

For Immediate Release
January 13, 2011

Activists commemorate formation of “Tree-Huggers and Tree-Cutters Alliance” on 10 year anniversary of Youbou sawmill’s closure on Vancouver Island

The closure of the Youbou sawmill on Vancouver Island 10 years ago and the resulting formation of the historically important environmentalist and forestry workers alliance, the “Tree-Huggers and Tree-Cutters Alliance” are being commemorated by activists next week. The Youbou TimberLess Society (YTS) will be hosting a film screening of their documentary videos “Stump to Dump”, and “Log Exports” produced by Lake Cowichan Secondary students, at the Duncan United Church Hall on Jan 20th at 7pm. A discussion with YTS members and Ken Wu and TJ Watt of the Ancient Forest Alliance will follow.

“The closure of the Youbou sawmill in 2001 because TimberWest wanted to export raw logs instead of processing them in the community set the stage for a historically important alliance between the workers and environmentalists, who both opposed the mill’s closure and the export of raw logs to foreign mills,” states Ken James, President of the Youbou TimberLess Society. “Who knew it would have set the stage for a much larger cooperation between environmentalists and forestry workers?”

“Ken James, Roger Wiles, Darreld Rayner, and the whole Youbou TimberLess Society crew are seriously historically important figures for the betterment of this province,” states Ken Wu, Ancient Forest Alliance executive director. “Prior to them coming on board, environmentalists and forestry workers were typically pitted against each other, often in extreme conflicts, while the forest companies went laughing to the bank with profits from liquidating our endangered ancient forests and eliminating BC milling jobs.”

On January 26, 2001, TimberWest closed its Youbou sawmill on the shores of Lake Cowichan, throwing 220 workers into unemployment. The company claimed the mill was unprofitable, a claim contested by many, and upon its closure subsequently continued to log at breakneck speeds while exporting the unprocessed logs to US and Asian sawmills. TimberWest is the largest exporter of raw logs from BC.

A few months before the mill's closure, sawmill worker Ken James and environmentalist Ken Wu (at the time the executive director of the Western Canada Wilderness Committee's- WCWC- Victoria chapter, now with the Ancient Forest Alliance) were invited to speak together at a forum at the BC Government Employees Union building in downtown Victoria to an audience of a hundred forestry workers and environmentalists. The two groups found much in common in their perspectives to end raw log exports and to ensure a sustainable second-growth forest industry. Subsequently the two groups started to attend and speak at each other's rallies and events.

The cooperation between the Youbou TimberLess Society and the Victoria WCWC paved the way for further cooperation between environmentalists and the Pulp, Paper, and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC) union in Nanaimo and Crofton on Vancouver Island, led by Arnie Bercov, and forestry workers with the Save Our Valley Alliance (SOVA) in Port Alberni. Environmentalists also started to work on specific projects and speak at events with the United Steelworkers (USW) union, BC's main logging union, which took over the International Woodworkers of America – IWA union around the same time, and with the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers (CEP) union against increasing raw log exports and the deregulation of the forest industry through the so-called "Forestry Revitalization Act" in 2004.

"The cooperation between environmentalists and forestry workers that we pioneered has dismantled much of the 'jobs versus the environment' framing of BC's forestry debate" states Ken James.

“Today, the vast majority of people support saving jobs and the environment by protecting our last old-growth forests on Vancouver Island, ensuring sustainable second-growth forestry, and ending the export of raw logs to foreign mills. The only problem is the BC government still doesn’t get it. But they will have to, not long from now,” states Ken Wu.

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