UNDERWATER LOGGING
Harvesting Submerged Timber

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TRITON LOGGING’S SAWFISH CUTS A NEW NICHE IN FORESTRY.

BY ROSS CROCKFORD

THE SAWFISH IS A FORMIDABLE CREATURE. Weighing three tons and as big as a minivan, it has eight eyes and sonar to search for prey. Its mouth consists of huge black pincers — and a 140-centimetre chainsaw. But the Sawfish is no monster. On the contrary: it saves lives, creates jobs, and wins awards from environmentalists. That’s because the Sawfish is a remote-controlled submarine, designed to harvest sunken trees.

“Quite something, isn’t it?” asks Jim Hayhurst, vice president of communications for Triton Logging, the Saanichton company that invented the Sawfish. Standing before the machine in Triton’s workshop, I have to agree.

It can dive to more than 100 metres, using sonar to navigate underwater forests and murky water, its eight cameras providing a live video feed to a pilot sitting in a barge on the surface. In less than five minutes, the Sawfish can find a tree, drill airbags into the wood, slice the tree off at the trunk, and then send it floating to the surface to be milled — without the risks divers face in typical underwater salvage logging, or the destructive road-building or laborious treeplanting required with conventional forestry. Last year Popular Science magazine named the Sawfish one of the best new environmental technologies on Earth.
There are as many as 300 million trees under water worldwide, most of them at the bottom of some 45,000 reservoirs formed by hydroelectric dams. Hayhurst says that Triton can harvest that timber at a cost comparable to land-based forestry, and though loggers can work faster on land, Triton has access to the kinds of big old-growth trees that are rapidly vanishing from above-ground forests. Triton claims the global inventory of submerged wood — preserved by the low-oxygen environment of deepwater — is potentially worth $50 billion.

This particular afternoon, the new Sawfish is heading to Lois Lake, a reservoir created by a dam built in the 1930s near Powell River. Triton’s been harvesting Douglas fir and Sitka spruce there for the past six years. But because the pine-beetle crisis has flooded BC’s timber market with cheap wood, the Sawfish is currently just going to Lois Lake for testing, and will soon join two other Sawfish already at work in Malaysia.

Currently, Triton is focusing its efforts on the sunken forests of Malaysia’s Lake Kenyir, a 38,000-hectare reservoir created in the 1980s and surrounded by one of the world’s oldest rainforests, rich with tropical hardwoods such as teak, red meranti and yellow balau. Triton already has a working partnership with a Malaysian firm that’s turning the wood into furniture, doors,
windows and decking. Triton has also applied to the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation to expand the project, training Malaysians for technical logging jobs, including operating the Sawfish themselves.

It’s been quite a journey for Triton, which got started back in 2000 when CEO Chris Godsall, then only in his early thirties, recognized an opportunity while working for a BC salvage-logging company, and raised money from family and friends to build the first Sawfish. Triton now has a staff of 55 in four countries, including Thailand and Brazil, and its timber, which has received the coveted “SmartWood” label by the Rainforest Alliance, has been used in Japanese temples and California mansions. Victoria’s Dockside Green development is building townhouses with Triton wood, and Mountain Equipment Co-op used Triton’s tough fir and pine for the slatted walls of its Victoria outlet on Government Street.

Other logging companies have offered to buy a Sawfish or two — which have been reported to cost $1.2 million apiece — but Godsall’s turned them down. Triton prides itself on maintaining custody of its wood from lake bottom to finished product, and that could be muddied if other companies used the submarine. The Sawfish is more than just a tool: it’s the key to Triton’s unique identity in the timber business.

“The Triton brand is valuable to countries and communities that want to be seen as responsible — economically, environmentally and socially,” says Jim Hayhurst. “Maybe that’s a tall order for a little yellow submarine, but it seems to resonate. “Generating good-news stories, it seems, is just one more of the many attributes of the amazing Sawfish. ☞