

Back to the blockades: Why I continue to fight for British Columbia's old-growth forests

[Op-ed commentary by Tzeporah Berman, published in *Globe and Mail* print edition, May 24, 2021](#)

Tzeporah Berman is a liberal environmentalist, adjunct professor at York University (Toronto) and writer. She was coordinator of the historic mass protests and blockades in Clayoquot Sound, Vancouver Island, 27 years ago to halt logging of old-growth forest. She is the International Program Director with [Stand.Earth](#) and the Global Chair of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative.

As you read this, I am either on the old-growth logging blockades on unceded Ditidaht territory on the west coast of [British Columbia](#), or I am in jail. This won't be the first time I have blockaded the logging of old-growth rainforests on Vancouver Island. The first time was 27 years ago when as a young 23 year old, I spent many months living in a clear-cut, co-ordinating blockades with a local community group in Clayoquot Sound. I was arrested that summer of 1993, and charged with 857 counts of criminal aiding and abetting. I faced six years in jail.

I was very lucky that a number of brilliant lawyers came to my defence and argued that you can't aid and abet civil disobedience, that I had a right to free speech, and that individual citizens make their own choices to do civil disobedience.

Today, the majority of remaining old-growth rainforests in Clayoquot Sound are off limits to logging. However, across the province of British Columbia, 27 years later, ancient giant trees are still falling. This is in spite of scientific evidence that there is so little left, and that these last old-growth forests are critical to maintain ecosystem services – a stable climate, the air that we breathe and water that we drink.

In his fall election campaign, Premier [John Horgan](#) promised a new future for old forests and committed to implementing a series of expert recommendations on old growth – including immediate logging deferrals in areas at high risk. One of those areas is Fairy Creek on Pacheedaht territory, and nearby Caycuse on Ditidaht territory – these areas are among the highest value old-growth forests remaining across the province.

When the Premier made his comments, many people had already been blockading and stopping logging for several months. The promise should have been a relief, but in the months since the election, that hope has faltered as logging continues as usual. In fact, [recent analysis](#) has shown that logging approvals in old-growth forests went up by almost 50 per cent in the past year. Unsurprisingly, more people have joined the blockades and tensions are rising.

There are moments in history where citizens are required to stand up because governments are failing to protect the public good. This is one of those moments.

Civil disobedience is a last resort. Let's be honest: Nobody chooses to spend almost a year living on a logging road if they have better options. Nobody wants to be arrested or risk their freedom if they can avoid it. But with old-growth giants continuing to fall and a complete lack of leadership from BC's provincial government, we are out of time and out of choices. And I can't just stand by while other people put themselves on the line for the forests and communities I have worked to protect for most of my life.

There's also a joy in taking direct action. I first experienced the power of protest almost 30 years ago in Clayoquot Sound. At the height of the logging protests, more than 1,000 people were arrested. There, I met thousands of people from different walks of life, all brought together by the call to defend irreplaceable forests. We sang and talked around the campfire, and envisioned a better future.

Today, the forests in Clayoquot Sound are largely off limits to logging and are gauged at low ecological risk relative to the rest of the province. It's the leadership of Indigenous nations and peoples, and their work to implement new visions for the land in Clayoquot, that is enshrining a paradigm shift in [forestry](#) and a just future for the land.

Sadly, the situation for other old-growth forests is significantly worse today than it was during those protests in the 1990s. In the decades since Clayoquot, talk and log policies have dominated the provincial landscape. Now, a fraction of big, old trees are still standing – most of them outside protected areas. Over the same period, forestry jobs have more than halved, and mill closings have devastated forest communities throughout B.C.

Increased logging in watersheds is threatening the drinking-water supply in some places, while others are at increased risk of catastrophic flooding and fires. First Nations, whose territories extend over every part of this province, have been largely left out of decisions over forestry on their lands, and community interests are routinely ranked below timber volume.

With the survival of old-growth forests reaching a precipice, the province in 2019 commissioned an Old Growth Strategic Review and a two-person panel. This panel made [14 recommendations](#), including immediate logging deferrals (temporary bans) that it said must be implemented within six months.

More than a year later, the vast majority of these areas are open to logging and reports show increased permitting and old-growth logging (likely because industry knows its days of being allowed to log old growth are limited). This week, independent scientists [published maps](#) of the critical old-growth forests left in British Columbia that remain under threat and urgently need logging deferrals if the government is committed to its promise to implement the expert recommendations.

Instead of taking a leadership position and following through on its own promises, the B.C. NDP government has instead ramped up a misinformation campaign and is driving divide-and-conquer tactics. NDP MLAs are using industry talking points, ostensibly provided by their party, to gaslight constituents who are simply calling on them to fulfill their election promise.

Instead of taking action, Forests Minister Katrine Conroy and other members of the NDP cabinet and caucus continue to tout deferrals announced in September, claiming that 352,739 hectares of

old growth were protected. In reality, only about 3,800 hectares were actually protected and [scientists have noted](#) that the government deferrals fail to meet the panel recommendations and so far leave the most at-risk old-growth forests still open to logging.

The tension and conflict around this issue are enormous – and dangerous. Like everyone in B.C., I was outraged by the blatant anti-Indigenous racism that forest defenders were subjected to in early May in the Walbran. I was also inspired by the words of Aya Clappis, Huu-ay-aht Indigenous youth, when she said, “My hope is that we can all together move into a just transition and sustainable economies where no one is harmed, but rather it lends our Coastal peoples the rights and the responsibilities to be caretakers of the land.”

Despite the violence they faced, these young Indigenous leaders reiterated their support for forestry workers and the need for a just transition to support workers and their communities as the province moves away from logging old growth. We all need to listen to their words, and nobody more so than Premier Horgan.

Personally, I need to be able to look at my children and my future grandchildren and tell them I did everything I could to save these last old-growth ecosystems. So that’s why I am once again, sadly, heading to the blockades and likely to jail. I don’t do this lightly and I am not looking forward to it. I do this in the hopes that courage is contagious, and that our elected decision makers will see how far many of us are willing to go to stop the destruction of these beautiful, ancient rainforests.

Perhaps we will inspire them to make good on their promises and give another generation the opportunity to crane their necks up and be amazed at these living beings that have stood here since well before this country was called “Canada” and even before Columbus landed his ships and colonialism began.

Pacheedaht Elder Bill Jones said in a statement that everyone needs to take a step back and “go for a walk in the woods.” It’s our responsibility to make sure these places still exist for future generations, and that our great-grandchildren can stand in the cool shade of an old-growth forest and look up in awe at the giant trees.

For them to continue to stand there, we need to stand for them now. Because if we don’t, we will never get another chance.