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CONTRIBUTORS**OPINION**

Guest column: A catastrophe at the Catchacoma Forest

By **Curtis Bain** Guest Columnist

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I always knew working in the woods could be dangerous, but I never thought the danger would come from other human beings. I am a professional forest worker and own my own company under McBain Quarries Inc. and have shares that enable me to harvest lumber on Crown land.

Last winter my father and I started an operation on the Crown forest north of Catchacoma Lake, south of Gooderham. I left my equipment there in April, as we don't operate in the summer. I've checked on our machines (a skidder and slasher) every week since spring and everything was fine.

When I came in on Oct. 9, I found my machines destroyed. The tires were flattened, windows smashed, the doors on the skidder were torn off and thrown, wires were ripped, all my tools were strewn around and thrown into the mud. It was devastating. I couldn't make sense of it. I'm working on getting them fixed but while they're out of commission, I have no money coming in.

It's become increasingly difficult to make a living from logging. For many of us it's become a seasonal profession. There are timing restrictions to protect species at risk, which is a good thing but it means a majority of areas are unavailable to operate throughout the summer. Winter weather is becoming less predictable, meaning the roads don't freeze in the way they used to and markets for low grade material make trucking distances uneconomical.

But I love what I do, and I can't imagine doing anything else. I got my start at 16 by clearing a building lot in Haliburton which gave me enough money to rent a machine and buy the rights to harvest timber on a 15-acre lot in the same area. I worked my way up little by little until I could afford my own equipment.

The forest is in my blood. My grandpa was a logger, in fact he died in a lumber camp and my father has always worked in the woods. He still does, by my side. He's 65 and has no plans to retire. We've worked together as a team for my whole career (20-plus years). It's normally just the two of us but we occasionally hire local sub-contractors to help out.

When Oct. 15 comes you need to be ready to go and make use of your window which means waking up at 3 a.m. to warm the trucks up and get everything ready to go. I don't mind waking up early, that's my time. No one else is around. With six kids you have to catch those quiet moments when you can. We head out in the dark and come home anywhere from 6 to 8 p.m. at night, working every day until spring, except Christmas Day.

We're always polite when interested onlookers come about to see what we're doing. This past winter the interest level was the highest I've seen. When we started opening the old logging road around Christmas of last year, which is now a snowmobile trail, someone called the conservation officer to complain that we were doing something illegal. We have all our approvals in place and this operation has been approved in a provincial forest management plan for more than eight years.

With the pandemic bringing more people to cottage country I've noticed more public interest and "not in my backyard" attitudes. In the times we are in right now, the forest sector is important. It's been a challenge recently to purchase a 2 x 4 and it costs twice as much. Lots of people don't want resource extraction near where they live, but they also don't want a high cost of wood or a shortage of it.

One day this past January I was in the parking lot at Catchacoma with the log truck and a man and a woman got out of the parking lot from their SUV. I said hello but they didn't acknowledge me. They walked down the logging road. My dad was operating the slasher and moving trees at tree length.

With no regard to him they walked right under the boom of the machine. It was startling to my dad. They didn't even look up at him but he was terrified because they could have been killed. There are many rules to follow when operating on Crown land. If I don't do my due diligence every day then people can die.

After that day more people kept coming. There were school groups and people filming and taking pictures — it was dangerous to operate. The amount of garbage in there from the public visitors is piling up.

The forest management company technician told me some activist groups (Wilderness Committee and Ancient Forest Exploration Research) were taking an interest in the area. I did a bit of research and learned about their claims that this is the largest old growth hemlock forest, which I can't understand since it's an area that was logged about 30 years ago.

I have been using the old logging roads in there and it's obvious to me that this forest is managed. There is evidence of the previous cut throughout. I can see it because I know what I'm looking for, so the fact that others can't makes me confident we are leaving a light impact and managing it sustainably, something my father and I really care about.

You can look at the tickets (which track the logs cut) and see that the forest is in decline. There's a lot more pulp than sawlogs, and even the sawlogs are full of ring shake which means they won't hold their integrity as lumber. The forest needs an intervention, just like gardens benefit from weeding.

Having my equipment wrecked has set me back a lot. I can't afford my insurance premiums going up so I have to do the work myself. I had to replace all the tires and hire a guy to come fix the machines, repair the welding, change the fluids- because I can't trust the fluids weren't tampered with — and have had to pay to move the machinery offsite.

Some people think they are going after big industry, but I'm a small business owner, contributing to our country's wood supply while trying to feed my family. When I got the equipment out to the parking lot to load the float there were lots of cars blocking my way and people were standing around shaming me, even after I lost everything. It was pretty awful.

This incident was reported to the police and they are investigating. If anyone has any information about what happened, please report it.

Curtis Bain resides in Minden.

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