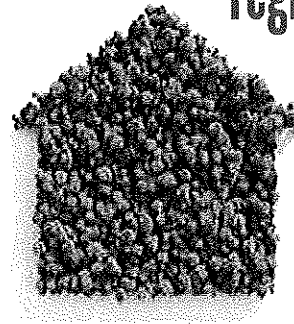




Universities and rural communities Joining together to assert control over forests

by Ryan Bullock, Gayle Broad, Lynn Palmer and Peggy Smith

**“The role of the university
in Canada’s resource
regions isn’t apparent.”**



THERE IS A RICH AND ROMANTIC cultural history associated with natural resources and communities in Canada, one reinforced by images and narratives of self-reliant White northerners eking out an existence in isolated communities and rugged landscapes, surrounded by pristine and endless resources. A more modern and less positive view of resource communities is that they are antiquated, marginal settlements, wrought with social conflict and racial tension, whose glory days passed when the last resource industry left town.

However, municipal leaders, Aboriginal and government representatives, academics, businesses and community groups recently came together at Algoma University for a conference on building resilient communities through community-based forest management. The goal was to learn about new cross-cultural networks and grassroots collaborations that are initiating transformation by rethinking rural economies, cultures and landscapes. As the meeting organizers, we contend that universities, especially natural resource-related departments, have much to learn from communities about the changing nature of resource sectors, societal needs and the role of universities in partnered research.

Canada’s natural resource sectors are changing: the forest industry has faced an unprecedented decade-on crisis with mill closures, layoffs and worker relocation; provincial and territorial government policies are being reformed from a big-industry approach; and

federal forest programs have been drastically reduced. Constitutional protection of Aboriginal rights, land claims and the Idle No More movement are redefining settler-Aboriginal relations. Large-scale resource projects promise development booms, but extensive third-party negotiations, social conflict and environmental concerns are tainting the promise. Environmental assessments are repeatedly challenged and commitment to community development through skills training and revenue sharing is constantly questioned. In this uncertain climate, it’s amazing that anything gets done at all.

Resource-dependent communities are excluded from real involvement in resource development and decision making, which is left to provincial and territorial command. Most public institutions, whether universities training future professionals or government agencies regulating natural resource use, do not think that communities have a central role in resource management and economies. Yet, the leadership and new ideas coming from rural and Aboriginal communities are creating change, as they develop new institutions and business models. Meanwhile, the role of the university in resource regions isn’t apparent, even though the professional and scientific disciplines supporting the forest, mining and energy sectors have shaped how resources are controlled and used in Canada.

Natural resource management is fundamentally about the ability of people to influence their quality of life in resource-based locations.

From this perspective, our complex resource challenges will not be solved by a few scientific disciplines or agencies. We need more than interdisciplinarity and social relevance in curriculum – a much more immediate university response. Community leadership is outpacing government reforms and industry innovation and is prepared to direct research partnerships. This could rebalance community-university relationships, decolonize research and produce timely and useful knowledge.

The conference was designed to bridge the gap between knowledge holders in communities, in the academy and in policy networks. It integrated different ways of knowing by using diverse tools to engage participants in active learning. The format exposed everyone to every speaker, rather than offering break-out sessions, and this unified research, practice and policy and made the community responses visible. A new network, Community Forests Canada, emerged that will foster dialogue and connections among communities and academics.

As academics, we left the conference mulling over what we had learned. We concluded that universities can play a significant role in rural and resource regions by helping to create space for academic-community dialogues that support different ways of knowing, are rich for both communities and academics, and foster relationship-building. Universities can support innovation and innovative thinking through diversity – diversity of disciplines, participants, sectors and peoples. ■