

Trumpeter (1990)

ISSN: 0832-6193

WATERSHED ACTIVISM AS A CONTEXT FOR COM-
MUNITY EDUCATION

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Joel Russ has lived on the land in the Slocan Valley since 1972, and considers his life there to be a hands-on ecological education. Since 1978 he has been a free lance writer. He makes his living through writing, research, and photography, which requires that he spend a lot of time travelling. He has a special interest in ecological restoration.

Picture 4500 residents of a mountain-cradled, 50-mile-long valley whose drinking and irrigation water is at the mercy of a sawmill operation and a government agency essentially charged with the duty of seeing that such mills' timber allowances are met from the largely publicly owned forests of the area. This has been the situation for decades in the Slocan Valley, whose steep conifer-carpeted walls rise up as part of the Southern Selkirk Mountains, in southeastern British Columbia. Activism in the protection of the "working forest" has been gaining momentum here since the early 1970s. From the beginning, those of us active in the effort have recognized this to be a practical educational circumstance, one devoid of the "ivory tower" syndrome.

The local participants in what is a rather typical drama include millworkers, loggers, and industrial truck drivers (and their families) — and thousands of people whose livings are made in other occupations. All of us depend on the various creeks, springs, and wells of the Valley for domestic and irrigation water.

For nearly a century, this region (the West Kootenay) had three main economic underpinnings: mining, lumber milling, and agriculture. But some thirty years ago, commercial agriculture in the region fell victim to the provincial highway construction, through the southern portion of the province, that made produce from the Slocan Valley less competitive and cheap imports into the Valley possible. Mining — while not entirely dead in the region — has become quite unsteady, due to rising extraction costs and fluctuating mineral markets. The sawmill in the village of Slocan, Slocan Forest Products — owned by a corporation operating six other mills in various places — now forms the basis for the largest single employment base in the Valley.

Since its founding in 1982, the Slocan Valley Watershed Alliance has functioned as an umbrella organization for some dozen neighbourhood watershed-protection groups located throughout the length of the Valley. Some groups represent people collectively dependent on a sizable stretch of watershed. Others represent the interests of village water-system users. Most member groups have a board which meets regularly, and the Alliance in turn has a board made up of group representatives, along with other interested individuals, who meet once a month. New people join both the neighbourhood groups and the Alliance board from time to time.

Our objective in the Watershed Alliance has been to try to put a large share

of decision-making power, with respect to how logging is planned and managed here, into the hands of the residents directly affected by it. Obviously, this would shift "the people" to whom the company and government would be responsible from some nebulous political entity, "the B.C. public", to specific people in a specific place. We believe that, in practice, this would constitute an effective form of ecological management.

The vision of the Watershed Alliance has been to expect, from industry and government, the application of a sustainable, low- impact form of timber harvest, in those watershed areas where studies might indicate harvest would be ecologically acceptable. Such low-impact harvest has not, to date, been insured by the bureaucratically determined policy of the provincial Ministry of Forests. At best, the Ministry operates under a "tree farming" philosophy, rooted in the practices of clearcutting, slash burning, monocultural reforestation, chemical fertilization, etc. This complex of management techniques, coupled with poorly defined standards of practice, puts both water quality and forest ecology at risk.

We Slocan Valley conservationists have had the good fortune to have among us a number of careful, sophisticated, private logging contractors, also a few professional foresters sharing a holistic philosophy, some regional political representatives, a wise union activist or two, and many other people with brains, talents, dedication, and concern. Especially in the last eight or ten years, we have all been each other's teachers. Respect for Nature has been the very foundation of our schooling.

What have we studied and learned about? You might guess we have learned principles of good forestry. Yes, that is true. But that kind of information seeped in gradually in the earlier years, much more rapidly in the last few. Early on, we actually learned more about how and why government agencies make their decisions, and who the personalities in the local offices of those agencies were. Also, we learned how to use the media — everything from the "letters-to-the-editor" columns in the regional papers, to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's provincial radio network. As well, we learned something, through environmental lawyers in Vancouver, about environmental and resource-extraction laws in our province. We learned how and why to leave a proper "paper trail" in our correspondence with government and industry. Importantly, we learned much about the relationship of different social groups in the Valley. Not least, in terms of the group itself, we learned communication and decision-making skills — and we learned how to raise money in an "economically depressed region"!

We haven't yet obtained control of the forest lands of our valley, though it is possible we may be drawing nearer that goal. Still, we have met success in several other ways, among these are the facts that: the public lands on the walls of the main Valley corridors have not as yet been logged, though the pressure has been on for years; and those of us who have been active in the Alliance, along with others in the region, as I will explain, have become more knowledgeable. All this learning, I might add, has been interwoven with our activism, much of

this prompted by the inescapable need to respond to crises in our relations with industry and government.

I have mentioned that forestry education, per se, has been a component of the Alliance's experience. We non-forester members have had much to learn. In good part this learning has come through lectures, workshops, and dialogue provided by our professional forestry members. For instance, we have learned a bit about the hydrology of watersheds, about forest soils, and about the ecological principles of species diversity. But we have also taken field trips into our forests to directly experience this environment together. We have looked at unlogged land, badly logged land, eroded land, washed-out roads, and more. Recently, we have discovered some books accessible to the intelligent layperson, most notably Gordon Robinson's *The Forest and the Trees* (Island Press), and Chris Maser's *The Redesigning Forest* (R.&E. Miles) which have been most interesting and informative.

The need for a more regionally oriented reference book has prompted us to subsidize one of our member foresters to write one: a meticulously detailed handbook of forestry planning, technical guidelines and standards, and model community decision making processes. The forester in question is a first-time author, so indeed everybody learns.

This book will be but one of the explicitly educational tools and services the Slovan Valley Watershed Alliance has fostered. Accomplished, or in the works, are province-wide watershed-activists' conferences, a series of documentary videos and audio tapes, and a compilation of collected negotiation documents. While the aforementioned forestry book is an in-house document, the other print and audio-visual materials are offered to community groups, schools, cable-TV networks, and so on. Interestingly, the general influence of local-environmental activism has prompted a number of young people to choose watershed-related subjects as the basis for their school science projects. One group of students, at Mt. Sentinel High School, chose to organize an ecologically oriented club called "The Conscious Party."

All in all, what we seem to have is perpetual community education offering no credit or degree. But what a school!

Citation Format

Russ, Joel (1990) WATERSHED ACTIVISM AS A CONTEXT FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION *Trumpeter*: 7, 3. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.7.3.21>

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