



Beyond “one size fits all”: Gender



Dan Orcherton photo

Left, Sarah Boyd-Noel, Co-ordinator, Northern Women's Centre, UNBC gives the introductory message to participants at “The Women's Perspective on Mountain Pine Beetle Forum.”



Dan Orcherton photo

Right, Dawn Hemingway, Chair of the School of Social Work at UNBC gave a talk entitled, “Impacts of Women in Rural, Single Resource Communities.”

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Gender perspectives in natural resource management are overlooked, and the roles and responsibilities of women are often undervalued and/or misunderstood. The Women's Perspective on Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) Forum (March 28–29, 2008 at the University of Northern British Columbia [UNBC]) provided a unique opportunity for women in beetle-affected communities in northern British Columbia to view the social, cultural, economic, institutional, and health-related impacts of the MPB through a gender lens.¹

An important goal of the forum was to identify action items that will hopefully lessen the impacts of the MPB on women and families in northern communities. The event also helped to:

- demonstrate why, and how, the epidemic requires a gendered approach to fully understand its impacts;
- identify present and future strategies/responses to the beetle;
- equip participants with preliminary knowledge, understanding, and tools to influence decisions back in their communities; and
- identify community-based research opportunities through the lenses of gender and diversity.

1 Can be referred to as men and women's perspectives related to biology, social structure, education, and economic factors.



perspectives and the mountain pine beetle

Conclusions drawn from the forum highlighted a fundamental need for ecologists, economists, social scientists, and health researchers to integrate perspectives of women's roles and responsibilities within the natural resource sector, especially in MPB-affected communities.

Fifty-two participants were able to shed light on the current understanding and knowledge of gender within the context of the MPB epidemic. "The main goal of this event," explained **Sarah Boyd-Noel**, (Co-ordinator of the event and Resource Director, UNBC Northern Women's Center), "was to give women an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns about the MPB epidemic, and to share strategies to lessen the impact of the epidemic on their health and well-being, and the future sustainability of their communities."

Funding was provided by several organizations, including: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada–Rural Secretariat, Women's Health Research Network (WHRN), BC Rural and Remote Health Research Network, Stand Up for the North, and the Northern Women's Forum.

The forum began with the workshop "Untangling Sex and Gender," facilitated by **Dr. Elana Brief** (Research Director, WHRN) and **Dr. Colleen Reid**, (Co-director of Research, WHRN). The session's primary goal was to provide information on gender as it relates to community-based health research and the MPB epidemic. Reid and Brief discussed the importance of sex and gender from an evolutionary, genetic, biological, and institutional standpoint. Brief described the connections between women's employability and health research, how sex and gender play a role in health and well-being, and how this relates to the current MPB crisis.

A common thread running through this session was identifying gender as a social construct that is shaped by cultural, historical, and temporal factors, which in turn influences gender roles, identities, and behaviours (i.e., societies are organized along the "fault lines" of sex and gender). Further, when gender roles become "institutionalized," the roles of women and men are both constrained and the power differential between men and women widens. Recently, there has been a shift to "gender-neutral" policy formulation and programming at the provincial (e.g., cuts to Women's Centres in 2004) and federal levels (e.g., cuts to Status of Women Canada in 2007). The engendered power

"(I learned) how to focus on women's perspectives when you are looking to do research in your community... Women belong to many community perspectives and yet we don't often integrate, network, or connect to make a bigger impact to solve the challenges that the MPB will have on our social, environment, health, and economy."

differential between males and females has many implications for women's health and well-being, including access to health care and other resources. Reid's post-doctoral work underlined the importance of considering social determinants of women's health (e.g., Sociology and Equity Studies, accessible transportation, and childcare) and the value of using a feminist action research model.

The goal of the second day of the forum, entitled "Boom, Bust, and Beyond: Women's Perspective on the Mountain Pine Beetle," was to discuss the extent and implications of the MPB epidemic as experienced by women in terms of community health and well-being. Challenges, assets, solutions, and capacity-building opportunities were identified and UNBC doctoral student **Kate Hrinkevich** touched on the biophysical aspects of the MPB to give the epidemic an environmental and ecological perspective. Hrinkevich said the extent of damage is far reaching, and that we have not yet realized its overall long-term socio-economic and institutional effects.

Zandra Ross, executive assistant with the First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative (FNMPB), gave an overview of their strategic plans, programs, and projects. She emphasized that First Nations communities play an integral role in managing MPB and that First Nations use an integrated, holistic management perspective based on the traditional medicine wheel. Part of Ross's presentation centered on aboriginal perspectives on fire and how this is connected to MPB, and health and safety concerns in northern communities.

Julie Carew (Co-ordinator, Stand Up for the North) and **Lynn Florey** (formerly with the Cariboo-Chilcootin MPB Action Committee) presented an overview of each of their projects and concluded that there

... continued on page 26



MPB affects men and women differently

... continued from page 25

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are vital community perspectives that need to be highlighted when looking at MPB and gender. They emphasized that improved access to, and communication of, information and services at all levels is vital. Carew and Florey also said that knowledge must be pooled to facilitate knowledge-based (KB) systems and networks that reflect current motivations. Funding mechanisms, they added, must emphasize gender perspectives in natural resource management across different disciplines and at institutional levels. Both speakers said that attitudes and perceptions towards forestry are changing in Northern BC, and that this is connected with MPB and its impact on the economic health, well-being, and social fabric of northern communities.

Dr. Dawn Hemingway (Associate Professor and Chair, School of Social Work, University of Northern BC) led a participant-driven, question-and-answer session. Participants asked how they can provide more gender perspectives within natural resource management with most agreeing there is currently a lack of education and outreach programs about gender, particularly within the current MPB crisis.

The third and final portion of the workshop was guided by WHRN and Stand Up for the North facilitators. The objective was to develop concrete action plans to integrate into the planning and programming process for gender-oriented extension and research activities.

Conclusions and perceived impacts

The forum concluded with committee representatives showcasing the results in terms of needs, assets, fears, and challenges with respect to the social, health, economic, and cultural impacts of the MPB. Feedback and evaluations indicated that the forum helped participants develop a greater capacity to:

- define sex and gender;
- consider sex, gender, and diversity in relation to their research, policy, and program development work and/or their work in the community relating to the MPB; and,
- consider the connection between the MPB and various, and seemingly disparate, social issues (e.g., youth sexual health, women's employment, and northern economic development).

Participants also concluded that gender-differentiated impacts and opportunities exist within MPB communities, and that there is "no one size-fits-all solution."

Action steps

Potential action items to come out of the forum include the following:

- Implement on-the-ground activities/opportunities that welcome women's perspectives in all aspects of natural resource planning and development.
- Reciprocate the notion that "gender balance adds to the quality of life."
- Integrate perspectives of women's roles and responsibilities within the natural resource sector.
- Integrate First Nations' insights and understanding of Traditional Ecological knowledge (TEK) and incorporate gender perspectives as a fundamental link within a holistic management approach to MPB.
- Establish a system for pooling knowledge and results from consultation, extension, and outreach programs.
- Make more effective use of existing networks and organizations (example voluntary sector) and professionals.
- Develop methods of communicating and consulting with hard-to-reach groups.
- Integrate results into BC Heritage Archives for safekeeping of current and/or historical advancements in the area of gender perspectives in natural resource management.
- Foster the notion that social issues concerning MPB are women's issues, and the "triple role" of women needs to be emphasized in all aspects of MPB management.

The perceived impacts (and there are many) of the MPB beetle affect men and women (and the old and young) differently. To ensure a more all-encompassing approach, women's voices and experiences need to be better incorporated into the ongoing planning process for community and economic development. 🌲