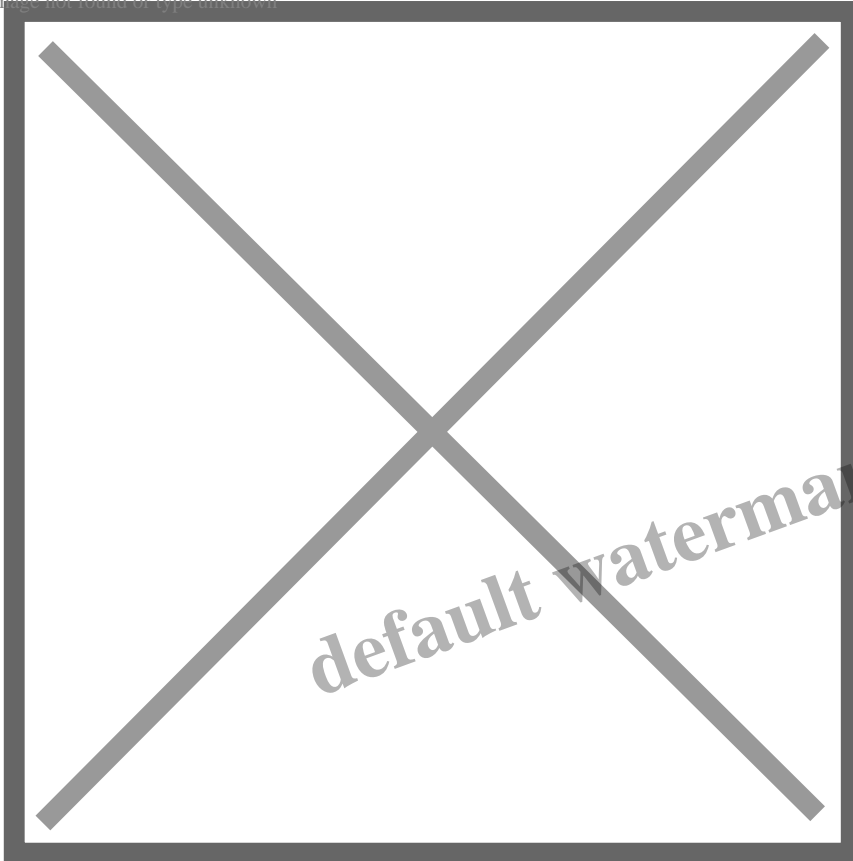


## Big Lonely Doug: the last one standing

### Description

Image not found or type unknown



*Big Lonely Doug*

*On a recent visit to Canada, we had the opportunity to visit Big Lonely Doug – a giant Douglas Fir left standing in a clearcut area in western Vancouver Island. The tree has become an icon for conservation and sustainable forest management. This is his story.*

## Doing a Bradbury

I recently rewatched the video of a classic moment from the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympic Games. Australian speed skater [Steven Bradbury](#) went into the final of the 1000m short-track event as a rank outsider. He himself admitted that he was, on paper, probably ranked at number 8 in the field. As the race progressed, Bradbury fell behind the other four finalists, recognising that he could not maintain their pace. However, incredibly, all four in the front pack crashed out on the final corner while jostling for the lead. Bradbury calmly skated past the mayhem to take the Olympic gold medal – the first person from a Southern Hemisphere country to ever win gold at the Winter Olympics.

*Steven Bradbury's Unbelievable Gold Medal Victory | Olympic Rewind*

Bradbury became an instant hero in Australia – an underdog who never gave up. “*Doing a Bradbury*” became a saying in Australia, meaning achieving an unexpected or unusual success. But it also symbolised that this doesn’t occur by mean sheer chance or pure good luck – that hard work can sometimes lead to wonderful results. Bradbury recognised his good fortune, but also acknowledged that years of training and hard work had got him to the Olympics in the first place. Being the last one standing on the day was enough to win him the gold medal and reward him for all those years of preparation.

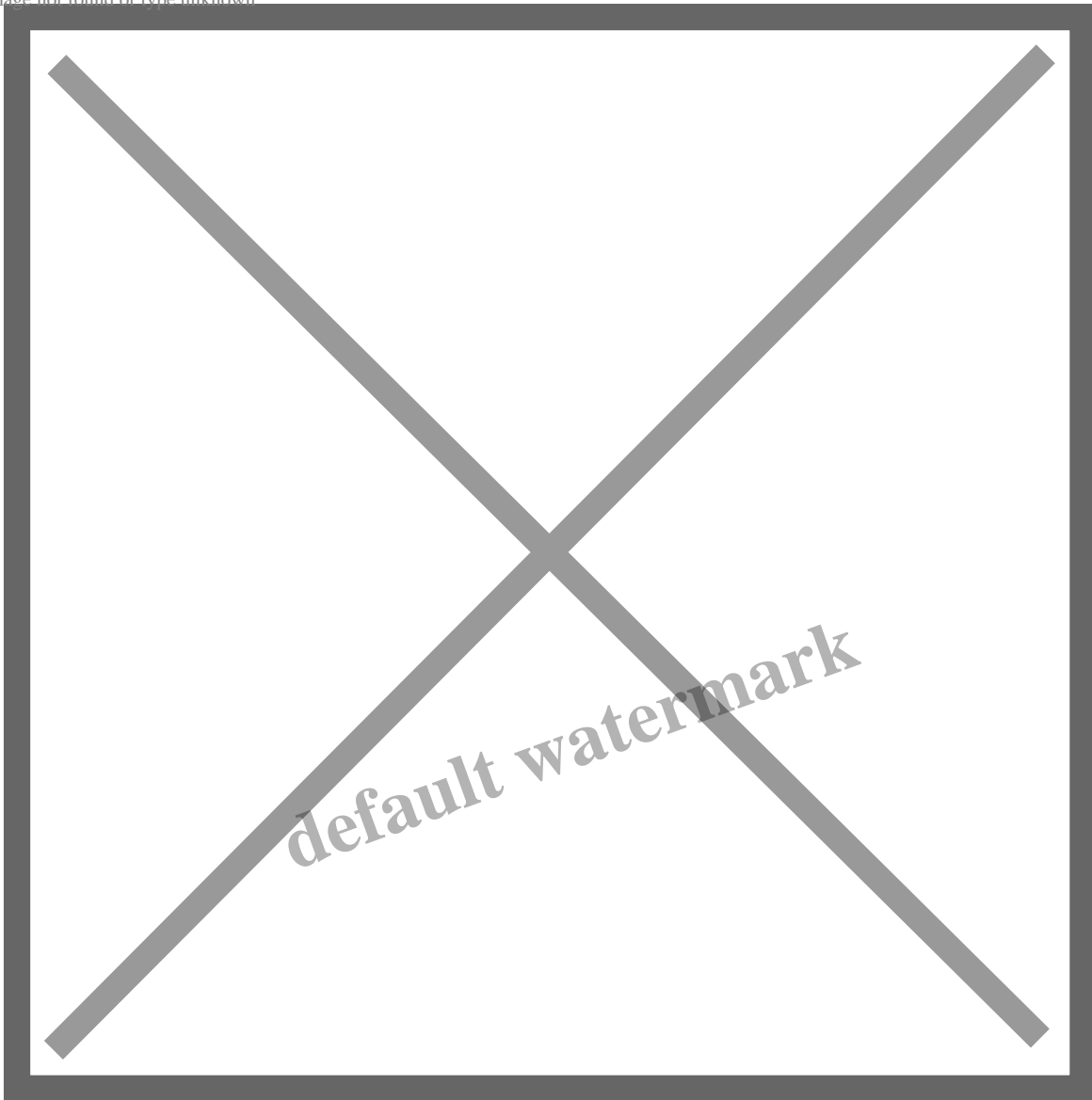
## The last tree standing

This post is about a tree that ended up being the last one standing, also through a chance piece of luck. The tree wasn’t competing in the Olympics – just standing in the middle of a forest grove with all its neighbours on the west side of Vancouver Island in Canada. If there was an Olympic category for amazingly big trees, this guy would have been in the running for a medal though. This tree is now known to be the second-largest Douglas fir in Canada —sixty-six metres tall, nearly four metres wide, and almost twelve metres in circumference.

Trees like this were once abundant in this part of the world – the landscape was covered in old growth groves of huge trees, with the hugest of them found in the sheltered valleys of the coastal mountains. But, as repeatedly seen in posts on this site, huge trees contain huge amounts of valuable timber, and old growth forests around the world have been ruthlessly exploited for that timber.

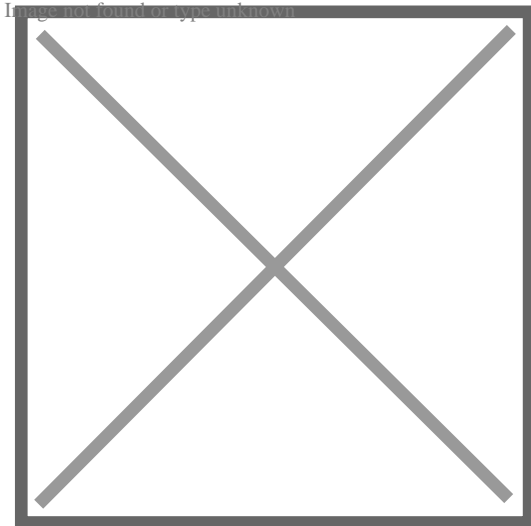
default watermark

Image not found or type unknown



*Logging truck in BC forest. Photo: Thomas Hawk via Flickr; CC BY-NC 2.0. Source: [Environment America](#)*

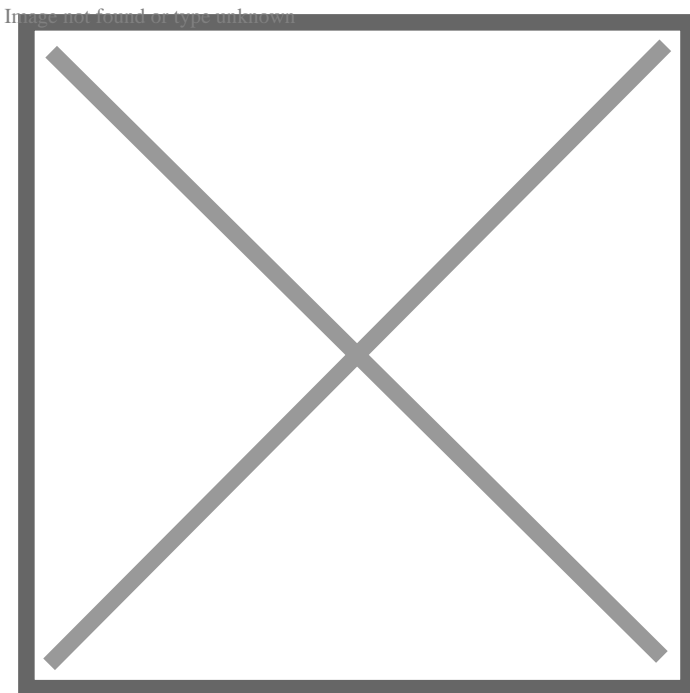
Douglas Fir is not regarded as a premium tonewood for guitars. But it's appearing more and more especially in electric guitars, in the form of [wood salvaged from old buildings](#) and structures. Douglas Fir was a timber well suited for construction work and has found its way into buildings all over the world – including as [floorboards](#) in my home in Western Australia.



*A resonator guitar made from salvaged Douglas Fir. Made by [The New Vintage Guitars](#), spotted in [Roosters Acoustics](#) in Canmore, Alberta.*

The place where our tree grew was known as cutblock number 7190 – twelve hectares fringing the north bank of the Gordon River near Port Renfrew. It was a mixed stand of Western Red Cedar, Sitka Spruce and Douglas Fir – similar to the adjacent [Eden Grove](#) – thought to hold some of the largest and oldest trees in the country. It was slated for clearfelling in 2011.

Dennis Cronin, a logger in these forests for over 40 years, had the job of surveying the cutblock and marking it out for clearfelling – using coloured tape to mark out falling boundaries and road locations. While he was doing this, he came across the giant tree – bigger than anything he'd seen before. Although he recognised the tree's value in terms of the quantity of high-grade timber it would produce, he decided instead to mark it "Leave Tree". In other words, the tree was not to be felled.



*Dennis Cronin—provided by Dennis’s widow Lorraine Cronin. Source: [Filson](#)*

This random act of kindness by the logger was a stroke of luck for the tree. And so it was that a single huge Douglas Fir remained standing amongst the debris left from clear-felling the area. Cronin often visited the tree over the next few years, until he died in 2016. [He told author Harley Rustad](#): “It’s like a legacy, ya know? Even though I’m a logger and I’ve taken out millions of trees, you won’t see anything like these trees again.”

## A celebrity is born

Few other people knew about the tree though, situated as it was deep in the forest and accessible only by a rough logging track.

But that all changed when the tree was spotted in 2012 by TJ Watt, the co-founder of the [Ancient Forest Alliance](#). The AFA is a registered charitable organization founded in 2010 and based in Victoria, which works “to protect BC’s endangered old-growth forests and to ensure a sustainable, value-added, second-growth forest industry.”

Watt and the AFA immediately recognised the powerful symbolic imagery that the huge, isolated tree provided. They [christened the tree](#) Big Lonely Doug, launching his new career as a silent advocate for conservation and sustainable forest management. The photos below were taken by TJ Watt shortly after the clearcut, and are courtesy of the [Ancient Forest Alliance](#), where you can find more photos. A clearcut is just that – nothing is left standing unless it’s flagged “*Leave Tree*”.

Big Lonely Doug and recent clearcut, 2012. Photo TJ Watt, Ancient Forest Alliance

Big Lonely Doug and recent clearcut, 2012. Photo TJ Watt, Ancient Forest Alliance

Stump of large cedar in clearcut area, 2012. Photo: TJ Watt, Ancient Forest Alliance

## Just missing Big Lonely Doug

My wife and I visited Port Renfrew in 2015 with friends from Victoria. We had a lovely walk on Botanical Beach and then hiked into the [Avatar Grove](#) of old growth forest a few kilometres out of town. Avatar Grove was first identified as important old growth forest in 2009 and declared Old-Growth Management Area in 2012, meaning that no logging could take place in it. It's a magical place containing some spectacular trees, and it was amazing to me that it had only been protected so recently before we visited.

I recalled the visit to Avatar Grove in one of the [early posts](#) in the Nature of Music. During Covid lockdown, I made the connection between the floorboards in my study and the tall Douglas Firs that would have occurred widely in that part of Vancouver Island.

But Big Lonely Doug's story was not well known when we visited the area in 2015. We were unaware that he was standing there just a few bumpy kilometers along forest tracks from Avatar Grove.

I first learned about Big Lonely Doug from a 2018 Facebook post by a colleague at the University of Victoria, [Brian Starzomski](#). Brian had taken a trip to visit the tree and posted some eye-popping photos.

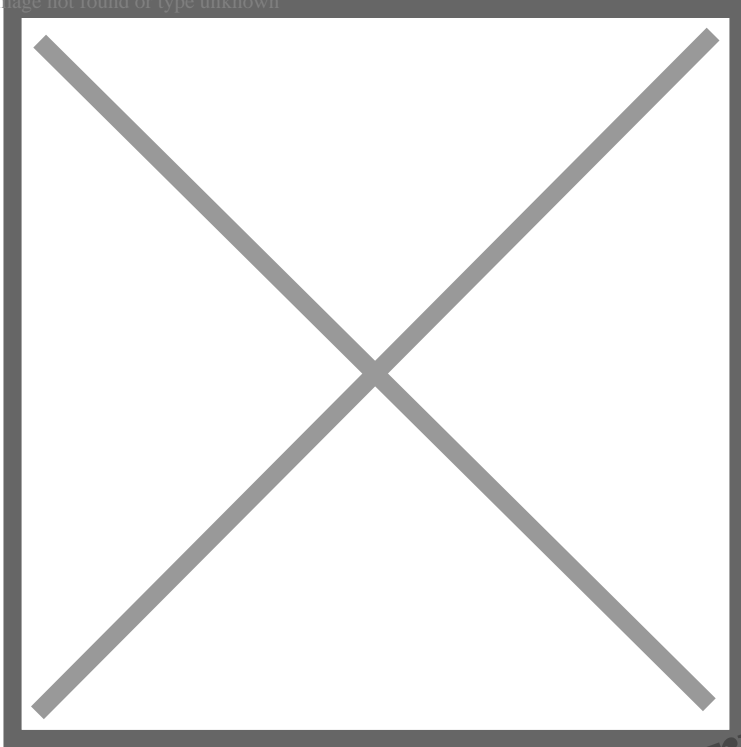
He'd also provided a link to the [story](#) on Big Lonely Doug that had first appeared in 2016 in the Walrus. And from that I was able to order a copy of the 2018 book by Harley Rustad titled "[Big Lonely Doug: The Story of One of Canada's Last Great Trees](#)".

## A road less travelled

Realising that we had, without knowing it, been so close to where Big Lonely Doug stood made me feel that we'd missed a golden opportunity to visit.

Fortunately, another opportunity arose recently when we travelled back to BC to visit our daughter in the Rockies and our friends on Vancouver Island. As our visit approached, my friend and colleague [Eric Higgs](#) asked if there was anything that we particularly wanted to do while in Victoria. My mind immediately turned to Big Lonely Doug, and so a tentative plan was hatched for a road trip out to Port Renfrew in search of the tree.

Image not found or type unknown



*Eric is a humorous chap*

The weather gods smiled on us, and we set off on a day that promised clear skies – not guaranteed on the west coast of Vancouver Island, one of the wettest parts of Canada. The road to Port Renfrew has numerous twists, turns and surprising bumps. But the road out of Port Renfrew towards the Avatar Grove surpassed it by far in terms of roughness and potholes – it had become a lot worse since our previous visit 9 years ago.

Despite his recent celebrity status, Big Lonely Doug remains aloof and hard to get to. I was glad that Eric had a Rav4 – and that he was driving. Navigating the potholes and loose rocks required patience and skill, and they got bigger and more frequent as we passed Avatar ([currently closed](#) while work is done to improve the safety and impact of visitor trails).

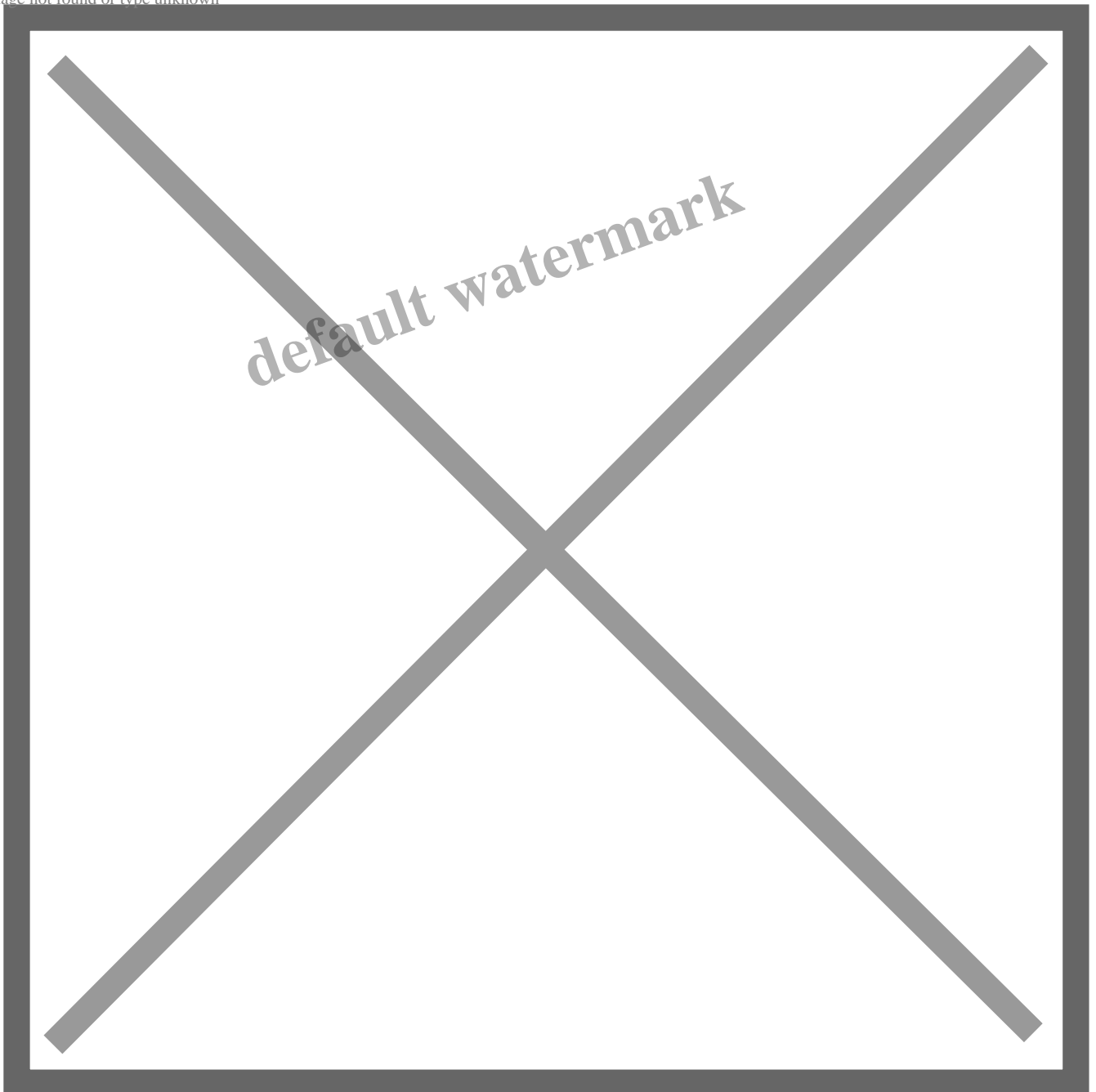
A few more kilometres up the road was the turn-off towards Big Lonely Doug. This led over a narrow bridge with no side-rails and a huge drop into the river coursing below. After the bridge, the road was actually an un-maintained logging track. The potholes became bottomless and the loose rocks turned to boulders. Eric eyed a particularly steep and fractured piece of track with the daring look of someone prepared to test the limits of his 4WD. But after a moment's reflection, sense prevailed along with a collective unwillingness to die just yet. We parked and hiked the remaining kilometer or so to where Big Lonely Doug was to be found.

## Visiting the old fella

The hike up was mostly through relatively young regrowth forest – the trees were not tall, but were still enough to obscure the view ahead. Indeed, as we reached the spot indicated on Google maps where Big Lonely Doug was supposed to be, I wondered if Google was playing one of its tricks of misinformed geo-location.

But then, sure enough, there was a roughly-constructed sign at the side of the road pointing down into the valley. And there, in a gap in the trees stood the tree itself. Just like in the photographs I'd seen previously. Except that, just over a decade after those photos had been taken, the forest around Big Lonely Doug was regrowing. A mixture of self-seeded and replanted trees now formed a green carpet at Doug's feet, covering over the stark debris of the clearcut.

Image not found or type unknown





*Big Lonely Doug, March 2024*

Big Lonely Doug is impressive in the photographs, but even more imposing in real life. It's a short but testing hike down a rough trail from the logging road to the base of the tree. The trail passes stumps of a variety of sizes. Many were relatively small, but a few stood out as the remains of Big Lonely Doug's giant companions.

We stopped at one giant cedar stump – recognisable as one of the stumps photographed by TJ Watt soon after the clear-cut. The rings in the stump were prominent and showed the history of this tree. Although impossible to age exactly because the centre of the tree had rotted away, the remaining rings suggested that this tree had been at least 500 years old. Still a skinny youngster compared to Big Lonely Doug though.

Standing on a cut stump on the trail to Big Lonely Doug

Cut stump on trail to Big Lonely Doug

Cut stump with Eric's boots and walking pole

Zooming in for a closer look

Zooming in even closer – count the number of rings where the end of the pole is.

It's only as you approach the tree that the sheer scale becomes apparent. Being able to stand next to Big Lonely Doug was a mind-bending experience. I've been fortunate to be able to visit some mighty trees on my travels – [Redwoods](#) in California, [Kauri](#) in New Zealand, [Mountain Ash](#) in eastern Australia, not forgetting my local giants, the [Karri](#) and Tingle of the southwestern forests. You get the same sense of awe from them all.

But Big Lonely Doug perhaps evoked the biggest rush of conflicting emotions. A giant tree like the others, but the sole survivor of an otherwise devastating clear-cut.

Big Lonely Doug stretching skywards

With Gillian, Eric and Stephanie, at Big Lonely Doug's feet

Feeling tiny in the presence of an ancient being

default watermark

The sapling trees surrounding Doug are now 5m tall or more

## Thinking Like Doug

As a scientist, I've been trained to look dispassionately at the world and garner evidence to support or refute ideas about how things work. You're not supposed to let emotions in. And you're certainly not allowed to anthropomorphise – to project human feelings, emotions and motivations onto other lifeforms. But standing next to Big Lonely Doug is the kind of transcendent experience that makes you question whether remaining strictly rational and dispassionate is appropriate, or even possible.

As we stood at the base of this amazing tree, I found myself wondering what Doug thought about his current situation and what had happened to his neighbourhood. He was probably one of the biggest trees that had inhabited the area. [Apparently](#), many of the surrounding trees were probably only about 150 years old at time of felling, suggesting that a major disturbance (a storm perhaps) had occurred there that had previously knocked most of the stand down but left Doug and some of the other large trees standing.

But in 2011 when the loggers came, what did he think then? We're understanding more about how [trees communicate with each other](#)

. Did Doug hear or feel the silent screams from his neighbours as the chainsaws bit into them? And then did he stand alone, wondering where his tree community had gone? His whole environment changed in an instant, and rather than being in a benign closed-forest environment, he was now exposed to the elements with no close neighbours for support. How did his roots feel as they were exposed to the drying soil? How did his branches feel as they felt the bite of winter storms?

Maybe as a survivor of past disruptions, he wasn't so concerned by these changes. If you've been alive for a thousand years or so, you're likely to have seen a bit of what the world might throw at you.

In 2024 when we visited Doug, the scar of the clear cut around him was beginning to heal over with an emerging forest of saplings that begun to grow since the logging. Did Doug welcome this host of new teenage trees, or did he view their youthful exuberance as an assault on his peace and quiet? We'll never know, I'm sure.

## Hope, patience and humility

The new carpet of young hemlocks, firs and spruces was a welcome sight – a sign that nature can bounce back from assaults like the indiscriminate logging that occurred there and in many other places across Vancouver Island and BC in general.

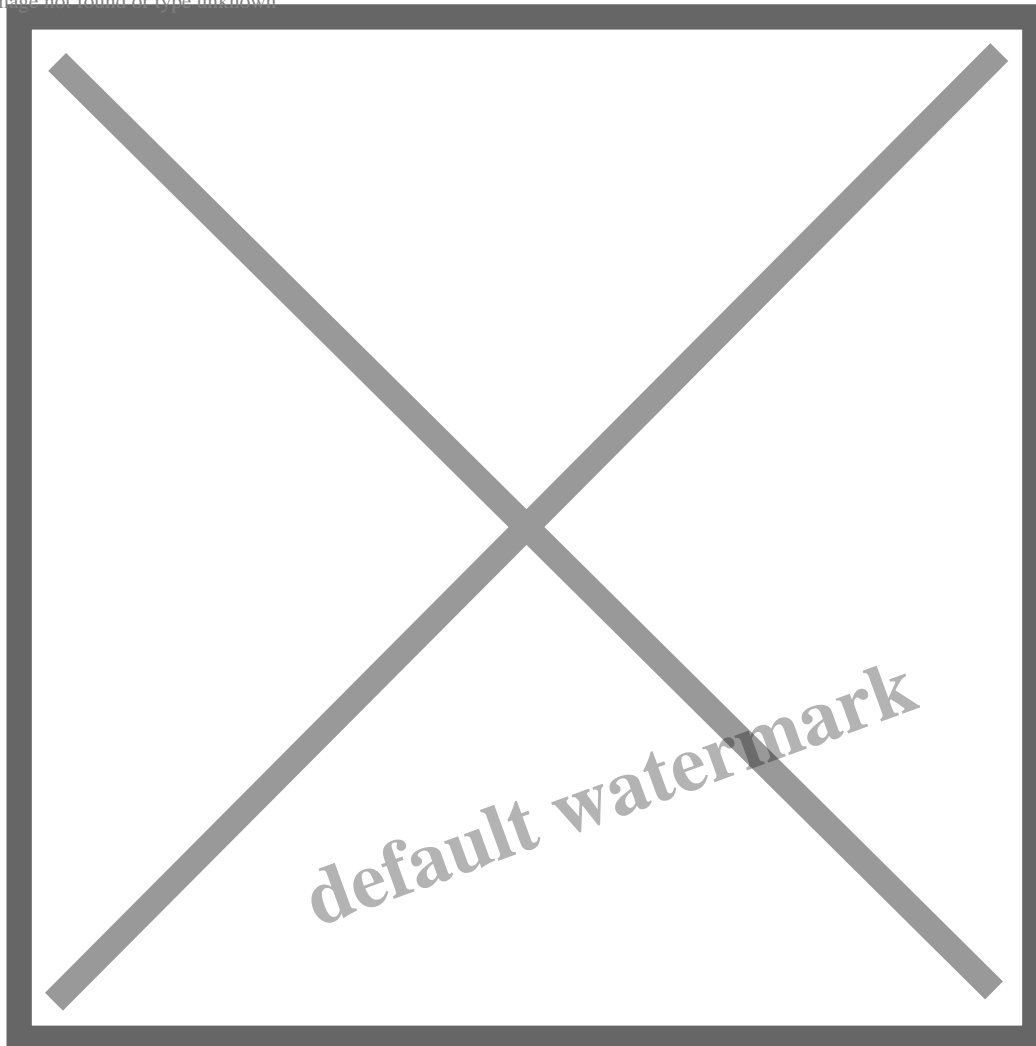
But at the same time, looking at the young trees also caused pause for thought. We can celebrate the recovery of the site – but Big Lonely Doug towering above them provides a salutary reminder that it will take centuries for the forest to recover to its former splendour. If it is allowed to do so, and if changes in climate and fire regimes don't interfere with the process.

As a restoration ecologist, I spent a lot of time discussing with my colleagues what successful restoration looks like. We celebrate the successful establishment of new plant communities on disturbed areas and are happy to see these grow and mature. But the timelines of most restoration projects are measured in years – decades at best. Restoring an old growth forest requires patience and foresight way beyond what most of us are capable of – and it will never happen in our lifetimes anyway. Comparing the young regrowing forest with the old tree towering above them is a humbling experience.

## A long and bumpy road

The potholes had to be navigated again on drive back down from Big Lonely Doug, but we took a different way back from Port Renfrew to Victoria, via Lake Cowichan, where Denis Cronin had lived.

Image not found or type unknown

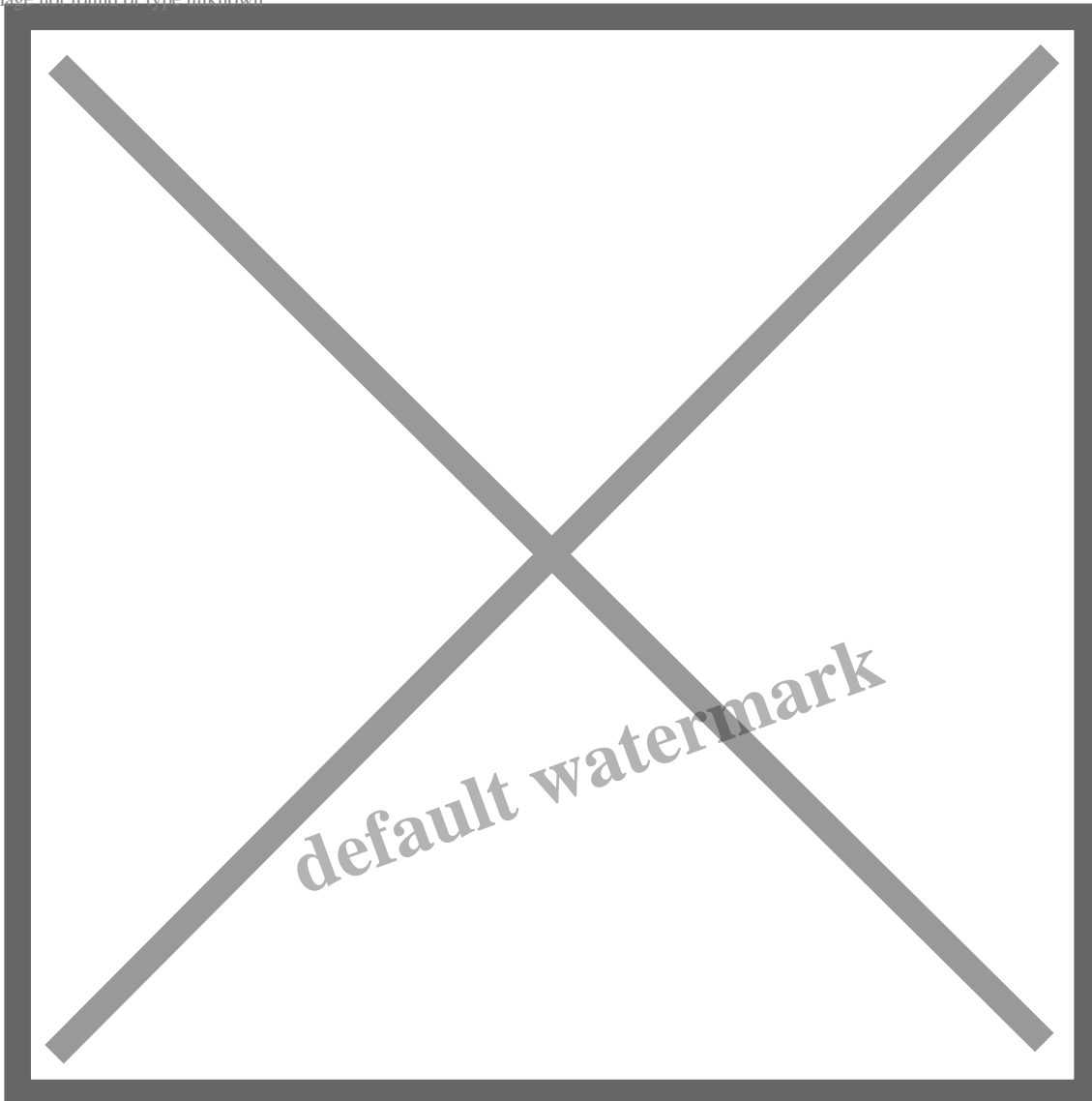


*The Fairy Lake Bonsai Tree. Photo: Shawn McCreedy, [Atlasobscura](#)*

Not far outside Port Renfrew, we passed Fairy Lake, with its famous [Bonsai Tree](#) – an diminutive counterpoint to Big Lonely Doug. Not far away from there is Fairy Creek, scene of perhaps the biggest civil disobedience actions ever staged in Canada. [The protests in 2021](#) aimed to stop the old growth logging planned for the area, and the results of those protests are still playing out both locally and more broadly across BC.

Like the landscape surrounding Big Lonely Doug, the area we drove through was pockmarked with recent clearcuts. A reminder that logging – including of old growth stands – is still very much a current activity in BC.

Image not found or type unknown



*Clearcut on a steep slope*

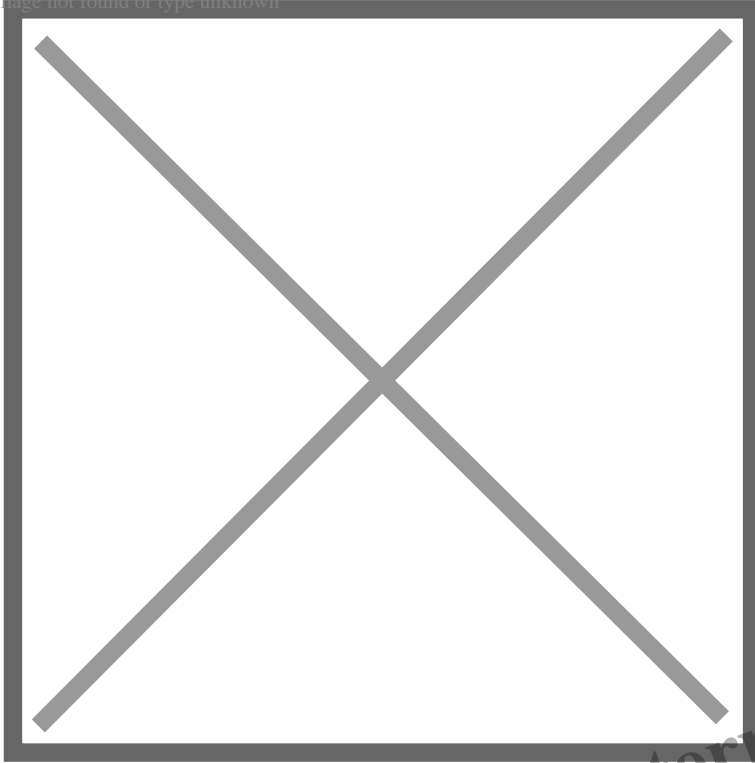
The road to effective forest conservation and management is obviously as bumpy and hard to navigate as the road leading to Big Lonely Doug. But ultimately so worth it.

And there's room for hope. A [recent agreement](#) between the B.C. government and two First Nations will permanently protect about 760 square kilometres of Crown land in Clayoquot Sound, including significant old growth areas.

As the sun fell low in the sky, we stopped at a small brew-pub for a beer and some pizza. Over our beers, we chatted about Big Lonely Doug – in much the same way folks had gathered in bars to talk about Steven Bradbury and the Winter Olympics. Both legendary stories of the last one standing.

Big Lonely Doug is, indeed, a potent symbol of humanity's past, present and future hopes and aspirations. Perhaps he can provide a beacon for a more respectful relationship with nature and a greater humility in how we treat the species we share the Earth with.

Image not found or type unknown



*Big Lonely Doug made such an impression on Eric that he had to incorporate the image in his barista activities the next day.*

Many thanks to Eric Higgs and Stephanie Cairns for making our trip to Big Lonely Doug possible.

For a full list of past posts, go [here](#).

Follow The Nature of Music on [Facebook](#)

### **Sign up for updates on new posts:**

Email address:

Sign up

### **Category**

1. Uncategorized

### **Date Created**

April 28, 2024

### **Author**

richard-hobbsuwa-edu-au