

Are Quebec's Forests Threatened?

by Jasmin Gu nette and Pierre Desrochers



Environmental groups claim that logging is jeopardizing the future of our forests¹ as well as the survival of the species that live in them. Is this an accurate picture of the reality of forestry in Quebec? The aggregate data do not show that our forests are in decline. On the contrary, forest cover has increased slightly between the first forest inventory in 1979 and the most recent one in 2002.² As for the overall distribution of the different stages of forest development, it has remained almost unchanged since the first forest inventory, with young, mature and regenerated forests accounting for about the same share of public forestland.³

The preservation of forest cover is due to a variety of factors. First of all, the increasing productivity of agricultural land allows more food to be grown on a smaller area, which reduces the need to clear forests. The total area of protected lands, which include among other things old-growth forests, rare forests and shelter forests, has also increased. As of March 31, 2014, they covered 9.11% of the province, compared to just 2.84% in 1999.⁴

Moreover, even in places where trees are harvested, new techniques for logging, reforestation and soil preparation have reduced the discrepancy between managed and natural forests by creating landscapes that imitate the diversity and irregularity of natural forests.⁵ Today, practically all of Quebec's public forests are harvested according to strict certification standards set by the FSC, the CSA and the SFI, which guarantee sustainable management practices.⁶

The different forest management systems

Beyond these broad trends, the state of our forests also depends on the government's expectations with regard to forest management, which are set down in its forest management system.

Under the forest concession system, which was in effect from 1826 to 1987, concession holders had wide-ranging responsibilities in allocating lumber volumes, managing inventory, preparing management plans and protecting their lands from fire. These concessions were granted to companies with no time limits, as long as the government's pre-established conditions were respected.⁷

Concession holders being the equivalent of owners of the land, it was to their long-term advantage to invest in and care for their property. They also had an interest in sustainably harvesting the forests they were granted since the profitability of their companies depended on it.

As pointed out in the Duchesneau report, prepared for the Commission for the study of public forest management in Quebec in 2004, apart from a few minor cases, it was generally admitted that the claim holders fulfilled their responsibilities adequately.⁸

However, the governments in power in the 1970s and 1980s thought that the forest concession system was incompatible with the goal of maximizing economic benefits, and therefore incapable of responding to the expected increase in demand for paper and



lumber on the global market. Not only were claim holders not overharvesting the forests, but they were accused of not harvesting them enough. In 1971, the government evaluated that concession holders were only harvesting 65% of the “annual allowable cut,” which corresponds to the maximum forest volume that can be harvested annually without reducing the productive capacity of the forestry sector.⁹

This perception that forestry companies were not harvesting the forest enough led governments to gradually abolish the forest concession system starting in 1974. This process ended in 1987 with the adoption of the *Forest Act*, which introduced timber supply and forest management agreements (TSFMAs) with 25-year terms. The government thereby took control of the allocation of trees and introduced new forest management rules.¹⁰

The revocation of forest concessions happened in parallel with the allocation of logging rights in public forests that were specifically meant to be held in reserve for the needs of the forestry industry (“forêts domaniales”). The total surface area of these forests more than tripled between 1971 and 1985, finally growing to double the total surface area of forest concessions.¹¹

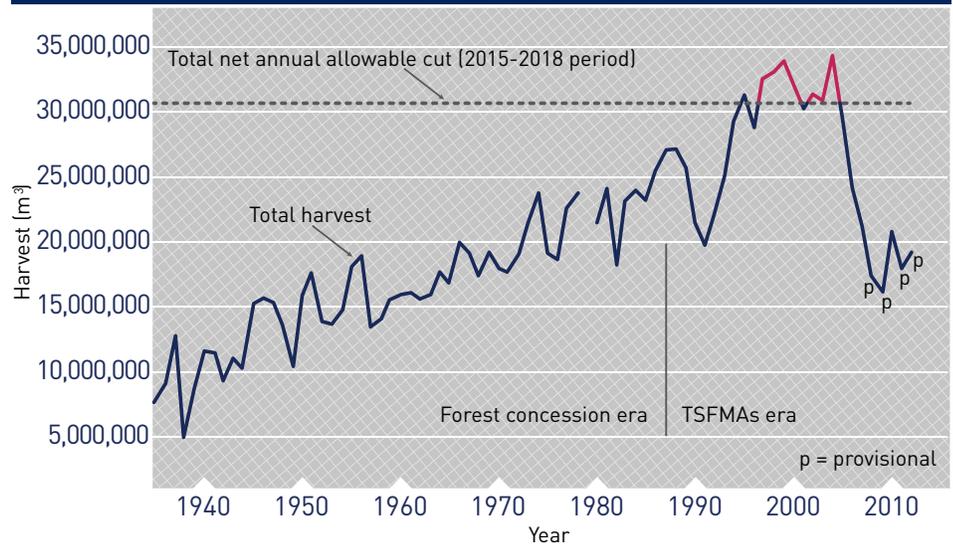
The forest cover has increased slightly between the first forest inventory in 1979 and the most recent one in 2002.

Following these reforms, the annual tree harvest from all public forests increased substantially. Between 1970 and 2000, the harvest of softwood species grew by 72%, even surpassing the total allowable cut in 1985 for this kind of harvest.¹²

A study of the evolution of the harvest and of the annual allowable cut for public forests found no overharvesting during the forest concession period (see Figure 1). It is only after the abolition of concessions that some instances of exceeding the annual allowable cut can be observed around the turn of the 21st century before the harvest fell in the mid-2000s due to falling demand in the United States.¹³

This harvest increase under the TSFMA system was a turning point in the management of public forests, as different reports

Figure 1 — Evolution of public forest harvests in Quebec compared to the annual allowable cut, 1935-2012



Source: Eric Alvarez, “Regards sur l’histoire de l’aménagement forestier au Québec — 1: la surexploitation des forêts,” *La Forêt à Cœur*, June 2014.

Note: The author used the most recent calculation method for the total allowable cut and extrapolated it into the past.

brought up the difficulty of adequately evaluating the true annual allowable cut and raised the hypothesis of overharvesting.¹⁴ Paradoxically, although this situation was in large part due to government intervention, it justified the near-total centralization of forest management in the hands of governmental organizations.

The new forest management system that went into effect April 1, 2013 replaced the TSFMAs with supply guarantees with terms of five years or less, at the Minister’s discretion. This new system gives the government almost total responsibility when it comes to the forests, including forest planning, the follow-up and monitoring of forest operations, the granting of forestry rights, timber scaling and the auctioning off of a portion of the wood.¹⁵

Whereas companies under the forest concession system, and even under the TSFMA system up to a point, had a long-term financial interest in managing the forests in such a way as to ensure that they would last, they no longer have any autonomy today and must simply follow the directives of government agencies from one year to the next (see Table 1).

This new system is already raising concerns regarding its capacity to reconcile the protection of the forest and the dynamism of the industry. On the one hand, the sustainable harvesting of the forest depends solely on the foresight of civil servants and the electoral interests of politicians. On the other hand, the uncer-

tainty regarding the term lengths of supply guarantees could discourage investment and entail job losses.

The committee entrusted with the task of preparing a report for the first year of the new forest management system recently highlighted its dubious effectiveness by pointing out the lack of communication from the relevant government agencies and the lack of transparency in the lumber marketing process.¹⁶ Forestry groups have for their part denounced increased harvesting costs and operating delays, as well as the duplication of tasks.¹⁷

To meet its economic and political goals, the government contributed to the overharvesting of the forests under the TSFMA system. Today, while forest cover is not shrinking, there are doubts about the new forest management system's economic impact on the forestry sector, which employed 60,082 people in 2013 and represented around 2.1% of the Quebec economy—more than the mining and energy sectors.¹⁸

Table 1 — Characteristics of forest management systems, 1826-2014

Time period	Type of system	Responsibilities	Length of contracts
1826-1974	Concessions	Concession holders allocate volumes of wood, manage inventories, prepare management plans and protect their lands from fire.	No time limit, as long as the government's pre-established conditions are respected
1974-1987	Transition period: gradual abolition of concessions and use of reserves in "forêts domaniales"	Logging rights in "forêts domaniales" allocated by the Minister of Lands and Forests.	Determined by the Minister of Lands and Forests
1987-2013	Timber supply and forest management agreements (TSFMAs)	The government determines the volume of wood to be harvested given the annual allowable cut for each species. Holders of TSFMAs must submit management plans and silvicultural strategies.	25 years
2013-	Supply guarantees	The government is responsible for forest planning, the follow-up and monitoring of forest operations, the granting of forestry rights, timber scaling and the auctioning off of a portion of the wood.	Five years or less, at the Minister's discretion

The Woodland Caribou

Another criticism from environmentalist groups is that activities related to logging threaten the survival of a few thousand woodland caribou living in Quebec's managed forests.¹⁹

In reality, however, other human activities like hunting have historically been of greater importance. Moreover, recent methods of ecosystem-based forest management try to recreate conditions similar to natural disturbances like fire, to which the species has always succeeded in adapting. According to specialists, the main problem related to forestry is that it facilitates the movement and arrival of other members of the deer family (moose and white-tailed deer) and their predators (grey wolves and black bears), which also hunt woodland caribou.²⁰

While the matter is complex, Environment Canada studies have emphasized the fact that "forestry activities can take place in the caribou's habitat without threatening the species, as long as their cumulative effects do not destroy the biological and physical attributes required for its survival and recovery."²¹

In the winter of 2012, Quebec's Department of Natural Resources carried out a woodland caribou population survey in the Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean region, allowing for the first time for a comparison of the state of the population over time for a given area. From the 1999 survey to the 2012 survey, the population doubled from 115 to 247 individuals.²² This occurred while nearly 70% of the overall land area in the region was disrupted by forestry operations.²³ The study stipulates that it is difficult to identify exactly the reason or reasons that explain the observed population increase.

While forest cover is not shrinking, there are doubts about the new forest management system's economic impact on the forestry sector.

It is important to note that the reports prepared by the Équipe de rétablissement du caribou forestier au Québec and by Environment Canada underline significant margins of error that leave room for doubt regarding the precision of observations on the changing state of the species. Although the population of

woodland caribou is falling in certain zones, it is rising in others, and the reasons for this are not well understood. Critics who point the finger specifically at the forestry industry are therefore jumping to conclusions that are not justified by the available data.

Conclusion

Quebec's forests are not about to disappear, and the forest cover has even increased slightly since 1979. Moreover, contrary to what is often said, far from imposing their will, forestry companies have very little room to manoeuvre since the abolition of the forest concession system. Essentially, it is the government that manages Quebec's forests today, a situation that raises numerous concerns with regard to the future of the industry.

Although the population of woodland caribou is falling in certain zones, it is rising in others, and the reasons for this are not well understood.

This important economic activity does not have a disastrous environmental impact on the ecosystem, contrary to certain myths. Rather, it is similar to agriculture, in that it allows the forest to continually regenerate itself, harvest after harvest.

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