

Building a Campus in Nature: The Value of Trees

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Forest Documentary: Summary

In the summer of 2015 I was asked to create a video that highlighted the importance of trees on UBC campus. The video was to look at different ways trees here are valued: from their ecological functions (cleaning our air, sequestering carbon), to their aesthetic importance for landscape design, to their central role in the image of UBC. This topic also dovetailed with the impending retirement of Colin Varner, UBC's head arborist, who had worked on campus for over thirty years. I was to capture some of his institutional knowledge through video in order to pass on to the next generation. I conducted interviews with Colin and others, like landscape architect Dean Gregory and UBC students, and in the summer of 2016 completed the video.

Despite its natural beauty, UBC is also a place of continual growth. The sounds of construction are ubiquitous on campus as new buildings are being built. When new buildings are created there are always decisions that need to be made: Do we keep the trees? And if so, how do we do it? It is within this context of development that I decided the video to ask the question: Why are trees important? If we can't answer this question — then how can we make the case to preserve them? At first glance, this question seems simple, yet — as you will see — there are far more layers to it depending upon who you ask. Below is a synopsis of the people interviewed, the process by which the film was made, and recommendations for further research.

Colin Varner has literally spent time *in* the trees, scaling up looming maples and pruning branches when need be. Yet he is also a natural historian, having authored several books on the history of plants and trees on BC's West Coast. In the video, he gives us a glimpse of how far the campus has come since 1916. "Well, I wasn't here, but the campus was clear-cut and there are photos showing that. They have cows walking around the main library," he said. It is this glimpse that is invaluable. To know where you are going you need to know where you have been, and while at one time it was valued to have farmland on campus — no one today would argue that Koerner Library should reside amid tree stumps and metal ploughs. In the video, Colin provides both a practical understanding of how trees on campus are maintained, and the historical understanding that gives us perspective.

I interviewed Dean Gregory, UBC's landscape architect, because he has a solid understanding of the development process on campus, and how trees are protected within that process. He also has a strong aesthetic vision for how

campus should look in the future, and why it is important for campus to look that way. As Dean explains: "For every project that comes in the door to build a bigger building, or to expand a building. I see my role as advocating for those trees that might be, 'in the way.' Because they are not 'in the way', they are intrinsic to the beauty, the ecological function, and the desirability of this campus as a place to come, study, live and work."

It was also important to hear from students, for they are the ones who primarily use the campus. Both Chanpreet and Mariana give us student perspectives on why they believe trees on campus are important. As Mariana, a grad student in zoology describes: "It opens up your world to have those trees, and hear the leaves rustling, and the birds singing, instead of: 'I have to get this test done, or I have to meet with this person.'" This is a perspective, I believe, that we inherently understand and agree with, yet infrequently vocalize. Mariana says what we already know but often forget: 'Yes, these towering stands of wood that surround us are essential to our happiness and mental health.'

How do you make trees look interesting through video? This was a major struggle during filming. It required many shots, from many angles, and shots of many different types of trees. This involved lugging my camera and tripod across campus, and then back, and then back again, over and over. I think I captured some nice shots — of the red oaks on main mall, the tall stands of cedars near the Lui Institute, and the cherry blossoms near the Village. Yet I am not a professional videographer, clearly, and therefore I have limited equipment and expertise. I would have benefited from a glidecam and a steadicam, which are pretty standard in the industry and create more dynamic and intriguing shots. For one interview — with Dean — I did not have a lavalier mic nor someone to help film while I interviewed him. Lesson learned: Always have a lav-mic, and always bring a friend to film so you can have a more natural and flowing interview, and not have to worry about the focus. I do think that the natural sound I captured, of the birds chirping in the forest (recorded near Tower Beach) were a very positive addition to the film. The more natural sound the better.

This film could easily be made into a larger and more comprehensive film. There is so much more to know. For instance, what do we want campus to look like in 200 years? This question, posed to many people, would yield interesting answers and could aid planners in the manner in which they develop the campus. These visions could be captured using digital renderings. While not many do — Dean is someone who is already envisioning this: "My hope is that many of the trees we have today will still be standing, and trees we will be planting today will be in their full maturity, — and it will tie the people studying in the university in 200 years with those of us who were staff and students — and that's what trees do, they provide this ongoing link with the past, and a look to the future." Another vein of research would be to find ways in which students, staff, and faculty can better interact with the trees on campus. Do we want treed areas where students could study, or hold events, or even meditate? Finally, UBC was been established one

hundred years ago, yet for millennia different aboriginal groups settled the area. Their presence, culture, and history are still strong, and are an integral aspect of UBC's history and identity. There is always more to know and understand. Therefore, there could be further research and communication on how aboriginal groups used the land before UBC was there. What was the spiritual importance of different trees? What were the tree and plant species that they depended upon for transportation, food, health, and housing, and where can they be found today? As we plan the campus, could we 'rewild' the area (a growing term, used by author J.B. McKinnon) with these native species of trees and plants? This, I believe, would be a fascinating and important story to tell.

Video link for Building a Campus in Nature the Value of Trees:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-0RLGsm38>