

Sustaining Old Growth Forest in the Face of Increased Tourism. A Short Note on Comparisons between “Yakusugiland” on Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan and “Cathedral Grove” on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada.

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Key words: Old Growth Forest, Tourism, Landscape.

This short paper is a brief introduction outlining the similar problems confronting two world renowned areas of island old growth forest, explaining briefly how the boom in tourism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has also meant greater concern in certain quarters over damage to the unique forest landscapes, susceptible as they are to the various pressures brought about by the annual rise in tourist numbers.

Background to the forests

Cathedral Grove

MacMillan Park, or “Cathedral Grove” as it is more commonly known today covers an area of over 300 hectares in central Vancouver Island, on either side of Highway 4, 16 kilometres east of the small town of Port Alberni. Its origins as a tourist destination date back almost a hundred years, to when the forest was still owned by the Victoria Lumbering and Manufacturing Company, for in the early part of the 20th century, it was a regular photo spot for tourists traveling on the Alberni road. By the early 1940s H. R. MacMillan, a well-known lumber baron, who by this time owned the area, gave the forest to the province of British Columbia. The area encompassed 156 hectares at that time. The province authorities were then able to guarantee the protection of the trees which include Douglas

Fir, Western Red Cedar and Western Hemlock. An old growth forest, with the tops of the trees creating a canopy similar to that of a cathedral (hence the name), the area soon become a popular destination where day visitors could wander among species of fern close to the great old trees, some up to 800 years old, towering above them. By 1947, it was established as a provincial park and over the years a network of trails has been laid down to help visitors enjoy the forest. Today more than 300,000 people a year visit Cathedral Grove.

Yakusugiland

Yakusugiland is the name given to a sightseeing “blocked in area” situated on the upper reaches of the Anbo river around 1000 metres above sea level on the island of Yakushima. The area is under the supervision of Kagoshima Prefecture and lies within the National Park zone. It covers over 200 hectares with the famous Yaku cedar accounting for almost half of the trees in the area. It was opened to the public to enable visitors to see up close the famous cedars, without having to resort to tough hiking courses within the more mountainous areas of the island.

It is about a 30 minute drive from the small town of Anbo up to the car park at Yakusugiland. The park itself was developed in Japan’s boom years in the early seventies during a time when Matsushita (1995) notes that an “improvement in transportation sources, increased public concern for nature” as well as the registration of the island to become a World Cultural and Natural Heritage site meant a steady increase of tourists reaching the island. It was set up in 1972 and originally called “Recreation Forest”. As numbers of visitors increased dramatically the park was later redeveloped as “Yakusugiland” with a network of well-organized trails through the cedar forests. Today, there are 4 main courses which cater for walkers of all

abilities allowing people easy access to some of the world famous Yakusugi trees. With over 400,000 visitors to the island a year (NHK, 2010), many of whom visit Yakusugiland, it has become one of the key tourist destinations on Yakushima,

Similar Problems.

To a great extent both areas have become victims of their own success. As Forbes (2009) points out, "National Parks are not necessarily for the protection of the environment." More often than not the National Park Services' agenda combines a mixture of aims including conservation of scenic areas and their ecosystems while still promoting their utilization by people. British Columbia Parks Services note this fact when referring to their "dual conservation and recreation mandate" (2010). This often leads to a conflict of interests. When initially opened to tourists, there was a lack of real infrastructure, and modes of transportation made it difficult for huge numbers of people to get to the parks. In the case of Cathedral Grove, it was only in the 1970s and 1980s as more people finally had their own transport that the numbers of visitors along Highway 4 really began to expand.

The same is true of Yakusugiland. Until recently public transport to the site was relatively infrequent, so with many tourists to the island not possessing their own vehicles, numbers of visitors remained manageable in terms of their negative impact on the environment. Now however, with more and more people bringing their cars over from the mainland on the ferry services, or renting cars for their visit from the numerous cheap car hire firms set up on the island, people are able to access Yakusugiland much more easily. In both cases, improved access routes leading up to the forest landscapes have resulted in drastic increases in tourist traffic. On Highway 4, improved roads have greatly cut the driving time from other parts of

Vancouver island in recent years, and the widening, strengthening and straightening of parts of the old hairpin circuit up to Yakusugiland from the Anbo turnoff have made it much less daunting to drivers.

The easing of the access to these places has produced a greater strain on the woodland environment. Large groups of people pounding the trails, especially during peak periods in the summer (both Cathedral Grove and Yakusugiland) and during Golden Week (early May) in the case of Yakusugiland, leaves the woodland paths susceptible to erosion and in the worst cases means the delicate fauna of the forest floor is trampled underfoot by crowds pressing on in the search of large trees, blissfully unaware of the damage they are doing to smaller but no less important parts of the ecosystem they have come to visit.

What is more, damage created by natural causes has also become in itself a reason to visit. In Cathedral Grove, for example, the severe windstorm of 1997 which uprooted many old growth trees, although in ecological terms creating natural regeneration, has also caused even more pressure on the woodland, as crowds now flock in to see the uprooted great trunks. With some of the trails so badly affected that they still remain unopened, the pressure of visitor numbers on other trails expands and as the British Columbia Park Services themselves make clear “the effects of visitor damage where deeply incised trails and debarked trees temper the enjoyment of MacMillan Park’s special forest environment” goes on unabated (2010).

Similarities exist in Yakusugiland, where it is the great stumps of giant trees felled in the Edo Period in particular and naturally fallen younger trees which create the magical forest scenes which so inspire visitors. By clambering up over these fallen giants, visitors are unaware of the damage they do to smaller plant life, especially the delicate mosses which form such

a biologically important part of the forest. It is just this kind of destruction that is taking place on another part of the island at Shiratani Unsuikyo. Greatly increased visitor numbers, especially by bus, thanks to faster, wider roads up from Miyanoura port have meant the destruction of large parts of the fragile moss tracts that ironically attract the visitors in the first place (Forbes 2009).

The relevant authorities have tried to address such problems. In Yakusugiland and the immediate vicinity trails have been improved and visitors asked to remain on them. However, it is plain to see that as more and more busloads of tourists are driven up to visit during peak times, there is a limit to the amount of people that the forest area can accommodate without damage being done to the environment. Already more buildings have been built on site to accommodate the requirements of visitors, though some are of dubious worth. Many for example would question the real need for a large structure housing gaudy souvenirs in the middle of a National Park site. Ironically local wildlife, such as the famous Yaku monkey, has even had to be culled, as a conflict of interests has arisen in recent years. Monkeys sought to steal food from the tourists and through being in regular close proximity to them had become fearless and in some cases outwardly aggressive to the human visitors. Many on the island now believe the optimum number of visitors has already been reached or surpassed, though because of the importance of the tourist industry to the island's economy there is also a vociferous group, including many local business leaders keen to see access made even easier in the hope of further promoting tourism and generating income.

At Cathedral Grove new paths have been formed and fences have been erected to stop people walking along fallen logs, a practice which disturbs the sensitive plants which grow upon the fallen trees. However,

some campaigners are skeptical and suggest that these recent amendments will have little serious effect while the National Park Services continue to improve direct access to the sites, allowing visitor numbers to increase year on year. Even the authorities in charge of Cathedral Grove admit that “the park’s small size and accessibility has left it vulnerable to impacts from high visitor use”, and while they try to offset this “resource damage challenge” against the “significant opportunity” that large numbers of visitors create, there are signs that many feel uneasy about what might be happening to Cathedral Grove.

Future Concerns

To a great extent the future concerns for both Yakusugiland and Cathedral Grove stem from the fact that they happen to both be accessible sites where people can walk easily and safely without any specialist clothing or equipment. The trails of Yakusugiland have been specifically designed for those not comfortable with the idea of grueling hiking courses. By the mid 1990s, visitors to Yakusugiland were asked for a “voluntary” entrance fee of 300 yen at the entrance, in a similar way to that at Cathedral Grove where there is a message exhorting visitors to “feed the donation tree” whose funds are used to pay for things like new signposts and re-vegetation projects. The fees at Yakusugiland allow the authorities to make educated guesses at the number of visitors coming to the trails. Already numbering in excess of 40,000 in the peak periods each year, it had become clear by the late 1990s to many that questions needed to be asked concerning the rapid increase in tourist traffic. A brief glance at figures for numbers of people visiting Jomonsugi, the most famous tree on the island, perhaps shows what future problems lie in store for Yakusugiland too. In the year 2000, 29,700 people walked the trails to Jomonsugi. By 2006, the figure had shot

up to 63,200, and in 2008 the unsustainable figure of 92,600 was recorded (Yakushima Newsletter 2010). Authorities reacted by closing off access routes during peak periods to private cars at the trailhead by Arakawa Dam. This step has failed to significantly reduce numbers however. The popularity of the trail means that great queues of hikers now wait patiently by Jomonsugi for a brief photo opportunity throughout the summer. This policy has also meant that more visitors have opted for other routes through Yakusugiland, meaning paths up to places like Taichu Dake have become overused of late. The policy has not worked in reducing numbers; it has merely pushed some of the tourist traffic onto other routes such as the trails at Yakusugiland, which in the long term will only serve to create a range of similar problems now being faced at Jomonsugi, including erosion and damage to the fragile eco-system.

Another concern is the number of large tourist buses now accessing Yakusugiland. Road improvements mean the buses can make more journeys per day bringing people up from Anbo. As long ago as 1995, Matsushita and others at Kagoshima University were advocating the use of the old logging railtrack as a way of ferrying numbers into the interior. The added advantage of this system would be to reduce road traffic and create less environmental damage. However, local government has chosen not to use this option, and contracts with local construction firms, concrete providers and heavy machinery firms have been forthcoming. Road "improvement" projects have been the order of the day, a common result in Japan's postwar rural debate that some see as a typical short sighted bureaucratic move smacking heavily of "pork barrel politics" with little thought given to environment concerns. The adverse effects of increased construction, a concreting of the landscape, so clearly visible in the Shiratani Unsuikyo area, are now starting to be noticeable on the approaches to Yakusugiland too.

Similar concerns have arisen in Cathedral Grove too where vociferous opposition has been organized to newly planned larger car parking areas. There are a number of websites highlighting the issues from both sides of the debate, but the argument to avoid further development is being made forcefully in Canada, in contrast to Japan where the grass roots movement to protect the sites of old growth forest from any more development are slow to be heard.

At Cathedral Grove, the British Columbia Park Services state that they would like the place to serve as a “catalyst for a multi agency information and education programme” (2010). This may be laudable in itself, but if numbers are not limited forest protection groups argue, there will be little left of the old growth forest’s unique eco-system with which to carry out this much vaunted programme of education.

The key battle area in the debate over the last few years has been the Park Services’ wish to build a larger car park at the Grove to allow greater vehicle access and to reduce the dangers of motor traffic on Highway 4. They note that over 2,000 people per day in July and August walk the trails and the present car park is full from 10a.m.-4 p.m. on most days, which creates dangers as people park along the highway’s edge and must run the gauntlet of passing traffic to access the trails. For many people however, in groups such as FROG (Friends of Cathedral Grove), the car park issue is a smokescreen put out by the authorities. According to them, the menace comes not from tourist traffic, but the logging trucks that pass through the Grove on Highway 4 at high speeds. The real issue for them is the fact that logging companies have been allowed to clear cut with impunity right up to the boundaries of Cathedral Grove, threatening the park’s eco-system as the natural wind barrier which protects the old growth trees within the grove is removed entirely. The car park issue for many is a red herring used by

the Government to defuse the issue of old growth logging. While the car park idea was rejected in 2001 and 2004, the debate still rumbles on and the future seems certain to continue to pit different agencies and protest groups against each other, each believing they have the answer to the forest's future.

In some ways the sense that the Park Services and forest protection groups come from opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their reading of this landscape debate is echoed in the way in which the park was initially founded. According to the British Columbia Park Services, H. R MacMillan who gave his name to MacMillan Park (the official name of Cathedral Grove), was a forester and philanthropist whose wish in donating the land was to allow the place to be one of "perpetual enjoyment" for generations of visitors to come. FROG, however states clearly that he was a rapacious logging man with an eye for profit and only gave up the park to assuage politicians in return for other more lucrative logging rights. They even go so far as to record his supposed words at the public debate in the 1940s when he is quoted as storming out of the meeting shouting "Alright, you can have the God damned grove" (Wonders 2009).

Cathedral Grove seems likely to remain an area which causes more heated debate as the 21st century progresses. The increasing political power in the hands of indigenous groups like the Haida Nation of Vancouver Island seem likely to make the issues surrounding the grove less easily solved as Government Park Services, Logging Companies, Environmental groups and the Haida all have their own agendas which may overlap at times, but make decision making very difficult. On Yakushima, increased concern of the local islanders regarding the fate of their forests is also a growing issue. As Forbes (2009) remarks, "On Yakushima, people still retain a sense of living with the land: a sense that has been lost in parts of modern Japan. There

is also a geographical separation of areas of human land- use and the areas designated as wilderness, meaning that the possibility exists for the island to contain both a viable economic system and sustainable biodiversity without generating a clash over use of resources.” As more visitors arrive to see the old growth forests, many inhabitants want more protection for the zones which symbolize the past and present power of the island. But with no one single Japanese agency responsible for Yakusugiland or other areas like it on the island, it seems likely that here too, there will remain a conflict of interests in terms of the woodland landscapes’ future.

It remains to be seen whether local environmental groups will become as organized or vocal as those in Canada, but there is no escaping the fact that the recent rapid rise in tourist traffic has put undue strain on the ecosystem of the forest, and without careful coordinated management in the very near future, many of the wonderful sights that tourists now come to see may be lost for future generations. As John Muir was quoted as saying, “God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand tempests and floods. But he cannot save them from fools.” It remains to be seen whether folly or reason win the day in these fragile areas of old growth forest.

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