



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

The Great Bear Rainforest has been saved. Normally, when I hear news like that I sigh in disbelief. It's hardly ever true. 'Saved' usually means 'given temporary reprieve' or merely 'on the agenda'. This time, however, I can't decide if I should be sighing or singing. The Canadian province of British Columbia has announced plans to protect a huge swathe of Pacific Coast rainforest – the largest tract of intact temperate rainforest left on Earth – and the newly-brokered deal will save about a third of this vast area specially for wildlife.

I was in this wilderness of ancient trees, glacial waterfalls, rocky headlands, coves, inlets and bays just a few months ago. Stretching seamlessly from Vancouver all the way to Alaska, it is home to everything from bald eagles and beavers to wolves and whales. The highlight of my trip was an hour crouching almost within touching distance of a spirit bear, a rare white form of the American black bear and one of the region's most famous inhabitants. It's an exhilarating place.

Conservation groups and First Nation communities have been fighting to protect the Great Bear Rainforest – which covers an area about twice the size of Belgium – since the late 1980s. After several premiers, umpteen ministers of the environment

and countless meetings, books, reports, protests, blockades and arrests, the recent announcement is undeniably welcome news. Most conservation groups have been tripping over themselves to sing the government's praises. But is protection of a third enough? What we're saying is that two-thirds of one of the most important wildlife regions on the planet is up for grabs. The agreement does specify that any logging and mining in the area must be sustainable, but anyone who believes that is kidding themselves. Canada's logging industry has an appalling track record. The sad fact is that we've become used to losing environmental battles. Our expectations are now so low that we are thankful for progress of any kind. I'm not saying that every last tree needs to be saved, but perhaps we should revert to the days when we aimed a little higher.



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Good deal for the spirit bear?

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