestation problem is only getting worse and the government is showing no signs of changing any legislation regarding the issue. Deforestation is one of the leading causes of climate change and demonstrates the injustices and disrespect towards indigenous peoples’ land.

Deforestation is something that happens globally and constantly. It can be defined as “the purposeful clearing of forested land. Throughout history and into modern times, forests have been razed to make space for agriculture and animal grazing, and to obtain wood for fuel, manufacturing, and construction” (National Geographic Society, 2024). It can further include converting forests to urban areas and the most targeted forests are dense, tropical rainforests such as the ones found in Vancouver Island, British Columbia. This issue of deforestation has been on the rise for thousands of years. A study done by National Geographic states that 2000 years ago, only 20% of Western Europe’s forest was cut down. However, today the number has risen to 66%. The rise of deforestation is also very present in British Columbia. Originally, British Columbia was home to 60 million hectares of trees, but there is currently only 22 million hectares remaining. As a result of deforestation, there are several signs of climate change that come with it. Since these large amounts of trees hold and release so much of the world’s oxygen, when they are cut down, a very high amount of carbon dioxide gets released back into the atmosphere. This is because trees are supposed to take in carbon dioxide from the air to complete the process of photosynthesis, however when they are cut down there is nowhere for the carbon dioxide to go except back into the air. Additionally, deforestation holds its fair share of biodiversity threats as well. British Columbia is currently home to half the total population of grizzly bears in Canada and over 500 species of birds that all rely on the forests as their shelter and homes. As the world is in the middle of a mass extinction, it’s more important than ever to protect these lands before it is too late. Over 1900 species are currently at risk of becoming extinct including the spotted owl and caribou located in British Columbia. The risks of deforestation can also be applied to plants as the loss of trees from a forest makes the soil more prone to erosion and ultimately prevents new plants to ever grow again. To further this study, a mapping from The Sierra Club shows that in Vancouver Island, only a fifth of the original productive old-growth rainforests remain unlogged. They also stated that “ Close to 700,000 hectares of the Island’s ancient forests remained in 1993 and less than 500,000 hectares in 2018. Old-growth logging on Vancouver Island continues at a rate of about thirty-four soccer fields per day” (Wieting and Coste, 2019). As described by the statistics, it is not hard to see that deforestation hits particularity hard to the west coast of British Columbia. The west coast is known as the Great Bear Rainforest and is one of the largest coastal temperate rainforests in the world. Temperate rainforests store much more carbon and the trees in this area need centuries before they can become old growth trees in these temperate areas. The rainforests located on Vancouver Island are forests like no other, such as the Fairy Creek forests home to old growth trees. These trees have been around for over 1000 years and are incredibly beneficial for the ecosystem as well as Indigenous practices. Deforestation has been a leading cause for climate change, mass extinction, and erosion in British Columbia.

When people think of deforestation, Fairy Creek is often a word that is comes into their head. This is because when the deforestation in British Columbia began attacking the trees that have been on the land for thousands of years, people decided it was time to fight. Fairy Creek is a forest located on Vancouver Island and is on the Pacheedaht First Nation territory in British Columbia. Fairy Creek is home to a vast amount of old growth trees such as the yellow cedar and have been a sacred part of indigenous communities for as long as they have been there. Many heads were turned when lives of these trees were deemed at stake which resulted in protests and arrests trying to save these trees. Several groups of people came from across the province to defend these trees by tying themselves to them, sleeping in them and various other ways. While this seemed like an act of activism and passion, the defending of Fairy Creek was ultimately more disrespectful to the Indigenous community as there was a large amount of ignorance that came with the defending of the forests. The first issue in itself is the fact that Fairy Creek happens to fall on the traditional, unceded territory of the Pacheedaht First Nation. This was the first fact that many of these protestors and self-proclaimed activists failed to remember when they placed themselves in the situation of defence. This can seamlessly tie into Indigenous Sovereignty, which is the main issue regarding the Fairy Creek protests and ultimate deforestation. Indigenous Sovereignty can be defined as “the inherent legal freedom that indigenous nations have to self-govern within their own territories,” (Samuels, 2021). With this statement alone it is clear to see that the deforestation of Fairy Creek should have never been considered as this violates this sovereignty agreement that Indigenous people fought so hard to get in the first place. However, there was an original agreement that allowed foresters to cut down 20 hectares of land, which is something the protestors failed to acknowledge. The real issue behind these protestors is that they simply were not invited to intrude on Indigenous people’s land and did not think twice about the land they were invading for their own acts of activism. As the article written by Gabe Samuels mentions, a Ph.D student who was studying the collaboration between non-indigenous Chileans and their indigenous Mapuche neighbors in peri-urban Chile stated, “it is not the position of non-indigenous allies to determine who is the legitimate voice of an indigenous nation when looking for what they should support in a conflict. Rather, non-Indigenous allies can take the time to understand the roles of different Indigenous leaders, and the context that shapes their public positions,” (Samuels, 2021). This quote demonstrates the lack of awareness and knowledge anybody had when these protestors decided to invade Indigenous land and failed to ask any sort of permission. This is a prime example of the ignorance and hegemonic values the dominant class is conditioned to think even when they are attempting to do something good. To further this, it is not only the issue that these protestors did not ask permission to enter the territory, but it also comes down to the issue that they did not include Indigenous people in their protests and agenda. These protestors were simply acting on their agenda and remained in full control of the fight without even speaking to Indigenous leaders. They completely neglected to plan this movement with the groups of people who were being affected the most. The First Nation Pacheedaht Chief Frank Queesto Jones spoke out regarding this issue and stated “It’s not the position of non-Indigenous nation when looking for what they should support in a conflict. Rather non-Indigenous allies can take the time to understand the roles of different Indigenous leaders and the context that shapes their public positions,” (Samuels, 2021). In this case, Indigenous people had a lot more to lose than the other protestors as the use of these forests and old growth trees have been a part of their community for hundreds of years. Over 70% of Indigenous lands are in forests and they hold a huge value to the community. There is a huge amount of sustainability within Indigenous communities as they use the forests for ceremonies, resources, and economic practices. The loss of this land is so much more than just the environmental impacts and the contribution to climate change. The deforestation of Fairy Creek and British Columbia demonstrates the injustices the Indigenous community faces as well as the contribution to climate change.

Deforestation is currently one of the leading causes of climate change and is heavily present in British Columbia and specifically Vancouver Island. Since Vancouver Island is home to many old growth trees and has one of the largest temperate rainforests in the world, the coastal land is sacred to many communities. With deforestation occurring at an increasingly quickly rate, it is imperative that these forests are protected with respect and in an educational manner. Since the government is refusing to take any steps to protect these original forests and respect Indigenous rights, 1000s of people are writing to the British Columbian government in hopes of any sort oof change. The environmental repercussions of climate change are extensive and severe. From the high amounts of carbon dioxide being released from the trees or the vast erosion preventing new plants to grow, it is clear that trees make up a huge amount of our eco system. With the continuation of deforestation, many animals such as the spotted owl, grizzly bear, and caribou are at a higher risk than ever of becoming extinct. As Vancouver Islands rainforests are currently being destroyed 3x faster than the Amazon rainforest, it’s imperative that society acts noow. However, it is also evident that there is a correct and educated approach in fighting for change. Indigenous communities have been disrespected and undermined for hundreds of years, however, the fight for Fairy Creek shed a lot of light on how this is a present-day issue. By not allowing Indigenous communities to have a say in the agenda for these protests it is incredibly disrespectful and ignorant. Furthermore, by walking in on Indigenous land with the expectation that it is your right is another example of how hegemonic present-day society currently is and the privilege that comes along with those values. Fighting for these issues is a complex issue, but ultimately the loss of these old growth forests would have a huge impact on the province as well as Indigenous communities. Deforestation is rapidly increasing and is accelerating climate change while shedding light on the injustices occurring against Indigenous communities.

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