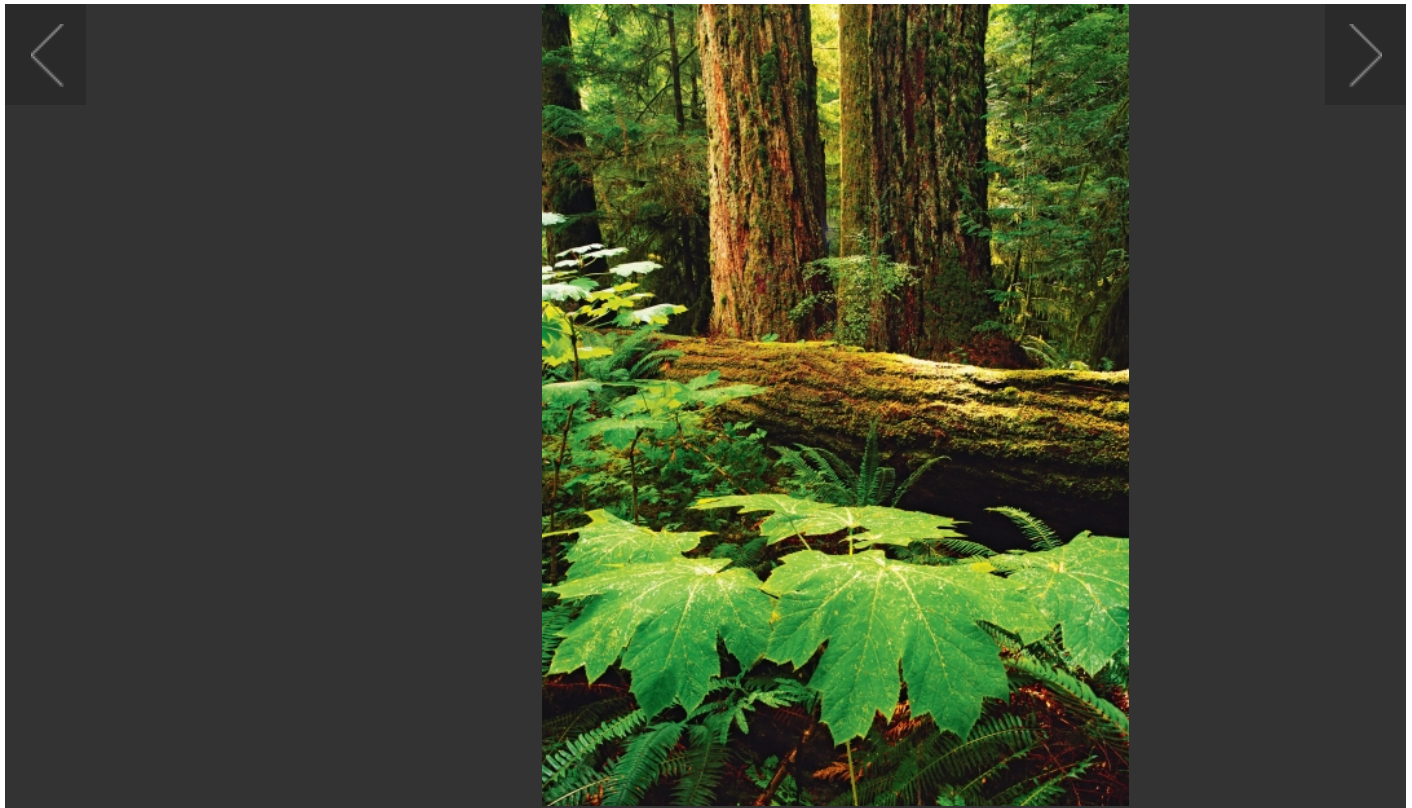


# The chandelier in the forest

JIM WALKER, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN 08.30.2013 |



Cathedral Grove is a 157-hectare stand of ancient Douglas fir located in MacMillan Provincial Park, 16 kilometres east of P highway-accessible protected old-growth Douglas fir forest in B.C. draws visitors from around the world. *KRAUSE, JO*

My lifelong commitment to conservation spurs from my close association with nature during my idyllic, storybook boyhood on the famous Miramichi River in New Brunswick, fly fishing for Atlantic salmon. If this early intimacy and connection with nature is absent, will people still have an appreciation for the natural world and the importance of its preservation? Probably not.

A disquieting “sign of the times” is evidenced in a current television advertisement by a major automobile manufacturer where a family drives through a “domesticated” forest that features a bath tub, armchair, mirror, bookshelf, photos and even a glass chandelier. The message is obvious — only by adding these modern appointments does a previously “hostile” forest become an inviting environment.

After hundreds of thousands of years in a close relationship with nature, people are now losing their connection with it and any appreciation of its

inherent value.

Yes, thousands are still concerned about preserving the natural world. But tens of millions more, like the family in the ad, have no special feeling for nature. Their numbers grow exponentially, while ours decline as we age. The opportunities we had as hunters, anglers, campers, etc. to develop a connection with nature are no longer as available or popular. In Canada and the U.S., 80 per cent (and growing!) of the population are urban dwellers, physically removed from any day-to-day contact with wild nature. This will be the inevitable outcome for the majority of the world's population.

Yes, polling does show that people are interested in the environment, but “environment” has come to mean the collection of factors that affect an individual's consumer lifestyle — climate change, food supply, air quality, water shortage and pollution. Ask instead about the future for the Pygmy shrew and most people will shrug. And concern for the environment is ephemeral — it slips drastically when “self-serving” factors such as the economy or employment are at risk.

But isn't there a significant increase in ecotourism? Indeed, but most of these modern experiences emphasize time-saving technology where clients are whisked by modern transportation to enjoy gourmet meals, amid all the comforts of home. They create the expectation that nature should always be safe, comfortable and convenient and if necessary, “modified” to provide this. Nature becomes just another place to be waited on and entertained.

So where to go from here?

For many years, The Nature Trust of British Columbia has acquired biologically rich and diverse lands to conserve B.C.'s biodiversity for generations to come. However, as public appreciation of nature continues to erode, it is imperative we and our conservation partners refocus our direction and make it a priority to educate the urban majority about our lands and the values they represent. It is not enough to acquire land alone. Urban dwellers who lack early exposure, intimacy and connection with nature will continue to see the environment as a “hostile” entity that requires domestication. Without public understanding, support and proactive conservation efforts, our land will remain unknown and its lush biodiversity will with time inevitably diminish.