Outside magazine, August 1996

Field Notes: The Last Wilderness

Few places are left like British Columbia's rainforest. But for how long? *By Doug Peacock*

Early July on the central coast of British Columbia was cold and wet. Clouds hovered over indistinct shorelines. A hazy spiral of bald eagles circled in the distance like buzzards. My ten-year-old son, Colin, and I were traveling by fishing boat up a saltwater channel that led into a fjord. On deck with us were my friend the writer Terry Tempest Williams and two local Heiltsuk Indians.

The 50-foot salmon trawler chugged up a narrow passage flanked by tall basalt cliffs. A faint line of barnacles marking the high-tide line ran across the rock a few feet above the dark water. Beyond this gray landscape of sea and stone loomed a dense forest of spruce, cedar, and hemlock--towering trees reaching up into a cloak of fog.

Suddenly, the older Indian, a thickset man wearing bifocals, threw up his arms and began to chant. Terry and I looked at each other, startled. The man was shouting some sort of song to the cliffs in a language I had never heard before.

In a minute it was over. An awkward silence settled on the boat. "Someone was buried up on that ledge," the Indian quietly explained. He pointed to a spot high on the rock wall painted with ancient pictographs: circles, lines, and arcs of red dots. "I was pacifying the spirits of the dead." He smiled. "I told them we're just visiting."

We leaned over the rail and looked down into the water. The man spoke again: "The ocean here is just crawling with life. It's teeming."

The man's name was Ed Martin. He was a 63-year-old Heiltsuk elder from the nearby town of Bella Bella. The other Indian was his 20-year-old grandson, Benny. Though I didn't know it at the time, we

were all going to the same place: Ellerslie Lake, a 14-mile-long snake of freshwater that spilled into the head of the fjord. The lake was a holy spot to the Heiltsuk.

We were making this journey because I wanted to show my son one of the last great wildernesses in North America: the temperate rainforest of British Columbia's central coast. This vast green expanse, carved into archipelagoes and fjords by the Pacific and crowned by immaculate snow and ice fields, stretches 500 miles from Knight Inlet north to the Alaskan panhandle--26 million acres of giant Sitka spruces, red cedars, and western hemlocks. The richness of the sea, the abundance of fish and game, combine with the forest to offer a landscape unlike any other on the continent. It is perhaps the only place on earth where a hunting-and-gathering culture ever attained anything approaching a civilization. All along the coast, early Indians lived in villages nestled in the bays and deltas. In the brief months of summer, they could accumulate enough salmon, berries, game, shellfish, and seal blubber to sustain them through the long winters. It was abundance beyond belief, just as Ed said, an ecosystem that to this day continues to thrive, with bountiful wildlife, clean water, and magnificent woodlands born of maritime winds and lowland moisture.

Unlike elsewhere in British Columbia, much of the forest of the central coast has escaped destruction by international timber companies, which have devastated the old-growth forests of the southern part of the province. But time is running out. Loggers have been moving north, cutting swaths out of the remote watersheds above Vancouver Island and Cape Caution, which contain the largest virgin timber stands in North America. Ellerslie--Quskas, or the Great Lake, as the Heiltsuk call it--is one of their targets. Industrial logging has already begun on the 6,000 square miles surrounding the lake, traditional Heiltsuk lands now owned by the provincial government. Since 1993, hundreds of acres have been clear-cut--an eternity of organic evolution halted in a few short summers.

North of Bella Bella, the inlets and passages of the fractured coastline intersected in a wide bay. I glassed a far shore, where a milky white beach denoted the clamshells of an ancient midden. Tall spruces grew along the beach, probably seeded by the timbers of the communal

lodge that once stood there. A barnacle- and mussel-covered shoal materialized to starboard. I handed the binoculars to Colin so that he could watch the fat harbor seals basking on the rocks. We passed a clear-cut; a small patch of low-lying old growth had been gouged out of the shoreline.

Ed Martin gazed at the blank spot in the forest. "They've crucified the trees," he said.

The clouds began to lift as we reached Spiller Channel and turned off to the east. Colin and Terry huddled at the rail, shouting into each other's ears above the roar of the engines. We startled a black bear digging clams and sent him bolting into the brush. Terry spotted marbled murrelets dancing on our wake.

The trawler dropped anchor in a small saltwater bay at the foot of Ellerslie Lake. It had been hours since we'd seen any signs of human life--a couple of shrimp boats combing Spiller Channel. Now, like a mirage, figures dressed in blue and green raingear were emerging from the trees to meet us. They were students and instructors from Round River Conservation Studies, an ecological field school for college undergrads based in Salt Lake City and headed up by my friend Dennis Sizemore. The group had come to Ellerslie to do a biological survey for the Heiltsuk, who were trying to reclaim the area from the British Columbia government. Ellerslie had been an ancestral home of the tribe for hundreds of years when the British Crown seized the land in the late 1870s. Now they were caught in a long and tedious legal battle to win it back.

We exchanged greetings in the cold drizzle and started up a muddy trail to the lake. Ed Martin, who worked as an occasional guide and consultant for Round River, walked beside Colin, pointing out black bear tracks in the mud. From somewhere high above us came the trill of a solitary thrush. The lush transitional zone between coast and rainforest held us in its embrace. The vegetation was thick and sopping. A tuft of bracken slipped beneath my boot and sent me down on my ass. I mechanically reached for the branch of a scrub mountain ash and grabbed a stem of devil's club instead. Tiny needles ripped

my hand, leaving a stinging burn.

In about 20 minutes we emerged from the brush and stared out across an enormous lake. I bent over and tasted a palmful of fresh water. Ellerslie.

We all piled into canoes. Terry, Colin, and I shoved off, with Terry in the bow and me in the stern. The wind picked up as we paddled out into open water. I skirted a point of land to the south and then turned and made for the western shore, where Round River had its seasonal camp.

"What's that?" asked Terry. We stopped paddling and listened.

"I think it's wolves," she said. A faint, high-pitched cry drifted toward us through the mist. We heard it again.

We sat for a moment in silence, looking out across the lake, which seemed to go on forever. This was what I had come for--the wide open spaces of Canada's westernmost province. British Columbia has always occupied a special place in my imagination.

During the decades I was growing up, only western Canada seemed the real wilderness beyond the frontier. Alaska, the Sierra Nevada, even the Canadian tundra and shield country--all had been traveled, if not tamed. But British Columbia was immense beyond belief, its own universe. It was the last great place on the continent, complete with forests, fjords, islands, ocean, mountains, and glaciers. The scale took your breath away. You would need several lifetimes to explore even one river drainage, one old-growth forest.

But the destruction was equally astounding. Nearly 25 percent of the 22 million acres of temperate rainforest that once blanketed British Columbia's coast and inland waterways has disappeared, most of it in the last 20 years. Vancouver Island has been the hardest hit. Virtually every watershed has been logged, every stand of old growth clear-cut. Hidden behind the "tourist fringe" of trees left standing in popular

scenic areas are miles of denuded forestland marked by logging roads, eroded mountainsides, and thousands upon thousands of tree stumps. The Canadian company MacMillan Bloedel, by far the largest timber operation on the island, holds licenses to 1.8 million acres of forest, which are cut at a rate of 40 acres a day. In 1993 MacMillan Bloedel, along with other timber companies, gained access to a huge chunk of Clayoquot Sound, which contains the last of Vancouver's old-growth rainforests--640,000 acres of trees, some as much as 1,200 years old. Thousands of protestors blockaded logging roads into the sound every day from July through October of 1993. It was the largest act of civil disobedience recorded in Canada. As a result, the provincial government ordered a slowdown to the logging, but most of Clayoquot's pristine areas are still slated for cutting, and road building continues.

This rampant destruction is largely due to the fact that Canada has little by way of environmental policy. There are no endangered-species protection laws and few requirements for environmental impact statements. The Ministry of Forests, established in 1912 to oversee Canada's national woodlands, is widely viewed as nothing more than a function of the timber industry--an even more egregious steward than the U.S. Forest Service, which is also criticized for being in the business of selling trees. Just about every big tree in British Columbia not in an official park is spoken for; some 500,000 acres fall each year. Most of the wood goes to American and Japanese companies, which turn it into pulp for newspapers and telephone books. Last year, the 15 publicly traded timber companies operating in British Columbia posted record earnings of $871 million, up 29 percent from 1994.

The provincial government is a direct beneficiary of this wealth. In 1993 it purchased $35 million worth of shares in MacMillan Bloedel, making it the company's largest single stockholder. For this reason, the provincial courts and legislature rarely interfere with the Ministry of Forests, whose efforts to police the timber industry are weak at best. When the ministry does issue tickets and citations, the penalties are, for the most part, inconsequential. Since 1971, for example, MacMillan Bloedel has been cited 83 times for violations ranging from illegal dumping to logging on protected land, and has paid less

than $500,000 in fines. International Forest Products, another Canadian company, has repeatedly been caught logging in unauthorized areas of Clayoquot Sound, in Garibaldi Provincial Park, and in spotted-owl conservation areas throughout British Columbia. Each time, the company has paid minimal fines and has been permitted to keep all of its illegally cut timber.

"It's like getting caught selling a bag of coke and being able to sell the coke to pay the fine," says David R. Boyd, an attorney with the Sierra Legal Defence Fund, which represents grassroots Canadian environmental organizations in suits against corporations and the government. "Each time a tree is cut down, money goes into the provincial government's pocket. The cronyism extends on and on and on." Feeling the heat of such criticism, the British Columbia government has implemented its first environmental public-hearing process, but it's little more than an empty gesture. In the four years since hearings began, there has been virtually no change in the province's timber policies.

"We call it Talk and Log," says Jill Thomas of the Vancouver-based Canadian Rainforest Network. "Everyone sits around a table with industry big cheeses and the process slows to a crawl. The ministry refuses to listen to anything anyone has to say, and the logging keeps going on."

Despite all of this, there have been conservation victories. In the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Haida Indians won a battle in the late eighties to set aside a 50-mile-long sacred archipelago. This capped nearly 20 years of tribal challenges to the logging industry, complete with blockades. And in 1994, 800,000 acres of the Kitlope watershed on the central coast--ancestral lands of the Haisla Indians--were saved from the chainsaw. The rest of the mainland central coast, however, remains up for grabs. In the past two years, six undisturbed watersheds, including Ellerslie, have been opened to logging. In 1993, an American logging concern run by a man named Bill Thompson clear-cut a 400-acre area along the Dean Channel and was making raids on Ellerslie before running out of money and abandoning the project. Last year Western Forest Products out of Vancouver, holder of the majority of tree licenses in the Ellerslie area, filed for a permit

to access the foreshore of Spiller Inlet, which would enable the company to send logs directly up Spiller Channel to the ocean. It is now preparing to build logging roads in the Ingram-Mooto watershed, just over the divide to the north. Ellerslie--the medicine lake, the lake whose deep silence, they say, can heal wounds of the spirit--is next.

We reached the north shore of the lake and landed the canoe on a shoal of polished bedrock grooved with glacial striations. A pair of river otters appeared, their lustrous coats curling against the calm surface of the water. They rolled and frolicked, diving for cutthroat trout.

Beyond us lay a beach framed by two tiny islands of bedrock. Scattered across the white sand were a handful of small tents, their bright colors vibrant against the dense forest behind them. A big white cook tent stood off to the side. This was the farthest outpost of the tiny army assembled in the fight to save Ellerslie.

We pitched our tents and crawled into our sleeping bags, listening to the sounds of the forest--thrushes, loons, and the who-cooks-for-you hoots of a barred owl. Though it was ten in the evening, there was still light. I read while Colin methodically wrote in the journal Terry had given him, punctuating his distinctive scrawl with sketches of what he had seen during the day. He scribbled away until his green eyes were mere slits.

In the morning, we all gathered in the big tent for breakfast. Afterward, Colin ran off with Dennis Sizemore's son Paul to herd up tadpoles in the lake. The rest of the staff and crew dispersed to survey areas. Dennis began Round River in 1989, leading small groups of undergraduates on ecological surveys of Colorado's San Juan Mountains. Most of Round River's field projects are organized around a central objective: survival of the last Colorado grizzlies, reintroduction of the Mexican wolf to the Southwest, jaguar conservation in Belize.The idea is that by focusing on specific animals that have a wide range of requirements from their habitats, a larger area of those habitats can be saved. At Ellerslie, the job was to catalog plants and animals, including rare species such as marbled murrelets,

tailed frogs, and grizzlies. The data would then be used by the Heiltsuk in their bid to claim the 6,000 square miles of ancestral lands that stretch to the south and west of Ellerslie Lake.

The claim was filed in 1993 by the Heiltsuk tribal council in Bella Bella, a muddy fishing town on the northwest corner of tiny Campbell Island, 25 miles from the lake. About 1,500 Indians live in Bella Bella, along with some white fishermen, a few teachers, and the ubiquitous patrons of the native poor--missionaries, government agents, anthropologists. As in many other native communities whose resettlement followed smallpox epidemics or the centralizing pressure of whites, unemployment, alcoholism, and suicide are widespread.

"When I first got married, Bella Bella was a different place," said Ed Martin as we walked along the shore. "I had $18,000 in my pocket, and I didn't know what to do with it. When I bought my first fishing boats, I paid cash. We were self-sufficient until progress and booze caught up to us."

Ed, himself a struggling alcoholic, had lost two of his 11 children to suicide. Like many Heiltsuk, he'd decided he'd had enough of the mixed blessing of industrial culture and viewed the land claim as a way for his tribe to revive fading traditions.

But many Heiltsuk have forgotten the old ways of the forest and are unfamiliar with the destructive consequences of logging. In fact, few in Bella Bella have a grip on the scale of industrial clear-cutting and the speed with which it proceeds. And so the village is divided. Some, like Ed, want the timber companies out. Others, particularly the younger tribe members, view logging as an economic boon. They've responded eagerly to Western Forest Products' offer of 25 training positions and hope that more jobs will follow.

"The Heiltsuk are going to have an increasing say in how their land is managed," says Dan Jepson, manager of aboriginal affairs and environment for Western Forest Products. "We're offering jobs related to fish habitat assessment, tree planting, stream clearing. It's our attempt to work with them, to show them how to manage their

resources."

"It's nothing short of scandalous," counters Ian McAllister of the Raincoast Conservation Society, a Victoria-based organization that conducts biological surveys of British Columbia's rainforests. "Western Forest Products's intentions are to cut all the trees they can and get out of there. They're not interested in sustainable forestry, though they'll say they are. All they're doing is flashing money around like crazy and offering the Heiltsuk nothing but short-term employment. But it's the promise of a secure economic base, which the people here desperately need."

Among the most facile of our modern illusions is that native people hold the key to solving our environmental problems. It's true that the root of these problems is the loss of ethical conduct and a usable tradition of behavior--knowledge that seems to continue to thrive among native cultures. At the same time, indigenous people from Asia to the Amazon have behaved as rapaciously toward their own land as any outsider. For years, native tribes throughout the Pacific Northwest and Alaska have given up ancestral lands to timber companies, mining companies, developers. Since they too need to make a living, what are the economic alternatives?

The Heiltsuk claim, now mired in the British Columbia provincial court system, is unlikely to be resolved for at least five more years. In the meantime, the logging continues, sparking talk among some traditional Heiltsuk of blockades. "There's nothing planned yet, but there are murmurings," says Mary Vickers, whose family is establishing a wilderness camp at Ellerslie for tribe members and outsiders this summer. "The Haisla won the Kitlope by banding together. We could do the same."

That night the students kindled a fire on the beach. We huddled around it, listening to Ed tell stories and sing songs in Heiltsuk. Only in recent decades had he retrieved his native tongue, suppressed since boyhood by missionaries and boarding schools. He told us about Ellerslie, how the lake was a place of healing and great power. The Heiltsuk didn't come to the lake much anymore, he said, but they

talked about it a great deal. It was important just to know that it was still out there.

Days passed. a summer high-pressure system settled over the mountains; the weather was great. Each morning, Colin, Terry, and I climbed into a canoe and explored the lake. Twice we paddled 12 miles to the mouth and hiked down cascading waterfalls to the bay below. We fished for sole using hand lines and jigs I had fashioned from loon feathers we'd found along the shore. At sunset, we watched a black bear forage in the shadows, digging clams and chewing mussels off the rocks. I cleaned the fish for dinner, and we used the heads to bait the portable crab pot I had packed. One night we provided Dungeness crab for the entire camp.

Colin and I packed our tent and gear and paddled east. Northwestern salamanders and small fish, probably cutthroat trout or kokanee salmon, darted in the shallows. We passed more pictographs painted on the white granite walls of the lake--patterns of red dots and one humpbacked wolverine. High on the ledges above, mountain goats grazed. As we approached the head of the lake, its character changed. Gulls and terns were replaced by yellow warblers and flycatchers. A tannic creek cradled by willows and skunk cabbage spilled into the lake. Grizzly and black bear sign was everywhere: nipped-off plants and claw marks at the foot of talus slides. A big timber wolf had left his pawprints along the shore.

As we paddled, I thought about Ellerslie, about British Columbia, about the other magnificent and untamed places I'd seen in my life. If we can't save it all--and clearly we can't--what criteria can be used to list priorities for conservation battles? In terms of ecological significance, the Ellerslie area probably isn't as rich as the Kitlope or the forests on Vancouver Island; it doesn't have the salmon runs or populations of grizzlies. But this misses the point. Ellerslie is important because the Heiltsuk think it is. What little we so-called conservationists have managed to save so far is pretty much what we could sell, by argument or hype, as significant but not especially valuable. The superlatives greasing the ecological persuasion--biggest, best, last, greatest--are the paltry products of our own systems, indices that fall safely within the parameters of our culture and

limited very much by our imaginations.

Two days later, paul sizemore celebrated his 16th birthday. Ed wrote a song for him in Heiltsuk and presented Paul and Colin with Heiltsuk names, which translated to Alder and Pond. He then began to sing and dance in the gentle surf of the lake, wearing rubber boots and cut-off Notre Dame sweats one of the Round River students had given him--his first pair of shorts in 60 years.

Ed finished his song, and we sat in silence. The calls of loons and an occasional eagle drifted across the quiet water. A deep hush lay over the surrounding forest. As far as the eye could see, there was not a sign of the hand of man.

Doug Peacock is the author of Grizzly Years.