

In Victoria County, New Brunswick, there is a certain tree which the locals refer to as the “Big Tree.” This particular tree sits atop a knoll alongside the Trans-Canada Highway, approximately 10 kilometers north of Perth-Andover and directly across from the Hamlet of Aroostook’s water tower. Hundreds of thousands of tourists, truckers, and regular folks going about their daily routines pass by this tree every year, but very few ever notice it. Surrounded by brush and many ordinary-looking trees, there is nothing spectacular about the tree on the knoll that would make it stand out to someone driving by on the highway. However, once you leave your car and actually walk to the base of the tree, then you can understand why locals have named it as they have. At more than two metres in diameter, ecologists estimate the Big Tree is no less than 500 years old. What is even more remarkable is that it is an eastern white pine, the tree species most valued by Eastern Canada’s forest industries in the 18th and 19th centuries. Luckily for the Big Tree, its trunk branches out in several directions a few metres above the ground, making it of little economic value for lumberers (not much “straight wood”).

The Big Tree is a reminder of how badly New Brunswick's forests have been managed. Hardly any large white pines, or large examples of any other species of tree for that matter, have survived more than two hundred years of intensive forestry in New Brunswick. In a series of transitions starting in the late 18th century, the province’s forest industries shifted from the production of ship masts to square timber to long lumber and finally pulp and paper in the 1920s. Successive industries simply cut the biggest and the best trees they needed to supply a particular market, a process commonly known as “high-grading.” By the mid-20th century, this valuation of the forests in purely economic terms had prompted a debate about forest management policy in New Brunswick. My doctoral dissertation examines the competing visions of various forest stakeholders, including pulp and paper companies, lumber companies, woods workers, independent woodlot owners, and environmentalists, as to how the provincial government should manage the Crown (public) forests after the Second World War. Each group valued the forests differently. The pulp and paper industry, for example, considered the Crown forests valuable solely as industrial landscapes, while the environmentalists were more concerned with the forests as vibrant natural ecosystems (their intrinsic value).

In the 1970s, the poor state of the province's forests and a cyclical downturn in international pulp and paper markets provided an opportunity for the New Brunswick government to seriously consider alternatives to the dominant industrial model of forest management. In particular, the provincial government formally established the New Brunswick Forest Authority in October 1973, a Crown corporation that administered more than 400,000 hectares of forests near Bathurst as part of a massive forest management experiment. The Bathurst Pilot Project was unparalleled in the history of North American forestry. If it had been judged successful after the initial five

years, all Crown land leases in New Brunswick would have been withdrawn and placed under the control of the Forest Authority. The Authority, as the sole harvester of wood on Crown lands, would have assured mills an annual “guaranteed volume” of wood. For a variety of reasons, the project failed by the end of the 1970s and the industrial forestry valuation of landscape/ideology of use became well implanted within government and industry circles. The industrial forestry model has informed Crown forest management policy in New Brunswick to the present day.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the Big Tree suddenly garnered a lot of attention at the local and provincial levels. The New Brunswick government was in the process of expanding the Trans-Canada Highway from two lanes to four, and the section of the new highway through Victoria County was projected to bisect the Big Tree. The potential loss of the tree sparked significant protest from ecologists, environmentalists, historians, and local residents. For them, the tree was valuable as an ecological specimen, as a symbol of what the province’s forests had once looked like, and as a possible tourist attraction (to this day, many claim that it is the largest tree in New Brunswick). This campaign to save the Big Tree was one of the reasons why the provincial government ultimately changed the highway's course a couple of hundred metres to the east.

In 2019, the tree had a reported height of 39.5 meters and a diameter of 215 cm. The crown spreads 20.7 meters.