

Ontario Highlights

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I'm back in New Zealand after nearly four months in Canada as part of the Young Professional Foresters Exchange Program. It was an honour to be selected as a participant of the 2025 exchange cohort and I'm grateful for the support from the New Zealand Institute of Forestry (NZIF), Canadian Institute of Forestry (CIF), Ontario Woodlot Association (OWA) and Matariki Forests that made it possible. I knew the experience would be valuable both personally and professionally, and it still managed to exceed expectations.

I was working with the OWA, a member-based nonprofit that promotes good forest management on private woodlands. The OWA plays a role similar to New Zealand's Farm Forestry Association, while also leading industry projects and managing a Forest Certification program for private forest owners. Ontario's private forestry is largely unregulated compared to forestry on crown land, making the OWA's work all the more important.

My Canadian forestry experience was diverse enabling me to come away with a comprehensive understanding of forestry in Ontario. It spanned forestry across urban, private and crown settings, from nursery to sawmill, and winter snowfall to spring flush. I attended industry conferences, worked across a range of forest types, and visited both small private woodlots managed for non-timber values as well as large commercial blocks. Throughout the trip I had the privilege of connecting with passionate and knowledgeable foresters and landowners. They were welcoming, generous with their time and expertise, and eager to hear about forestry in New Zealand.

Ontario has three main forest regions:

1. Carolinian hardwood forests in the South,
2. Transitional forests of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region,
3. Boreal forests in the north.



The southern hardwood forests are diverse, with species like oak, maple, beech, walnut and cherry. They are managed using single-tree selection or shelterwood harvest systems. This meant getting out with a prism to measure basal area, tree marking for selection, and then harvesting to manage forest structure and enable regeneration of target species. True forestry, some would say!



Moving north, boreal forests are dominated by spruce, pine and fir, with birch and poplar important hardwood species. These are managed by emulating fire disturbance patterns, primarily through clearfelling with retention of residual trees and patches.



A highlight of my time with the OWA was hosting the International Model Forest Network (IMFN) Global Forum. The IMFN is a global initiative which fosters sustainable landscape stewardship, restoration and conservation through collaboration among local communities, governments, researchers and forest practitioners. The week-long Global Forum welcomed 180 delegates from the network's model forests across 44 countries and 5 continents. Discussion centered around exchanging best practices, celebrating successes, and tackling shared challenges. It was a powerful reminder of the strength of global connections and an incredible experience to be part of.



Towards the end of my placement, I took the opportunity to head north with GreenFirst Forest Products. GreenFirst are an integrated forestry company with four sawmills and operations across more than six million hectares of crown forest lands. Many Canadian foresters had told me that northern forestry is more like New Zealand's. They were right, it was more familiar than single tree selection in hardwood stands! Still, there were differences: rotation ages are >80 years, a good clearfell yield is 100m³/ha, logs with an LED >40cm are too large to go through the sawmill and grade mix is simple with volume being either 'sawlog' or non-merchantable. The terrain is flat, skidder country and operations run 8-9 months a year as ground conditions during the fringe months, either side of winter, are prohibitively wet. Cartage during winter is also critical,

with significant bush stocks common where volume wasn't moved before the roads thawed. It was fascinating to see how the industry is so well set up to efficiently manage small piece-size volume across vast areas.



It was interesting to learn about the industry dynamics in the province. Annual harvest volume is currently approximately 13 million m³, down from 30 million m³ in the early 2000s. Currently, the lack of a viable pulp market is limiting the industry. Where there were previously 20 pulp mills operating, only three remain, and there have been multiple large closures over the past year. As a result, sawmills have limited options for disposing of residual fibre, and effective forest management is compromised by having to leave pulp in the cutover. US trade uncertainties are also topical as around 65% of sawn lumber production is exported south.

Maple syrup is classically Canadian and an important non-timber forest product for the eastern provinces. The syrup season is short, generally running for 6-8 weeks in March and April. During this time I visited 'sugar bushes' of varying scales. Smaller operations collect sap via buckets, while the larger operators use vacuum pressure through suspended pipes. Sap is boiled to produce syrup, this is achieved when the sugar content is at least 66% and generally requires 40 litres of sap to produce 1 litre of syrup!



Both the weather and the wildlife provided experiences of their own. Bears and moose were sighted from a safe distance, however there was no escaping the weather. We had spring snowfalls and an April ice-storm (caused by conditions that meant rain froze on contact with a surface). The latter brought a state of emergency, region-wide power outages and trees breaking under the weight of the ice.



Ultimately, this exchange was an opportunity to refresh some broad forestry principles, expand my perspective and network, and to be reminded that, no matter where we are in the world, good forest management is rooted in the same core values. I was lucky enough to cap it off with a summer holiday on the west coast exploring the Rocky Mountains and Vancouver Island, which rounded my time out perfectly.

