

Chapter 02 - “Why Do We Plant Trees?”

This chapter is going to focus on two main topics. First, we'll cover an overview of government management of the forest industry in British Columbia. We'll look at various public, private, and government entities that hire tree planting companies to replant the cut blocks. After that, we'll focus on a snapshot of typical people who plant trees, and people who should or shouldn't go tree planting. Even though many people have an idealized vision of becoming tree planters to save the environment, the reality is that many people hate the work and quit after just a few days or weeks. By doing some pre-season research, potential planters will gain a much better understanding of how the industry works before they accept a job, and may be less likely to quit once they find themselves in the middle of a cut-block, covered in mud and surrounded by mosquitoes.

If you're going to be planting somewhere other than British Columbia, you should skip the next two sections and jump into the middle of this chapter, to the section titled, “People Who Should Go Planting.”

Overview of Forest Management in BC

BC's forestry and logging industry is very significant. Within British Columbia, 94% of the land in the province is crown land. Two thirds of the land in BC is a forest base, so obviously, the amount of woodland regulated by the provincial government is massive. Of the forested land in BC, 83% is coniferous, which is useful for logging. Although less than 1% of BC's forested land base is harvested each year, forestry accounts for 15% of BC's economy. It's estimated that for every mature tree logged in BC each year, three new seedlings are planted.



Figure 2.01
Land Use in BC.

BC has about 95m hectares of total land base, of which 55m hectares are forest land and only 22m hectares are available for harvesting, but the annual timber harvest in 2022 was only 112,902 hectares. Source: BC Government.

Let's look at the organization of timber harvesting within BC, and how that organization affects tree planting companies. The province's forests as a whole are administered by the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations. Historically, this organization was referred to for many years simply as the Ministry of Forests, or abbreviated as MOF. The province is split up into eight management regions for all natural resources, including forestry: Skeena, Northeast, Omineca, Cariboo, West Coast, South Coast, Thompson/Okanagan, and Kootenay/Boundary.

There's a further subdivision of the province into a total of thirty-eight separate Timber Supply Areas, known as TSA's. These TSA's cover the entire province. There are also thirty-four Tree Farm Licenses, or TFL's. Each individual Tree Farm License covers a single distinct area (or a few distinct areas), and the boundaries occasionally fluctuate, but the TFL's don't cover the entire province. The TFL's account for a relatively small percentage of the total area of the province, although they provide a disproportionately high percentage of the annual harvest.

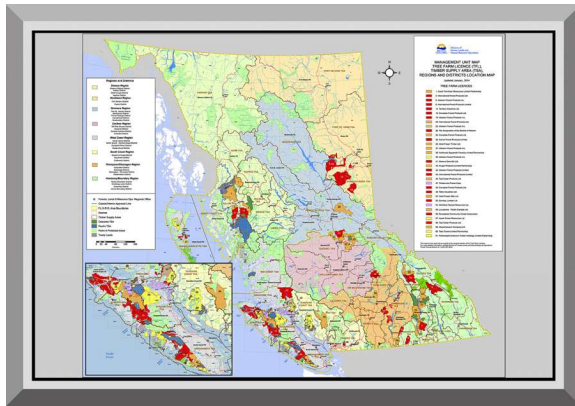


Figure 2.02
TFL and TSA Map.

A map of the various TFL's and TSA's of British Columbia can be found online. Every other province has its own unique system for classifying forest use.

Source: BC Government.

Each year, BC has what's known as an Annual Allowable Cut, or AAC. The Annual Allowable Cut is a determination of how much wood may be harvested in a specific calendar year across the entire province. It's arrived at by studying timber supply analysis, social and economic objectives of the government, technical reports, and public input. The AAC is a policy decision, not a calculation. It's not a consensus decision, rather, it's a decision of the province's Chief Forester. Admittedly, it is a data-driven policy decision, rooted in Timber Supply calculations. Once the Chief Forester has determined the size of the AAC, a separate role is performed by the Minister of Forests in determining the apportionment of the AAC to the various parts of the province. The AAC is measured in cubic meters, not in the number of actual trees cut.

Administration of Logging and Reforestation

Going back to the Tree Farm Licenses, a TFL is an agreement between the province and a single large private interest. Usually, the TFL's are held by large logging companies, such as Canfor, West Fraser, Mosaic, Tolko, Western Forest Products, and so on. A Tree Farm License provides rights and responsibilities to manage a specific area, and to harvest their own AAC within that area. Basically,

within a TFL, the logging company may come up with a five-year plan that specifies which blocks will be harvested within their TFL in each of the next several years, and that's a work-in-progress document that is constantly evolving each year. Within the TFL, the logging company acts as the long-term owner of the land, even though the land is owned by the province. The rationale is that the logging company will manage that land in perpetuity, harvesting a small portion each year and ensuring over the next couple of decades that the harvested land is reforested properly so it can be harvested again a few generations later. The amount of wood fiber harvested each year in all of the TFL's combined usually contributes to about a fifth of the AAC in the entire province, even though the land base within the TFL's is slightly under five percent of the productive land base in BC.

A Timber Supply Area is an area of crown land designated by the Minister of Forests. All land within the province falls within one of the thirty-seven TSA's. Within each TSA, there can be many volume-based licenses. Part of each TSA is not available for timber harvesting. This part may be due to wildlife protection areas, old growth management areas, wildlife tree patches, riparian management areas, or a number of other reasons. The amount of land within the TSA may be further restricted by reserves for First Nations, private woodlot licenses, private dwellings, TFL's, and community forests. The rest of the land within the TSA can be harvested. Organizations such as BC Timber Sales will have auctions where a small logging company can bid on the rights to harvest a small group of blocks. BCTS oversees certain rules and regulations related to the logging of these areas, and then puts planting contracts up for bid to planting companies. The planting contractor who submits the lowest bid price on any given contract is awarded that contract, and will do all the planting on that contract according to specifications provided by BCTS staff. BCTS also looks after things like road-building, silviculture surveys, brushing, and so on. I'll talk about these activities later in this book.

The Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resources Operations also tenders contracts out. Rather than being similar to the freshly logged areas that BCTS administers, the FLNRO contracts may focus more on small and patchy beetle salvage areas, or on the backlog of NSR land from old tenures where there's no responsibility anymore for any specific entity to deal with reforestation. NSR land is a designation that refers to Not Sufficiently Restocked areas, or areas where the reforestation efforts in the past have turned out to be inadequate. Beetle salvage was a problem for a couple of decades starting in the early 1990's due to the major epidemic proportions of mountain pine beetle infestations throughout BC. It originally started in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park. The epidemic was declared a crisis in 1999, and seasonal devastation peaked in 2005. Since 2015, the province has been in a subsidence or decline phase, although unfortunately only because the beetle has nearly run out of mature pine trees to kill. A lot of the problems with the current health of BC's forest industry relate to mill closures (which have accelerated since 2020), and those closures have often been directly based upon lack of supply of economic fibre, either because the MPB killed the trees, or because the province over-harvested during the epidemic. We danced, and now we have to pay the piper. On a side note, trees that are killed by beetles can sometimes still be harvested and used, although the wood isn't as valuable as freshly logged healthy timber.

There's also a program known as the Forest Investment Program (FIP), which combined two previous programs: Forests For Tomorrow (FFT) and the Forest Carbon Initiative (FCI). This program is government funded, and it oversees the reforestation of some crown lands within BC that do not have a pre-existing legal reforestation obligation. These are often areas that may not have been harvested, but were destroyed by natural occurrences. The FIP program mainly mitigates timber supply losses, such as reforesting areas after a wild fire, or after a major pine beetle infestation. Although there are specific government staff allocated to the FIP program, other entities sometimes help with the actual administration of FIP funded planting work, such as BCTS staff, First Nations partners, or outside consultants.

Finally, of course, smaller entities such as First Nations, municipalities, and independent woodlot owners may approach planting companies to assist with smaller reforestation projects. Overall then, there are a wide variety of harvesting approaches within BC. This diversity contributes to the health of BC's forest industry, and provides a wide variety of options for tree planting companies to find work.

Now that we understand the various types of entities involved in logging and harvesting in BC, and therefore have a better understanding of who hires a planting company, let's focus on the opposite, the people that a planting company hires. We'll focus on a snapshot of some typical people who plant trees, and people who should or shouldn't go tree planting.

People Who Should Go Planting

Physical fitness is important. Excellence in aerobic ability and excellence in brute muscular strength are helpful but not entirely necessary. Endurance, however, is very important. Tree planting is exhausting. You must be able to develop the ability to keep working steadily throughout a full work day, and throughout a season. You cannot easily train for planting. You may be able to develop your leg muscles and provide some basic aerobic conditioning by spending several weeks before the season starts, hiking for two hours per day with a twenty-pound backpack. However, you also need to develop muscles in the shoulders, arms, wrists, fingers, and back.

Your best bet to attempt some proper pre-season training is to go online and find the free "Fit To Plant" training program, or Kerri Dunsmore's professional training program (small cost). There's probably nothing better out there than these two programs:

Fit To Plant: www.replant.ca/fittoplant

Kerri's program: www.replant.ca/kdathletictherapy

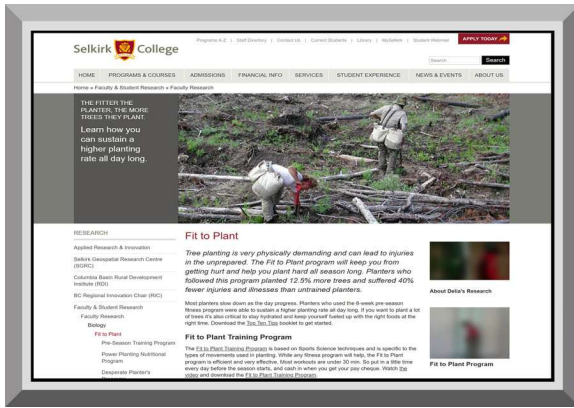


Figure 2.03
“Fit To Plant” Program.

The Fit To Plant program, designed by Dalia Roberts, is a great way to get yourself in shape for planting before the season starts.

BC ForestSafe now hosts this free online training resource. Visit www.replant.ca/fittoplant

The only truly successful planters are those who want to make money. You shouldn't go planting solely for the experience, to see the world, or to meet people, and you should especially NOT go planting to save the environment, or to be with a partner. You should go planting for yourself, and for your wallet. Anything else is just a bonus.



Figure 2.04
Relationships Can Suffer.

The emotional toil of planting can severely test any relationship, especially one in which one or both people has not previously experienced a season of tree planting.

The ability to learn is another key asset. Be open-minded and analytical. Tree planting, contrary to what some people believe, is NOT a mindless job. In fact, it's one of the most intellectually demanding jobs out there, which is why experienced planters do better than rookies. It takes time to learn. Focus is critical. Even if you read, memorize and think about every piece of information you find in this and other resources, there will still be things that you have to learn as a rookie which 'cannot' be taught.

Speaking of vets, let's address some terminology. Planters in their first season are often referred to as rookies. You'll also hear references to vets/veterans, ie. someone who has planted more than one season. However, there's a lot of disagreement about what makes a planter a veteran. Most planters agree that someone who has returned for another year after completing a previous full season should be called an “experienced” planter, but they are not yet a “veteran” planter. However, there is no chronological line in the sand to distinguish between an experienced planter and a vet. The label “vet” should probably be reserved for someone who has been exposed to varying conditions under many different types of planting specs and conditions. They should be a “strong” planter, which implies a mix of decent production and reliable quality and density, rather than simply being a fast planter or a highballer. A true vet has probably worked at least four or five seasons with a wide variety of experience in many types of ground, probably at a few companies in different geographic regions. A strong and capable planter with a wide breadth of experience gained over four seasons may be more of a “vet” than a mediocre planter who has planted for seven years but who repeatedly worked on the same one or two contracts.



Figure 2.05
Pre-Season Learning.

If you take the time to learn as much as possible before the season starts, you'll be able to focus on the physical process of planting once you hit the field, without being distracted by wondering "why" everything is done the way it is.

Knowledge that a vet accumulates might include intuitively knowing the types of vegetation that usually grow on dirt, what vegetation usually grows on rock, where to place your shovel to find dirt, and so on. If you pay attention to your surroundings, you'll become a better planter, but you should also watch other good planters, and ask your crew leader for advice. If you have a good crew leader, they will also be a good planter, and the best leaders prioritize training for less-experienced planters.



Figure 2.06
Your People Are Your Best Investment.

A good crew leader knows that every minute spent working with new planters pays off in the long run.

Anybody can eventually become a good planter, with concentration and determination. Some take longer than others, but all it takes is drive, focus, and the ability to learn from yourself and others. You won't be successful unless you constantly and actively try to improve your planting skills. The fact that you're making an effort to increase your chances of success by learning the information in this book is a good sign. You're probably going to be far more likely to succeed than someone who is apathetic about investing any time in pre-season learning.

You'll encounter a lot of very interesting and unique personalities in a planting camp. Be open-minded, as you may learn a lot of interesting ideas and perspectives from these people. Sometimes, the people who seem a little crazy are the ones who really understand life.

People Who Should Not Go Planting

Anybody with a history of back, arm, knee, ankle, or neck problems should not go planting. Planting puts enormous physical stress on the body and can frequently aggravate old injuries, often making

them even harder to deal with. This is especially the case with knee injuries. Veteran planters who spend years in the field will slowly wear out their bodies, destroying tendons and ligaments. You may think to yourself that your prior knee injury from several years ago will not cause you any problems, but your body must be at 100% to do the job well.



Figure 2.07

Planting Is Hard On The Body.

It's normal to be sore after a day of planting, especially in the first month of the season. However, if you have a prior history of back, arm, knee, ankle, or neck problems, you shouldn't choose a career as a tree planter. Planting is hard on people in the best of health.

I've known several people who brushed off prior injuries because their injury hadn't caused them problems for years. Then, when they started planting, the injury acted up again within days, causing them to have to quit their job. All that does is cost you a lot of money and frustration as you find yourself having to quit your new summer job, and it also causes frustration for the person who hired you and who invested time in training you. If you aren't confident in your body's ability to handle the physical demands, don't try tree planting. You don't have to be incredibly strong. I've seen 110-pound people who can excel at planting, but that's due to a combination of good overall health and an excellent mental attitude.

Anybody who is dealing with emotional stress should not go planting. If you have relationship hassles, depression, some kind of an existential crisis, or if you're in mourning, the bush is the worst possible place to deal with it. If you take medication to manage your emotions and mental health, you probably shouldn't go tree planting.



Figure 2.08

Dealing With Emotional Stress.

If you're dealing with depression or other types of emotional stress, tree planting will only make it much worse.

Anyone recovering from a long-term illness should not go planting. The physical stress of planting will sometimes break down your immune system and bring back the illness. Toward the end of a three-month stint of planting, even the healthiest people can get sick easily.

There is no benefit to saying that you're an avid environmentalist. While it's great that we're planting trees to clean up after commercial harvesting operations (because the alternative is much worse), the bottom line is that this job is just that, a job. Crew leaders want to hire people who are interested in a healthy paycheck, not people who are trying to save the world. Trust me, people who interview a lot of candidates get sick of hearing the standard phrase, "I love camping, and I like to go hiking." You're going planting to plant trees, not to go on a recreational camping and hiking adventure. Cut the bullshit. If you've done 22-day canoe trips in the Yukon or hiked the entirety of the Pacific Coast Trail from Mexico to Canada, then yes, that's going to be of interest, and you should mention it in an interview (but prepare to be quizzed). If you spent five weekends going camping with your family when you were nine years old, we don't want to hear about it. Interviewers will want to evaluate your personality and your motivation, not hear claims that camping is your one true passion (after you've learned to set up a tent by watching a YouTube video).

Most experienced crew leaders will NOT hire romantic partners who are applying as a couple, unless both members of the couple already have planting experience. Experience has dictated that the attrition rates for couples are often **much** higher than for the average unattached individual. If you fall into this category, rather than trying to hide it, ask yourself if you're prepared to accept the fact that you may be thinking about planting for the wrong reasons.

If you're red/green colour-blind, you're going to have a really hard time following planted trees in summer overgrowth, and you'll probably be far less successful than other planters around you. Think twice about planting, because being colour-blind will definitely have a negative effect on your quality, density, and earnings. Apparently, about eight percent of North American males are red/green colour-blind, although the number is much lower for women. This handicap can be overcome, but it will make your job much more difficult.



Figure 2.09
Colour Blindness.

Many people are red/green colour-blind. This makes an already-tough job even more challenging. The difficulty of distinguishing the red flowers is especially obvious in the greyscale edition of this book.

People with allergies to trees or who have hay fever may find themselves to be fairly miserable at times. This should be quite obvious, but some people fail to consider this when applying for a job. However, this type of problem isn't a deal-breaker. I fall into this category. If you don't mind spending a lot of money on non-drowsy antihistamines, you can survive as a planter.



Figure 2.10
Allergies & Hay Fever.

If you suffer from hay fever or other non-life threatening injuries, be prepared to spend a lot on antihistamines. If you are at risk of anaphylactic shock due to insect stings, going tree planting is a very dangerous choice, and highly discouraged.



Figure 2.11
Pollen.

You might be shocked by the amount of pollen in the air at certain times during the season. This is most evident when you look at the edges of puddles immediately after a light rainfall.

If you're allergic to bee, wasp, or hornet stings, you need to think carefully about what will happen if you're stung when you are hundreds of miles from the closest hospital. Getting stung by one of these insects is absolutely inevitable if you plant in July or August. If you're allergic and you can control your anaphylactic reaction through the use of an epi-pen, then carrying several pens might be sufficient to mitigate this risk. But what if you're working in an area where the fastest that you can get to a hospital is five or six hours? And what if you get stung several times in the neck after opening a ground nest? If getting a sting is something which your body reacts very badly to, you should absolutely consider a different line of work. At some point, you'll get some serious stings in a remote location with no medical facilities nearby.

Only a very small number of first-year planters will eventually migrate to the "pros" by planting on the BC coast, because you'll need several years of prior experience. Remember that it's very common in the fall coastal season to get caught in heavy slash after inadvertently knocking into or opening a nest, and you may get stung dozens of times. This can be a weekly occurrence. There have been several very severe anaphylactic shock cases in the coastal industry in the past few years, even among planters who aren't normally bothered by a sting or two.

If you can't see well without glasses, you need to think carefully about what you're getting yourself into. You can wear glasses on the block, but this can be extremely frustrating when it rains. Your glasses will definitely get badly scratched during the season, from constantly cleaning mud and rain off of them. Some people wear contacts, but if you do this, you should wear disposables because you'll lose them occasionally. Be aware that you're often planting in extremely dry and dusty

conditions which aggravate your eyes, so you'll probably need to carry saline solution. Remember too that you're working in mud and dirt all day, and it isn't generally advisable to stick dirty fingers into your eyes to adjust your contacts. Having less than 20:20 vision won't prevent you from being able to plant, but it will decrease your efficiency and earnings slightly.

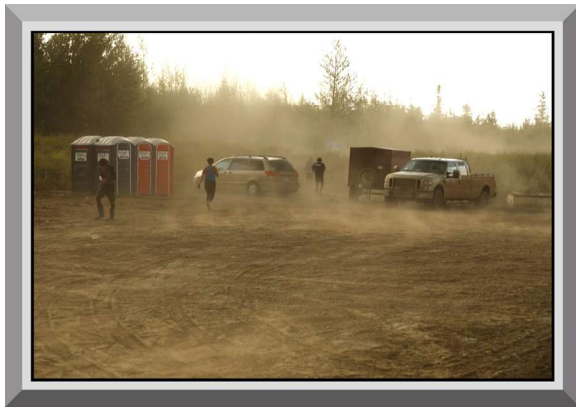


Figure 2.12
Dusty Conditions.

Expect to encounter just about every possible extreme when it comes to weather, from dusty conditions to snowstorms, with wind and rain and hail and every other combination in between.

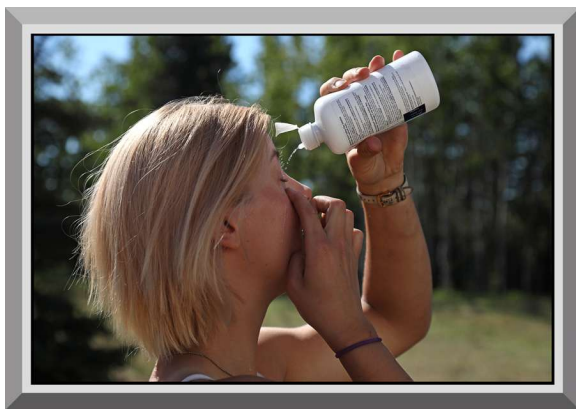


Figure 2.13
Saline Helps If You Wear Contacts.

If you wear contacts, it's very helpful to make sure you have a supply of saline solution.

As far as physique goes, most successful planters are regular weight or slim, not heavy-set. Despite the fact that most planters tend to be fairly lean, a planter can be moderately heavyset and well-built, and so long as you have a healthy physique, you can still do quite well at planting. If you're a heavy-set person and you really want to plant, you can try an experiment to help you decide if you can handle the physical requirements. Find a good heavy-duty backpack, and put forty pounds of books into it. Next, find a steep hill. Walk up and down that hill for three hours straight, without stopping. Now decide if you'd like to do that for eight or nine hours per day, every day, including days when it's over thirty degrees Celsius. If you're comfortable with that idea, your physique can handle planting.



Figure 2.14
Your Physique.

What matters the most about your physique is that you're healthy for your height and weight. As mentioned earlier, pre-season physical conditioning is a wise idea.

If you have a fear of heights, that's probably not a big deal. However, you might have minor problems later in your career, if you last long enough to decide to try planting on the coast.

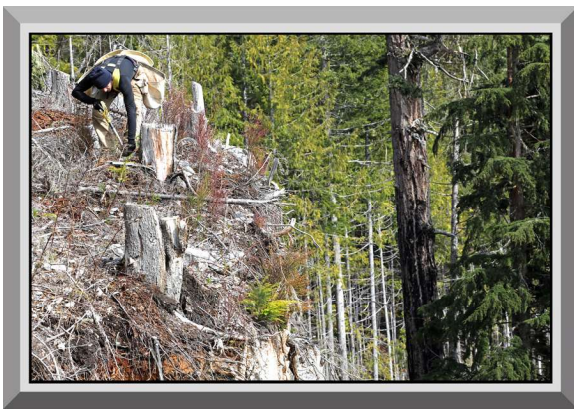


Figure 2.15
Working On Steep Ground.

First year planters will rarely work on steep ground, but if you eventually end up planting on the coast, some of the blocks are quite intimidating. On those blocks, a fear of heights can come into play.

Photo Credit: Andrew Ulmer.

There's a moderate amount of helicopter work on the coast, and working on some of the cliffs on the coast can be quite nerve-racking, even for people without a fear of heights. Helicopters are also used frequently on Interior jobs in western Canada, although more frequently in Alberta than in BC. If you're scared of flying in a helicopter, this could eventually present a minor problem.



Figure 2.16
Working With Helicopters.

Helicopter work can be moderately common in some parts of coastal BC and northern Alberta, although helicopters are rarely used in the rest of Canada.

The important thing to think about when answering challenging questions like these is that if you lie to an interviewer or on an application, the person whom you're hurting the most is yourself. Whether you like it or not, tree planting is production based, and any characteristics or attributes

which have the ability to negatively affect your production will also reduce your earnings, and make you dislike the job even more. Trying to hide past injuries in order to get a job may increase the chance of long-term injuries to your body which can affect you for the rest of your life.

Some Common Myths About Tree Planters

Some people say that the best tree planters are tall people. This is not true. Admittedly, very short people may find it slightly more challenging to climb through heavy slash on some blocks. Mostly though, height is irrelevant, and weight is not an issue unless you're overweight. Women shouldn't be reluctant to plant just because you're a woman. Although reforestation has traditionally been very male-dominated, this is changing because women can absolutely be as productive as men. Mental determination and motivation are much more important than physical size and strength. If you're curious whether male planters or female planters have an inherent advantage over the other gender(s), there's no consistent answer. I've had years where male planters dominated my Top 10 producers, and years where female planters dominated. Maybe someday I'll have a camp where trans planters dominate the production rankings. It all depends on the individual, not upon their gender.



Figure 2.17
Your Gender Doesn't Dictate Your Capabilities.

It seems ridiculous that this even needs to be mentioned, but women and LGBTQ2+ are no less capable at planting than men, even though the industry is still somewhat male dominated. Your gender identity does not dictate your success.

Some people say that most tree planters are insane party animals. This can be partly true. The younger the crowd, the more partying. However, the best planters tend to be older, and know the physical wear and tear of alcohol. A typical night off for some companies a few decades ago might have been a beer-fest that ended with someone trying to steal a skidder for a joy-ride. Nowadays, at many companies in western Canada, some planters will use their time off to play chess, go to the pool, see a movie, or even just catch up on sleep. Alcohol or drugs will rob you of sleep and proper rest, or cause a lack of focus. These will affect your production in the long run. Then again, a fun night of dancing around a campfire can make the memories of a tough shift fade away. Just remember to party in moderation, keep it safe, and look out for each other. Not every night off needs to be a party night.



Figure 2.18
The Night Off.

The “Night Off” doesn’t actually refer to the evening of a day off. It refers to the previous evening, when you get to relax, socialize, and sleep in the following morning. Have fun, but don’t overdo it.

Some people say that tree planting is boring. This isn't necessarily true. This depends on the person. If you can manage a deep and intense focus on something, the time can really fly. This applies to planting just as much as to other activities. Some people find planting to be painfully boring, so they plant with partners, plant for a specific cause or goal, sing while planting, back-bag a portable speaker, or do whatever else it takes to make them happy. I generally find that time flies while I'm planting, and at the end of a bag-up, I often have no idea of what I've been thinking about for the past hour. Other people go stir-crazy when left alone with their thoughts.

There are a lot of stereotypes about what kind of person goes planting. You can fill in the blank for whatever stereotype you're thinking of. Some of them can be accurate more often than not. The old saying, "birds of a feather flock together" may apply. Crews or camps often seem to be made up of similar types of people, with similar attitudes. In my mind though, diversity is very beneficial, and the majority of the most interesting people that I've met in my life have been tree planters.

For more photo and video resources associated with this chapter of the book, including additional maps and information about TSA's and TFL's, visit:

www.replant.ca/training/whyplant