

Eik Street Tree Impressions

Compiled and edited by
Alison Garnett

Introduction

In May 2005, fifteen undergraduate students from the University of Victoria, accompanied by our professor, embarked on an educational trip outside the classroom. We found ourselves in Clayoquot Sound for nine days, to gain a “real life” context for an Environmental Studies course on community-based research¹.

While in Tofino, we visited Eik Street Cedar Tree. Crouched around the base of the 800 year old tree, we were asked to record our initial impressions of what we saw. Many of us had never seen or heard of Eik Street Tree before. Some of us knew of it briefly from news media coverage. We were given a brief history - told that a study had been conducted, concluding that there existed a possibility of the tree falling, thereby putting nearby buildings at risk. In an effort to save the tree from being cut down, some community members had raised 80,000 dollars to build a harness for the tree, to remove the danger of the tree falling.



Largely unedited from that day on Eik Street, the thoughts, art and poetry from ten of us are included here. In the spirit of community-based research, this article one of our attempts to give back to the community of Tofino. It is also meant to contribute to what we feel Eik Street Tree does best – creation of a dialogue.

Jonna Winger
4th year Political Science major

I had two responses to the Eik Street tree, one was “wow, ridiculous”, and the other was “wow, what great community organization”.

Initially, I thought that chains around a tree were a little ridiculous; it is suppose to be a “wild” thing, something that is suppose to take its life course, without human intervention. Humans are trying to control nature more and more with new forms of technology. This is just another form of control - what, control a tree? How do they even know that this metal contraption is going to work? From all of my previous experiences Mother Nature has usually always won out over nature.

¹ ES 481A: Community-based Research in Clayoquot Sound. Summer session 2005. School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria.

On a second, more positive note, I was impressed by organization of the community in putting the project together. Just like any community, views are likely to be complex, and often times conflicting. For a community of such a small size to come together and raise so much money to constrain a tree is impressive. So in conclusion, I feel that while constraining a tree is ridiculous, and probably in the end going to be unsuccessful, the community organization represented here is impressive.

Ryan Karkhairan

2nd year double major in Environmental Studies and Anthropology

Funny how this tree, which probably goes unnoticed by so many passers-by, can stimulate such an abundance of thoughts when one takes the time to contemplate it.

One thing that strikes me is the implications the state of this tree has in regards to the human condition and how we deal with the world around us. It seems that on the whole, humans are unwilling to let nature be and to define its own course. However, the manifestations of this seem to take the form of a sort of continuum: on the one side being those who go to great lengths to ensure that nature does not encroach on human comfort and safety; on the other side being those who go to great lengths to ensure that human habitat doesn't always negatively impact the natural world.

It saddens me to see that the only way that this tree is allowed to exist is to be put it in shackles. The fact that this majestic being, which has been rooted firmly to this spot for centuries, weathering all sorts of storms, has had its very existence threatened because it may or may not fall on a tourist resort seems to me quite ludicrous. And here we are controlling the tree in whatever way possible.

However, there is a something else represented in this tree. It represents to me a community working together for a greater good. It represents people who understand that there are things in this world more important than profits and economy. To me it is wonderful to know that there are communities in the world that can see the intrinsic value in such a magnificent piece of this planet's natural landscape. It took a strong will to fight for this and the community of Tofino managed to stave off one more ecological scar.

Still, one wonders the cost at which such casualties of progress are avoided. After all, isn't it just as much of a tragedy and an indignity to force this tree to stand after its time to fall has come and gone? If human society continues to see the environment as an obstacle to be overcome and dominated, I wonder how long it will be before nature returns the favour?

Nevertheless, I applaud the people of Tofino who stood together to save a life. And I have faith that the people of this world will continue to care for it and through their love and respect will open others up to the interconnectedness of all people to the world and all of its inhabitants.

Heidi Postnikoff

4th year double major in Environmental Studies and Geography

This is a statement. It is not merely the preservation of a tree but rather, what sits before me is symbolic of a larger picture. My initial question? Why would a magnificent, wise, old tree be shackled and chained, rather than have the opportunity to age gracefully towards a final resting place? Because, one look at this Cedar and I am reminded that the plight of the earth's forests... of many centuries of old growth, have come to this. In order to protect these magnificent lands, we must (symbolically) shackle the trees. Yes, I have mixed feelings about this site, but is this not the point? By preserving this tree, community members of Tofino came together, with a strong statement, to sing this message.

This message, which has far reaching implications, proves to remind us of a much greater force. While part of me wishes that this tree could have a resting place in the deep woods, I see that instead it stands tall... for all to see, silently and wisely reminding us of a sad reality. Whether this is the right means to do this, or whether this is merely another attempt of human control, what I will take from this tree standing before me is a message, which rings loud and clear. As long as we continue to clear-cut, log, and settle in once remote areas, perhaps the only way for future generations to see such stunning old growth, is to wrap our arms, chains, and girdles around the trees in a desperate attempt to preserve the forests.

Jessica Slattery

4th year Philosophy major

We walked past the tree. Someone yelled out from behind, "this is the tree!" and I glanced backwards. My impression was that this was not a tree, but some human-made structure, like many others I'm used to walking by in the city, sectioned off by a chain link fence and surrounded with broom and blackberry – two unattractive invasive species, which I'm accustomed to thinking of as undesirable.

Before I saw the tree I assumed that \$80,000 had been spent to save it because it was majestic in its beauty. Now after seeing it I'm a little disappointed in that regard. I feel like the immediate environment surrounding the tree needs to be improved, that we need to pull out that broom and plant some ferns.

I think the money may well have been spent better. While this creation potentially creates dialogue, not all of it is going to be positive in regards to people who care about trees. Furthermore, this creation seems to further the separation between humans and the environment. If the community's efforts were an attempt to preserve the integrity of the tree then they were not successful. The girdle, the fence and the invasive weeds are not pleasing to the eye. A full recovery of the pre-existing ecosystem would be necessary if that's what the point was.

What is beautiful is the conceptual splendor of this creation as a human-made creation. The girdle and the community's cooperation brought us here to view it. I feel sad if this represents what the situation in the forest has come down to. The need to protect one tree takes so much effort and the willingness of the community is beautiful.

Marin Ripsam

4th year Environmental Studies and Geography

The tree in its current state by no means looks part of nature. It is enclosed by huge pieces of metal and steel wires in order to maintain and ensure it will not fall. It seems a bit silly, for lack of a better term, to invest so much time, money and effort into assurance that a natural living tree won't fall, as falling is actually part of its natural life cycle.

Although it may seem silly, I think this tree and its encompassing girdle represent the environmental politics of Clayoquot Sound. The preservation of nature and its beauty are used as an argument to discourage destroying nature for the increase of condos and development, yet there seems to be a contradiction.

Beyond the politics of the region I believe the community spirit and connectedness are represented by this tree. The fact that this community has fought so hard for this tree shows their willingness to come together for something they believe in and feel passionate about. It is these types of community events that, although they may at first glance be confusing or seem silly, are healthy for the community to ensure a connection.

I leave this tree with a feeling of a very passionate, connected community image, which no matter the issue, they are willing to fight for what they believe in. The issue may not be the obvious, but rather the politics that underlie the circumstances. Things are never as simple as they seem.

Julia Black

4th year Environmental Studies and Womens Studies

While the effort and funds put towards "saving" this tree are slightly humorous at first glance, I think they are representative of a few very important things.

First, the tree marks the possibility for otherwise disengaged community members to mobilize around a very specific thing that for whatever reason is their connection to local ecosystems. The bracing of the tree to me symbolizes a protest to the modern development paradigm that poses a threat to the natural beauty and awe of this place.

This particularly large, central tree is important to community members. It is an accessible, visible symbol of their love for and connection to nature, and while keeping it standing may serve next to no ecological purpose, it is a symbolic statement that trees and nature are as much a part of this community as people and business. It is also a statement that the development path that this town eventually goes down simply cannot involve bulldozing everything and anything that is in the way. When I see the hardware bracing the tree and hear that it cost approximately \$80 000 to do so, it is the community declaring, "We have many resources in this town and we don't want them all spent on new condos and cars. Nature is worth our money".

Meaghan Noad

5th year Biology major with minor in Environmental Studies

This tree is symbolic and probably means very different things to different people. The first idea that comes to my mind is human domination and control over things that are potentially “hazardous” in ways that can’t be predicted. It reminds me of the Lord of the Rings when the Orks are tying down the Ents when they attempt to destroy the tower.

I think it’s quite sad because it refuses the right for the tree to undergo the natural processes of life and death and regeneration. We have learned that this tree was girdled in an attempt to keep it from being cut down, which in many ways also symbolizes the plight of the community for control over resources and development.

It is a piece of art. It is ridiculous, and funny. It is a clash between humans and nature, as well as humans and humans.

Alison Garnett

4th year Environmental Studies and Womens Studies

My first thought is what motivates environmentalism, and what should motivate environmentalism to make it as constructive as possible? I normally think that passion is at the root of environmental activism, especially at the root of logging blockades and willingly getting arrested. And if passion is central to activism, then you can’t be surprised when passion gets in the way of rationality, as I believe happened with this girdled tree on Eik Street. Should passion be at the centre of activism?

Alyssum Nielsen

3rd year History major

A seven-hundred year old tree stands wrapped in iron and stabilized with supports. The tree, the oldest living resident, is a cedar. It has been protected by the Tofino Natural Heritage Society from a natural or imposed death. The foreign supports and binding chains detract from the natural beauty of the surroundings. The tree seems out of place.

Western mentality is of constant preservation. We preserve artefacts in museums and documents in archives. We hook the elderly and chronically ill up to life support and demand that they stay with us. The Eik St tree is yet another example of this.

The Eik St tree reminds me of the journey of the totem pole. The last stage of a totem pole life is to decompose into the earth and go back to where it came from. However, westerners have taken the totem pole from its natural habitat, interrupted its natural life cycle and put the totem pole in a museum. Many First Nations have demanded their rights to their ancestral belongings, and totem poles. As such, many artefacts have been repatriated. How long will it take for the trees to band together to demand their rights, to demand that their Elders be repatriated?

Megan Thom

3rd year double major Environmental Studies and Political Science

Wounded sentinel
witness of centuries
Guardian of the Sound.
Keep watch, old one
for all the other lighthouses
are mechanized.

Venerable elder
pronounced dangerous
unsteady
a liability
trapped in a seine of red tape
rotten at the core,
but still standing.

Propped up
by the love
of its children
supported in the dusk
by an iron cage.

Old grandfather cedar
held by young hands
struggling under the weight
the awful weight
of living
after all your comrades
and kin
are gone.

Concluding remarks

At the time the above collection of thoughts were written, we knew little of the history of the tree or the people whose resolve allowed the tree to continue to stand. Many of the student authors who contributed to this collection may have since changed their opinions as they gained more knowledge of the situation and the region, but there is still great value in these initial impressions.

Many of us agree that the tree represents amazing effort and cooperation by the community to achieve an innovative alternative to cutting the tree down. It marks one possibility for the way that development and old growth trees can co-exist within a community. It expresses, in its very visible location, that the community of Tofino places great priority on nature and trees. And as one author wrote, the creation yells out "Nature is worth our money!"

But some of us question the altruism of that work. The tree stands on its own, looking almost shameful, with invasive blackberries, unfriendly steel and newly built condominiums constituting

its neighbourhood. That tree, like all trees, we believe, has a right to live a natural, dignified life course, and that dignity has been removed from Eik St tree. If all the work put into this creation is not for the tree, who then is it for? While we stand in respectful awe of the work that individuals in the community have done, we wonder if perhaps that work has been misguided, if indeed, passion for nature has gotten in the way of rationality.

Some believe that this shackled tree represents the need that humans feel to control nature, especially the unpredictable elements. Some see this as an example of how dominant society sees the environment as an obstacle to be overcome, as the two do not seem to be able to live together in their current forms. Although bracing the tree has enabled it to continue to stand among new developments, in seeming coexistence, its presence is largely sentimental, not ecologically useful. Humans were responsible for making that tree stand alone, and then building condos that were then put "at risk".

Although it may be too late for this tree to retain its dignity, it is visible and accessible to the community and the great number of visitors in Tofino, and its presence creates a dialogue about the role of communities, development and nature. The caged and stabilized tree is one sample of the many trees in the coastal temperate forest that live in competition, not cooperation, with humans. We hope Eik Street Tree can serve as a reminder of this, and that it will create an incentive to rethink the relationship between trees and humans, and to generate alternative forms of saving them.

Editors note

This article was compiled and edited by Alison Garnett (June 28, 2005) on behalf of students in ES 481A: Community-based Research in Clayoquot Sound. Summer Session 2005, School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria. Comments should be directed to Kelly Bannister (course Instructor) kel@uvic.ca. Copyright remains with the author of each comment.