

"The Golden Spruce" by John Vaillant

This book is about the loss of a one-of-a-kind tree. It tells the story of a man who worked in the forest industry for many years until he became disillusioned about the loss of old growth forests. He was a survivalist who could go out into the wilderness and thrive with his wits and physical prowess. He was very good at the jobs that he had over the years, being able to read the terrain and push through logging roads to efficiently access the trees that were to be logged. Sadly, he destroyed a treasure trying to drive home a point about loss.

This irreplaceable tree was a Sitka spruce with golden needles. It was 16 stories (around 48 metres) high and more than six metres around. It was almost 300 years old. As far as anyone knows, it is the only tree to be given a name by the Haida people. They called it the elder spruce tree. About 1700 AD, a random Sitka spruce cone opened and let a seed like no other drift to earth. Despite as much as 750 years of fertility, a typical Sitka spruce may produce only a dozen offspring that survive to maturity.

I found this book very interesting as it gave a lot of information about the ecology of the coastal rainforest. For example, the northwest forests support more living tissue by weight of any ecosystem, including the equatorial jungle. This is largely to do with the biggest free-standing creatures on earth, trees! It is estimated that a square metre of temperate forest soil can contain as many as two million creatures representing a thousand species.

The book provides an insight into the dynamics of the logging industry over the years. Here is an excerpt from the book:

With two men working steadily, perched on opposing springboards, Gibson's four-metre, eight-hundred-year-old Doug fir would have taken all day to bring down. At dusk, when the heartwood finally gave way with a sternum shuddering groan, the men dropped their tools, jumped from their perches, and fled uphill into the thick salal that covered the steeply angled forest floor. From there, they watched as the fruit of their labours - weighing about as much as a jumbo jet - come crashing down to earth. Wrote Gibson: It seemed to pause in the air for a moment like an eagle in slow motion before starting down the mountainside, cart wheeling, end over end and disappearing into the water at a 45-degree angle. After what seemed to be a five-minute lapse, it suddenly emerged on the surface like a giant whale breaching from the depths. It was completely devoid of branches and most of its bark had been stripped away by the 1000-foot (300-metre) passage over rocks and windfalls.

Grant Hadwin, the person responsible for cutting down the golden spruce, disappeared kayaking back to Masset in the Queen Charlottes to stand trial for his crime. There is speculation that he is still alive and living somewhere in the world.

I was a bit sad reading this book. I realized I would never have the opportunity to set my eyes on this amazing creation of Mother Nature.

Sharon Lawson