

The creation of the Cheakamus Community Forest

The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) and the Lil'wat and Squamish Nations are in the forestry business because who better to be the stewards of the surrounding forests than the community itself?

The three governments are partners in the Cheakamus Community Forest Society, an arms-length corporation, which manages 30,000 hectares of forestland surrounding the RMOW. On April 9, 2009, the partners signed a 25-year tenure license with the provincial government. As tenure holder, the Cheakamus Community Forest Society sets standards for harvesting that are in-line with the community's sustainability and cultural goals.

It is also one of the first community forest operations on the BC Coast to employ a new ecosystem-based management approach, which allows for timber harvesting without compromising the forest ecosystems or undermining other tourism, recreation, or cultural forest values. It is the gold standard in sustainable forestry.

"Working in partnership with First Nations, we have a unique opportunity to manage our forest resources locally, which means we can manage our forest to the highest standards of eco-forestry," said Whistler mayor and Cheakamus Community Forest Society board member Ken Melamed. "The Community Forest Agreement allows us to move forward our community's sustainability initiatives by ensuring that watersheds are managed in an ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable manner."

A community forest like the one in Whistler is a forestry operation managed for the benefit of the community. Community forests help communities diversify their local forest economies. These are area-based tenures, which allow communities to manage harvesting operations as well as other values such as trails and recreation sites, wildlife, water supply, and scenic viewsapes.

For Whistler, the community forest means that watersheds and viewsapes are managed in an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable manner.

"We are going into the forestry business, but we are also managing for scenic values, recreational values, and environmental values and cultural values," said Melamed.

The Cheakamus Community Forest also provides an opportunity for the RMOW, Squamish and Lil'wat Nations to strengthen their ties through a partnership agreement. Community forest agreements are also a mechanism by which the province transfers decision-making to communities that wish to more fully participate in the stewardship of their local land base. Community forest tenures are area-based, giving the holders exclusive stewardship of a geographic area of forest land over the term of the agreement.

The next step for the Cheakamus Community Forest is the creation of a forestry plan. Currently Whistler, the First Nations and local stakeholders are working with the non-profit organization Ecotrust Canada to custom design an ecosystem-based management forestry plan with a sustainable harvest level that will not harm sensitive habitat or destroy viewscapes, scenery and First Nation cultural values.