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## Trust, legitimacy and power in forest certification: A case study of the FSC in British Columbia

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 4 July 2010

Received in revised form 6 November 2011

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Trust

Distrust

Legitimacy

Control

Ethical certification

Forest

### ABSTRACT

The root of the word certification is “to make certain”. Yet the complex technical and normative challenges certification aims to address, and its engagement of diverse and distant actors, are more about trust than certainty. The reliance on trust is perhaps most evident in “ethical” certification schemes due to the contested normative and affective nature of their environmental and social claims. Yet there is little research on the dynamics of local to global trust in these schemes. Social scientists have instead focused on the “legitimacy” of certification as an authoritative governance mechanism. This discourse has reinforced general trends towards structural formalization and rationalistic control that fail to address underlying sources of distrust.

This paper draws on a case study of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in British Columbia to examine how trust and distrust in certifiers influences the legitimacy and power dynamics of ethical certification, and its ability to promote desired outcomes. It observes how a global, rationalistic system for accrediting certifiers failed to build trust among core local supporters. Instead, normative and affective distrust in certifiers drove the development of prescriptive standards designed to control even the most distrusted certifiers and producers. The result has been slow growth in certified area relative to industry-backed competitor schemes and the demotivation of producers who might otherwise be willing to commit to desired outcomes. The current strategy to build global legitimacy through increasingly formalized and rationalistic certifier accreditation systems runs counter to the development of local trust in certifiers and the creation of shared values and commitment to good forestry.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper draws on a case study of forest certification in British Columbia to examine how trust and distrust in certifiers influences the legitimacy and power dynamics of ethical certification, and its ability to promote desired outcomes. Forest certification is one among a growing number of schemes – from organics to biofuels, to fair labor to fair trade, to name a few (Bartley, 2007; Raynolds et al., 2007; van Dam et al., 2008) – that involve the labeling of products that are produced according to a shared understanding of environmental and social ethics. While significant attention has been paid to the effect of political and market pressures on certification’s environmental and social standards (e.g. Cashore et al., 2004; Jaffee and Howard, 2010), less consideration has been given to its impacts on the certification process itself, and less yet to the role of individual certifiers in shaping the dynamics of trust, distrust and power in specific local contexts. This fuels abstract arguments about what makes a legitimate certification scheme

that may impede, rather than further, shared learning and cooperation on the ground.

Ethical certification began as a civil society-driven movement to re-embed global trade with consideration for its environmental and social impacts on valued places and vulnerable people. For some early supporters, this meant reversing the de-personalization and “fetishization” of relationships along the supply chain from a focus on things to a focus on social and environmental connections, and thereby addressing a perceived root of modern environmental and social problems (e.g. Hudson and Hudson, 2003).

Over time, however, theorists have noted a shift in certification processes from “relational” systems based on long-term cooperation and trust-building to more socially dis-embedded processes focused on control and surveillance (Mutersbaugh, 2005; Raynolds, 2009). Most of the research on this shift has been focused on agrofood networks and fair trade, where it is seen as the result of mainstreaming certification to suit buyer-driven supply chains (e.g. Dolan, 2010; Hudson and Hudson, 2003; Raynolds et al., 2007). The role of certifiers as key intermediaries in this process, however, has not been well studied.

The literature on forest certification has had a somewhat different focus, framing certification as a form of “governance” involving

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competition among environmentalists and the forest industry to gain legitimate authority over resource use (e.g. Bernstein and Cashore, 2007; Eden and Bear, 2010; Gulbrandsen, 2004; Tollefson et al., 2008). With strong roots in political science and institutional theory, this literature emphasizes the standard-setting process as the core locus of rule-making and control where various interests vie to legitimize their *a priori* visions of appropriate forestry, resulting in standards that are either higher or lower depending on the relative influence of environmentalists or forest producers (e.g. Auld, 2009; Cashore et al., 2004; Gale, 2004). This approach downplays the actual and perceived role of certifiers and producers in co-constructing or resisting the implementation of valued forest practices.

I propose instead that the degree to which particular certifiers are, or aren't, trusted to enact particular visions of appropriate production may lie at the very heart of certification's ability to promote desired relationships and practices while avoiding an escalation of prescriptive rules and social control mechanisms. I furthermore propose that there are few places more amenable to explore this proposition than the province of British Columbia (BC). Forestry in BC has long been fraught with conflict and distrust among environmentalists, industry and First Nations (aboriginal peoples). Due in part to this long-standing conflict, BC is also the site of some of the world's earliest efforts at forest certification, beginning over 20 years ago. Thus BC presents an ideal, long-term case study of trust among standard-setters and certifiers in a region with high levels of forest conflict.

This paper proceeds in the following steps. The next section introduces a theoretical framework for understanding trust, legitimacy and power, followed by a discussion of the research methodology. The empirical sections then begin with a contextual narrative of forest certification's evolution in BC and internationally up until the final drafting of the FSC-BC standards. Against this contextual backdrop, I then present the results of interviews and questionnaires to assess the determinants of trust and distrust in individual certifiers and how this influenced the content of the FSC-BC standards. The next section considers the outcomes of FSC accreditation and the FSC-BC standard-setting process in BC to date, and subsequent changes to FSC's accreditation procedures. The paper concludes by considering what lessons can be learned from the BC case, and recommends a reconsideration of assumptions as to the appropriate role of certifiers in trustworthy and progressive forest certification schemes.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Personal trust, distrust and power

Trust is here defined as an attitude or belief that the results of another's intended action will be appropriate (Misztal, 1996), regardless of whether behaving appropriately serves the trustee's short term self interest (McDermott, 2003). Fundamental to this definition, is an understanding of what is appropriate as well as the risk of behavior that is inappropriate (Gambetta, 1988). The precise basis for trust depends on the "transactional domain" (Hardin, 2002), i.e. precisely what one is trusting another to do. Ethical certification claims to verify whether or not the outcomes of production and/or trade serve a set of environmental and social values. Thus trust in this context inherently involves normative assessments. Values, furthermore, are cognitively linked to emotions and motivation, i.e. they affectively motivate particular beliefs and actions (Dietz et al., 2005; Vining et al., 2000). Thus the perception of shared values or "value salience" creates enabling conditions for trusting another's commitment to those values.

Rokeach, in his research on values (1971), distinguishes between outcome-oriented values such as the social and environmental goals of certification, and "instrumental" values which relate to modes of behavior such as "honesty". Similarly, meta-analyses in the social psychology literature have identified three instrumental attributes of personal trust that may, or may not, be perceived as distinct from outcome-oriented assessments. These are perceptions of competence (including knowledge and skills), integrity (including openness and honesty), and benevolence (concern, care and responsiveness to the trustor), with the relative importance of these depending on what one is trusting the other to do (Mayer et al., 1995; Peters et al., 1997; Schoorman et al., 2007). While competence may be considered a technical matter, integrity and benevolence address motive and thus have innate normative and emotional qualities.

In sum, in contexts where there are perceived normative and affective risks—e.g. risks that ethical certification is not serving an appropriate set of values—there are at least four potential determinants of trust. These include assessments of outcome-oriented value salience, as well as assessments of instrumental competence, integrity and benevolence.

Trust in all of its dimensions is a socially embedded phenomenon in that it is exercised in the context of a social exchange of trust and trustworthiness. According to rational choice theorist Hardin, the motive to entrust another and to behave in a trustworthy way can be explained through "encapsulated self interest" (Hardin, 2002). Both trustor and trustee must decide whether to sacrifice their short term self interest in order to build relationships of trust and reciprocity. Based on the anticipation of future exchange, trustees choose to be trustworthy and trustors make choices to risk in entrusting others in order to maximize their long-term self interest.

Some theorists have queried the limits of Hardin's rational choice view of trust, placing greater emphasis on the role of shared norms and values (Kramer and Cook, 2004). At the least, a sense of shared values would appear to lessen risks to the trustor that the trustee will behave inappropriately, whether by intention or misunderstanding. Values regarding desired outcomes might also interact with instrumental considerations. For example, if stakeholders and certifiers do not share the same understanding of good forestry, would a certifier be viewed as having integrity if the certifier endorsed what it viewed as bad forestry out a sense of encapsulated self interest? And given the complexity of the certification process and impossibility of monitoring the certifier's every move, would there not then be a risk that certifiers concerned only with encapsulated self interest might respect a trustor's values only when their actions are visible to the trustor? This tension between values and interests would seem to suggest that people are less likely to invest in trust-based relationships in contexts of perceived value conflict.

The level of trust between two parties, whatever its determinants, has profound effects on the distribution of power. Where there is trust, both trustor and trustee gain power to pursue their long-term interests through voluntary cooperation. Where trust is lacking or there is distrust, both sides may vie for control. In other words, relationships of trustworthiness create reciprocal power, while control empowers one party through disempowering the other. Furthermore, signaling a lack of trust or distrust may de-motivate voluntary cooperation on the part of the trustee (Murnighan et al., 2004) thereby escalating a struggle for control.

The desire for control is particularly acute in contexts of active distrust, defined as the belief that another will behave inappropriately (Lewicki et al., 1998). While a lack of trust is agnostic, distrust involves negative beliefs about another's normative and emotional motivation such as their adherence to inappropriate outcome-oriented values, lack of integrity and/or malevolence (intention

to inflict harm). While trustor and trustee may willingly share power (i.e. voluntarily cooperate) in situations of high trust, distrust triggers a desire for avoidance, if possible, or control (i.e. coercion) if not.

While trust and distrust thus influence the willingness to share power, other factors may determine precisely how much power is shared. Those with more power to independently pursue their interests and/or to coerce others into cooperating have less incentive to invest in trust building. This can lead to lopsided dependencies and low levels of power sharing and reciprocity.

## 2.2. Rationalistic systems, control and legitimacy

The scale and complexity of transactions can also affect preferences for trust-based cooperation or control. Certification emerged as a product of industrialization and the standardization of metrics, products and services to facilitate global trade. Standardization renders products and production systems interchangeable and globally transparent (Mutersbaugh, 2004), thereby reducing uncertainty regarding individual units, while enabling the development of complex technologies and long-distance trade among unknown exchange partners.

This added complexity and social distance creates new uncertainties and hence challenges for trust. Giddens observes how trust in the context of globalization has become increasingly “disembedded” from local social relations and placed in abstract systems based on universal principles such as “science” and “reason”. This claim to universality lies in value neutrality, whereby scientifically and rationally justified decisions can be made divorced from their socio-cultural context (1990).

But if we consider the above four possible determinants of trust, this raises a dilemma for global institutions as they must determine what values are appropriate while at the same time demonstrating value neutrality. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a consortium of national standard-setting bodies, provides an illustrative example. Since its founding in 1947, ISO has produced a growing array of international standards for products and production systems, as well as guidelines for certification bodies assessing conformity to standards (e.g. ISO/IEC, 1996(E)). ISO is thus an institutional path breaker for globalized standardization and certification.

ISO standards are set by consensus among tri-partite committees of Producers, Consumers (initially restricted to companies) and General Interest. This consensus-based approach was designed to ensure buy-in from those interests affected by the standards (Yates and Murphy, 2007). ISO’s consensus-based process of standard-setting is strictly separated, both institutionally and conceptually, from the process of certifying conformity to standards. ISO-compliant certification is a “rationalistic system” involving the verification of standards conformity based on objectively measurable criteria. In the language of trust, the core threats to instrumental trustworthiness in rationalistic systems are technical incompetence and normative and emotional bias. Certifiers or “auditors” in such systems adopt the role of impersonal guardians of trust charged with surveillance and control to ensure compliance with standards set by outside parties (Shapiro, 1987).

Yet, as theorists have argued, systems such as certification and auditing based on principles of impartiality face a fundamental paradox, in that the agents of impartiality are themselves human trustees (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Power, 2003; Shapiro, 1987). These trustees, furthermore, must obtain clients and receive pay from human sources that likewise must be trusted, creating a possible “conflict of interest” that threatens the appearance of impartiality. In response to accusations of conflicting interest, auditing firms develop a “collection of procedural norms, structural constraints, entry restrictions, policing mechanisms, social-control specialists,

and insurance-like arrangements {that} increases the opportunities for abuse while it encourages less acceptable trustee performance” (Shapiro, 1987: p. 623). This leads to a “spiral of distrust” and demand for control via “nth order” trust organizations to audit the auditors (Ibid).

“Legitimacy”, I suggest, is a concept that may be invoked in such a context as a response to distrust and the desire for control. Specifically, legitimacy has been defined as a “collective audience’s shared belief that ‘the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate’” founded in institutionalized norms and practices that confer authority (Bernstein, 2004: p. 18; Hurd, 2003; Suchman, 1995). Thus actors may argue on behalf of a broader social collective that a particular governing approach holds legitimacy, regardless of the views of dissenting parties. Relative to trust, the power gained through legitimacy is institutionalized power that may therefore be summoned as a means to control distrusted actors.

Legitimacy, however, can be variously framed in terms of inputs and outputs, with differing implications. For example, as defined by Scharpf (2006) “input-oriented” legitimating arguments reside in the inclusiveness of a decision-making process, while “output-oriented” arguments focus on the effectiveness and efficiency in achieving outcomes such as good forestry. From this perspective compromises in inclusiveness may be legitimized as necessary to avoid endless negotiations and inaction. Yet jettisoning inclusiveness may risk losing the cooperation of affected actors and hence a loss of effectiveness.

The following case study examines the evolution of forest certification in BC from a small-scale informal system based on personal trust and cooperation to a battle among local and global actors for legitimacy and control of large-scale systems. It applies the above theoretical perspectives to consider if a greater focus on the multi-dimensional determinants of trust as opposed to legitimacy might reveal space for a new middle ground.

## 3. Methods

The research informing this paper involved participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, a written questionnaire, and a review of written materials. The participant observation included work as a certification assessor in California, Oregon, Washington and BC from 1998 to 2001, as well as work as a regional representative for a certifier in BC in 1999. It also involved participation in the FSC-BC standard-setting process from 1998 to 2002, as well as ongoing international research on certification to the present date.

My earlier direct engagement in certification was key in my choice to focus on trust. As a certifier it struck me how reliant all stakeholders were on trust and how difficult it was to act in its absence. The data presented on the 20-year evolution of forest certification in BC, and its intersection with the development of certification internationally, are drawn from a combination of written sources and interviews. The data on trust in the FSC-BC standard-setting process and trust in certifiers and producers are drawn from forty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key individuals involved with the FSC in BC, written questionnaires, review of written standards and policies regarding forest certification and the FSC, as well as review of the broader literature on ethical certification.

The BC stakeholders interviewed include forest industry representatives, woodlot owners, First Nations, environmentalists, labour unions, loggers, government officials, certifiers, and FSC-BC staff. The majority of the interviews took place in 2002, during the completion of Draft 3 of the FSC-BC regional standards. The total sample of interest group members included roughly three quarters of the non-governmental individuals most involved in the FSC’s

development in BC. Thus, in addition to providing a wide range of perspectives from those most influential in the processes, the sample also offered clues as to the dynamics of the entire population of stakeholders actively engaged in FSC processes in BC.

Trust is a sensitive topic, particularly where it touches on issues that may be central to assessments of fundamental capacities and character, such as integrity and commitment to core values. In fact several First Nations respondents, upon hearing of my research topic, commented that it was a rather private issue and weren't sure of its appropriateness as a focus of research. In part due to this sensitivity, and in part to not further steer the interview in ways that might exaggerate the importance of trust, I avoided asking direct questions in interviews that used the word "trust". Rather I drew on theoretical understandings of trust outlined above to ask questions about BC standard-setting processes and perceptions of specific certifiers that were related to trust. From this perspective, confidence that another would voluntarily behave appropriately, without coercion or control, was an indication of trust even if the word "trust" was not used. The intent of the analysis was not to develop new definitions of trust, but rather to analyze how trust or distrust, as here defined, was shaping perceptions and actions.

I supplemented these verbal questions with a written questionnaire that explicitly addressed trust in certifiers. The questionnaire was designed as an optional extension of the semi-structured interviews for those 29 respondents who were not paid staff of the certifiers and FSC-BC. I felt that providing an optional written format to indicate trust removed pressure on interviewees to respond and/or defend their responses, should this feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, the questionnaire allowed me to systematically disaggregate the salience of outcome-oriented values and the three instrumental determinants of trust hypothesized in the social psychology literature—competence, integrity, and benevolence.<sup>1</sup> A Likert scale was used to compare relative levels of value salience and trust. Slightly over half of the target respondents (16) completed the questionnaire. I treat their responses in a similar qualitative manner as quotes from spoken responses, that is as perspectives of particular influential BC stakeholders without statistical inference.

Finally, I compare the growth of FSC certification and competitor schemes to assess the combined effect of the FSC-BC standard-setting process and the FSC's certifier accreditation process on producer uptake. I then consider recent developments in FSC accreditation processes to see if FSC's approach has changed to address the problems that arose during the FSC-BC standard-setting process or whether such problems are likely to persist.

## 4. Historical context

### 4.1. Local roots

Forest certification first emerged in BC in the 1990s, during a crisis of conflicting outcome-oriented values and distrust among large-scale forest producers, governments, environmental groups and indigenous peoples. This era marked the height of controversy over the fate of the remaining old growth rainforests of the Pacific Coast, as well as the rights of indigenous peoples, commonly referred to in Canada as "First Nations". In BC, the vast majority of forests are publicly owned, and also under dispute regarding First Nations land rights.

<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid sensitive questions about capacity and character, the questionnaire replaced the word "competence" with the more narrowly defined issue of "knowledge and skills". Likewise, "integrity" was replaced with being "honest and forthright" and "benevolence" with confidence that the certifier "would do their best to address my concerns". These substitutions were thought to reduce the sensitivity of the question while still serving as adequate proxies for determinants of instrumental trust.

For much of the previous century BC forest governance was characterized by discretionary forest policies and a close alliance between the forest ministry and forest industry (Rajala, 1998; Wilson, 1998). In the 1990s, several key developments were beginning to turn the tides. These included recent court rulings in favor of First Nations' rights to land and resources. After centuries of struggle over land rights, and socially repressive measures such as forced residential schooling and suppression of cultural practices, First Nations were not inclined to trust in government and industry to make decisions on their behalf (e.g. Kunin, 1998). This sentiment is reflected in the following quote:

*First Nations have a long history of seeing trust betrayed over and over again ... by industry and by government. There is no reason for First Nations people to trust ... There is nothing in the past to justify trust.*

Interviewee 40. First Nations

Given this distrust, and the relationship between trust and control, First Nations were unlikely to be satisfied with any forestry decision-making process that did not grant them significant control over activities affecting their land and resources.

In addition to growing demands for First Nations empowerment, the 1990s was a time of changing national and international norms for public involvement in forestry decisions on public lands. Forest agencies in both Canada and the US were putting increasing effort into multi-stakeholder processes to address land use and timber harvest planning (Mou, 2003; Salazar and Alper, 2000). At the same time, there was a major gap between the outcome-oriented values of government and industry, developed over decades of collaborative focus on timber production, and the values of the environmental movement focused on wilderness conservation (Wilson, 1998). Civil society pressure succeeded in propelling the provincial government's adoption of a more prescriptive Forest Practices Code in 1995 (Hoberg, 2001b). However, concurrent policy decisions limited the impact of these new regulatory measures on core issues such as annual allowable harvest volumes (Cashore et al., 2001; Hoberg, 2001a).

While government-driven forestry processes were mired in conflict, a group of like-minded stakeholders across the Pacific Coast of the US and Canada were building solidarity around a new "ecoforestry" movement. The guiding theme of ecoforestry was to give environmental and social considerations equal or higher priority than commercial timber production. Environmental objectives included the maintenance of natural forest composition, structure and function and the use of lower intensity harvest and regeneration methods (e.g. Drengson and Taylor, 1997; Hammond, 1991; Maser and Smith, 2001). Social objectives included support for indigenous peoples and small-scale producers, local job creation, and local value-added processing (e.g. (Davies et al., 2008; Tollefson, 1998)).

The Silva Forest Foundation ("Silva"), based near Nelson in South Central BC, was among the most active proponents of ecoforestry in the region. Silva, founded in 1992 by a forest ecologist already well known in the BC forest community, worked to promote its vision by developing a set of environmental and social standards for good forestry and a system for "certifying" local producers who met those standards (Silva Forest Foundation, 2009). A Silva logo could then be attached to forest products coming from Silva-certified forests.

Silva was engaged with the local producers it certified throughout the process of improving forest practices, from initial management changes, to certification, to the marketing of certified forest products. In other words, Silva employed a relatively "relational" approach to certification, establishing outcome-oriented values through its own standards, helping forest managers meet those

standards, and assessing their performance in one cohesive package. This approach is consistent with the holistic concepts of ecoforestry, as well as emerging Fair Trade conceptions of more personalized, de-commodified market exchange (Hudson and Hudson, 2003). Silva's work involved small-scale woodlot owners who voluntarily, and without significant market pressure, opted to align themselves with this transformative vision of production, and who were not concurrently enmeshed in conflicts with the BC NGO community.

#### 4.2. Global consolidation

Around the same time that Silva and other NGOs were inventing locally based certification schemes (McDermott, 2003), another forest certification movement was developing at a global scale. The launch of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1993, unlike earlier certification efforts, has grabbed the attention of scholars because it involved a Northern civil society effort to address tropical forest loss in a way that would achieve widespread legitimacy across the global forest supply chain (e.g. Cashore et al., 2004; Eden, 2009; Gale, 2004; Klooster, 2009; Meidinger, 2003; Schlyter et al., 2009).

The FSC adopted an institutional structure that mirrored core features of ISO, but with critical adjustments in the balance of power. The FSC, like ISO, is a membership organization, only instead of national standard-setting bodies, FSC members consist of civil society and the private sector, and government membership is forbidden. FSC standard-setting, like ISO, is based on a three-chamber system. However, instead of ISO's Producers, Consumers and General Interests, the FSC chambers are defined as Social, Environmental and Economic reflecting an abstract metaphor of the "three-legged stool" of sustainability (WCED, 1987). Furthermore, the FSC restricts actors with commercial interests in forest products to the Economic Chamber (FSC-AC, 1999). While ISO approves standards based on consensus, FSC approval requires 2/3 majority vote, balanced across chambers. In this way FSC borrows features from ISO as an institution with widespread legitimacy among government and industry, yet in a way that empowers civil society actors distrustful of such institutions.

FSC has also aimed to balance power across scales. For this purpose, the FSC has developed a set of Principles and Criteria at the global level, and empowered regional and national working groups to develop "locally appropriate" indicators (Evison, 1998). In large federated countries such as Canada, sub-national working groups such as the FSC-BC have chosen to develop sub-national indicators. Further shifting the balance of power, both FSC-Canada and FSC-BC have added a fourth FSC chamber to the usual three, consisting of an "Indigenous Peoples" Chamber, which grants First Nations veto power.

Given FSC's limitations on government and industry power, it is perhaps not surprising that numerous governments and forest producers have backed competing certification schemes that also vie for widespread legitimacy. In BC there are two FSC competitor schemes, the US-based Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the Canadian Standards Association (CSA). Both SFI and CSA have joined a global umbrella organization of FSC competitors, known as the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes (PEFC). The PEFC also requires a Forum for "balanced representation of interest categories" (PEFC, 2008), thus eliciting abstract legitimating principles of appropriate value formation but without the FSC's limitation on commercial influence. This highlights the way in which apparently common legitimating principles can obscure power differences of central relevance to stakeholder trust.

While the formation of outcome-oriented values across all of these schemes is legitimized through claims of balanced stakeholder

processes, the accreditation of certifiers does not follow the same logic. By the time that the FSC had approved its Principles and Criteria, more than 4.2 million hectares of forest had been certified by four multi-national certifiers in ten countries (Upton and Bass, 1996). Those four certifiers had been involved in stakeholder dialogues over the FSC's founding, and in 1996 were the first to receive contracts from the FSC as FSC-accredited certifiers. The FSC meanwhile had drafted a manual of standardized requirements for certifier accreditation, finalized in 1998, that facilitated the accreditation of additional certifiers (FSC-AC, 1998a,b; Synnott, 2005). The greater the number of certifiers the FSC accredited, however, the greater the likelihood that some stakeholders might distrust an individual certifier, which could undermine trust in the FSC as a whole.

The FSC, in response, claims to have developed an "integrated accreditation program that systematically controls its certification bodies" (FSC-AC, 2011b: p. 1). The emphasis on "control" signifies an attempt to replace trust in certifiers with trust in (and hence empowerment of) the FSC system. The FSC's initial substantive criteria for accrediting certifiers emphasized the technical competence of the certifiers and their ability to produce consistent results (FSC-AC, 1998a,b; Nussbaum et al., 2000). The trend since that time has been towards full adoption of ISO standards that further elaborate requirements for technical competence and impartiality (FSC-AC, 2009a), as well as an institutionalized system for "auditing the auditors" involving annual and random surveillance audits of FSC-accredited certifiers (ASI, 2010).

#### 4.3. Global meets local

FSC's arrival in BC on top of a pre-existing ecoforestry movement, coupled with a history of highly contentious regional battles for resource control, was met with a mixed response. Supporters of Silva, BC's homegrown forest certifier, included internationally networked chapters of Greenpeace and the Sierra Club. These NGOs supported the international FSC as a means to redress deforestation and forest degradation in the tropics. They were more ambivalent, however, about the FSC as a certification system appropriate for BC (McDermott, 2003). This ambivalence remained relatively modest in the early days of FSC-BC regional standard setting. Initial efforts to develop an FSC-BC standard were characterized by a relatively informal organizational structure, with participating players including mostly like-minded members of Silva's eco-forestry network (McDermott, 2003).

This all changed quickly and dramatically, however, in the late 1990s after a series of high-impact international market campaigns protesting industrial forest practices in old growth forests of the Pacific Coast. These campaigns, involving many of the environmentalist supporters of Silva and the FSC, were aimed at brand-sensitive, large-scale retailers such as Home Depot, pressuring them to stop sourcing wood from regions such as BC *unless the wood was FSC certified*. Their reach extended well beyond BC to buyers in the US and Europe and included various ads "shaming" companies buying BC wood, as well as banners and demonstrations in storefronts and other public places (Tollefson et al., 2008). While the focus on brand-name multinationals proved highly effective in gaining media attention and galvanizing industry response, it was accompanied by a curious dilemma: the ecoforestry model thus far promoted as the prototype of certifiable forestry was of a scale that could not possibly accommodate the size and pace of demand of companies such as Home Depot that were chosen as targets of the market campaigns.

Rather than expand market demand for ecoforestry, the effect of these campaigns was to put FSC on the map of large-scale industrial forest producers. At the same time, it relegated small-scale production to a symbolic position of moral legitimacy combined with market irrelevance. A pivotal point in this process

was the public declaration in 1998 by Western Forest Products (WFP), an industrial firm with forest holdings on the BC coast, that it intended to become certified under the FSC (Cashore et al., 2004). Far from embracing what many might view as a predictable outcome of market campaigns focused on retail giants such as Home Depot, Greenpeace BC and other environmentalists joined forces with the Heiltsuk First Nation, who were engaged in an ongoing dispute with WFP, to oppose WFP's certification under the FSC (Forest Action Network, 1998). Certainly, the potential collection of interests involved in FSC activities in BC had now expanded well beyond existing circles of trust.

Meanwhile the group of certifiers interested in FSC-accredited certification in BC was also expanding. In addition to the locally based Silva that had applied for, but not yet received FSC accreditation, five other internationally operative certifiers were showing interest in FSC-accredited certification in BC. These included the US-based non-profit SmartWood Network and for-profit Scientific Certification Systems (SCS); as well as the UK-based, non-profit Soil Association, all of which specialized in environmental and social certification and were already accredited under the FSC. It also included the multi-national for-profit consulting firms Société General de Surveillance (SGS), and KPMG, both of which are engaged in a wide variety of auditing, tax, and advisory services in well over 100 countries. SGS was already FSC-accredited, and KPMG was seeking accreditation. A tremendously diverse group of "certifying bodies" thus began to converge under the FSC umbrella, organizations and firms that spanned nearly the extreme ends of the scale in terms of size, organizational culture and production orientation (McDermott, 2003).

By 1999, and amidst all of these developments, the FSC-BC was engaged in its third and final drafting of an FSC-BC standard. The following section presents the results of stakeholder interviews and questionnaires to assess the status of trust in certifiers active in the province at that time and consider how this influenced the nature of the FSC-BC standards.

## 5. Trust and distrust in certifiers and their effects on the FSC-BC standards

### 5.1. Trust and distrust in certifiers

The results of interviews and questionnaires conducted with a wide range of BC stakeholders revealed highly variable trust in the six certifiers operating in BC at the time of the FSC-BC standard-setting process. In general, and as elaborated below, environmentalists indicated the highest overall trust in Silva, followed by the other active non-profit certifier, and least trust in multi-national, for-profit auditing firms, while industry responses were the reverse.

The following environmentalist interviewee explained his/her confidence in Silva as grounded in Silva's long-term commitment to ecoforestry and ongoing work with local ecoforestry operators.

*I like Silva because it's local, home-grown... A lot of people that have, pre-certification, decided that ecosystem-based forestry was what they were interested in, came through Silva, in some form or another... they're pretty clear about where they come from... They're promoting a different vision of forestry.*

Interviewee 15, Environmentalist

Environmentalist questionnaire respondents similarly indicated high levels of confidence that Silva would give appropriate priority to environmental values. This was matched with high instrumental trust in Silva's forthrightness (integrity) and responsiveness (benevolence). In other words, Silva's normative and emotional commitment appeared positively associated with trust for these

respondents. None of the interviewees criticized the lack of social distance between Silva's outreach activities, standard-setting and certification procedures (McDermott, 2003).

Reasons offered for industry preferences were likewise rooted in past relationships. The following quote about a multi-national for-profit certifier "X"<sup>2</sup> emphasized the efficiency of going with a known entity.

*We also I guess realized that {X} was another credible certifier... and, the fact that they had been doing some work with us as the certifier for the other work, in terms of our sustainable forest management plan, that it makes sense logistically, and from an efficiency point of view, to have them involved in looking at applications for FSC.*

Interviewee 10, Industry

Environmentalist interviewees and questionnaire respondents, in contrast, distrusted this same certifier X. Among the reasons offered was X's engagement with clients with whom they had past relations.

*It erodes trust when there are perceived conflicts of interest, such as {X} which works for the same companies it audits. Enron may make them think about that...*

Interviewee 25, Environmentalist

The above quote indicates that socio-economic ties among companies and certifiers erodes trust. This contrasts with the previous point made by environmentalist 15, where social ties between Silva and clients enhanced trust by demonstrating long-term commitment to shared forest values. In other words, contrary to the emphasis of rationalistic systems on "conflict of interest" as the core threat to trust, "conflict of values" may pose the greater threat for some stakeholders.

Distrust of certifiers was frequently expressed in instrumental terms. For example, the following environmentalists questioned X's integrity and, by implication, the integrity of its industry clients.

*Industry... they'll just say 'well, we'll go with an unscrupulous certifier, get {X}, maybe, to do the evaluation'. They'll loosely interpret it {the standards}, the watchdog organizations don't have the resources to go over it.*

Interviewee 25, Environmentalist

*Because of {X} making an application {for accreditation} and they appeared to be devious, people have no appetite for leaving decisions to the certifiers."*

Interviewee 35, Environmentalist

Environmentalist responses to questionnaires, similar to their verbal communication in interviews, indicated low levels of trust in certifier X. This included a lack of confidence in X's environmental values as well as their instrumental trustworthiness in regards to forthrightness (integrity) and responsiveness (benevolence).

While the contrast in trust in certifiers between environmentalists and industry respondents was striking, there was also considerable variation in trust among First Nations, labour and small-scale producers. Trust in individual certifiers varied more within than across these other interest categories. However, a common pattern among all stakeholders was congruence among perceived value salience, integrity and benevolence. In other words, those certifiers perceived to promote appropriate values were perceived as being more forthright and responsive and those distrusted for their value priorities were viewed as lacking in integrity and responsiveness.

<sup>2</sup> The names of certifiers are withheld when not necessary to the analysis.

The one instrumental dimension of trust that did not appear to vary much across all stakeholders was perception of certifier knowledge and skills (competence). Concerns about certifier competence were not mentioned in the interviews and, in the questionnaire, all certifiers were generally ranked high in this regard. In other words, FSC's accreditation process could be judged as largely successful in accrediting competent certifiers, but this was not sufficient to generate trust that certifiers would behave appropriately.

Interviewees were also asked explicitly about the FSC accreditation process. The one non-BC-based environmentalist respondent indicated support for a rationalistic approach to certification, citing the need to speed FSC's growth.

*I want to see a huge amount of certification, done in a boring way. I want efficient, trained auditors with clip boards. Mechanical. My goal is 200 million hectares in five years. We need lots of boring big guys. It would take hundreds of Silvas.*

Interviewee 4, Environmentalist (UK-based)<sup>3</sup>

This stands in contrast to the following quote from a BC-based environmentalist.

*The accreditation process focuses on the wrong things. On the bureaucratic processes. Like are the filing cabinets locked and the computers password-protected. What's ignored is where there has been a controversial assessment . . . People care about that sort of thing. There needs to be a clear mechanism for local stakeholder involvement. . .*

Interviewee 25, Environmentalist

According to the above respondent, a purely rationalistic approach is not addressing what "people care about", i.e. issues that are of normative and emotional importance. Rather, this respondent felt that local stakeholders should be granted more control over decision-making processes.

These findings highlight a dilemma for the FSC in that the one stakeholder's basis for trust might be another's anathema. However, there was one non-profit certifier who elicited relatively consistent favorable responses by interviewee and questionnaire respondents across the different interest groups, suggesting the possibility of a middle ground. FSC's global accreditation process, however, appeared unresponsive to value-based local dynamics of trust and distrust.

## 5.2. Distrust and the legitimization of control through formal standard-setting processes

*The biggest problem {in the standards-writing process} was that there was no agreement on who are the good certifiers. {Certifier X, Y, Z.} Each name ran shivers down different people's backs. If they had agreement on the criteria for a good certifier it would have been much easier. It came up all the time {in the standard-setting process}. You bet it came up all the time, over and over."*

Interviewee 20, First Nation

*"Draft 3 {FSC-BC standards} was built by a group of people who didn't trust industry, government or the certifiers. . . It is very procedural and prescriptive."*

Interviewee 33, Industry

With international rather than regional control over certifier accreditation, this meant the only avenue for ensuring adequate FSC performance in BC was through the precise wording of the

FSC-BC regional standards. In other words, the control of certifier accreditation through rationalistic procedures at the global level put pressure on the FSC-BC regional standard-setting process to develop standards that could control even the most avidly distrusted forestry firms and certifiers if/when they applied for certification.

The assertion of authoritative control was legitimated through association with existing recognized institutions as well as selective application of abstract principles, and strengthened through codified and enforceable rules. The FSC-BC's four chamber system resembled the tri-partite structure of the international FSC (hence forward referred to as "FSC-AC")<sup>4</sup> but with the relative balance of power shifted towards the Indigenous Peoples' Chamber and away from the Economic Chamber. In 1999 this power structure was further strengthened through a systematic approach to standard-setting unprecedented in regional working groups elsewhere. An elections process was established for an FSC-BC Steering Committee that was to serve as the chief executive body responsible for approving new regional standards. Voters elected two members for each of the four chambers. A Technical Committee was set up to draft the standards, and final approval of the standards would require a two-thirds majority vote by the Steering Committee, with at least one positive vote per chamber required. A series of public meetings were also held as part of the process, with written documents outlining in detail the time schedule, rules of engagement, and public comment processes to be followed (McDermott, 2003).

For the First Nations participants interviewed, the existence of the fourth Indigenous Peoples Chamber was mentioned as a key strength. This meant that First Nations held veto power over the standard-setting process, a situation unprecedented in other BC land use planning processes at that time (Mou, 2003), and in contrast to other competing certification schemes (McDermott and Cashore, 2008). Approval of this structure is reflected in the following quote.

*"One of the strengths {of the FSC-BC} was a level playing field. No one group could dominate. That was very troubling for industry."*

Interviewee 40, First Nation

The emphasis in the above quote lies in the way in which the FSC-BC constrained the influence of industry, by restricting it to the Economic Chamber and thus at most one-fourth vote. It also implied that the four-chamber structure led to a "level playing field".

Not surprisingly the industry respondents interviewed, in contrast, reported dissatisfaction with the distribution of power in FSC-BC standard-setting process. As implied by the above quote, this could be explained by industry's relatively dominant position of power in other forestry decision-making arenas. However, a closer examination of the responses of some industry interviewees suggests that the root of the problem may be more complex. A number of respondents, such as the one quoted below, called into question the very definition of "interests" as applied in the case of the FSC-BC.

*"The {FSC-BC} Steering Committee was skewed in one direction. There were four {seats} on the enviro side. Two that called themselves social but really were enviros"*

*. . . I mean {name of FSC member} is in the economic chamber! Hello? . . . Because he's a consultant. Even though he works for the environmental community 100% of the time. Hello! Wait a minute, the system's flawed here!*

<sup>3</sup> This respondent was employed by an NGO linking UK-based retailers with certified wood suppliers.

<sup>4</sup> FSC-AC refers to the "Forest Stewardship Council Asociación Civil", the legal title of FSC as an international membership organization registered in Oaxaca, Mexico. The addition of "AC" in this analysis is intended to distinguish decisions made by FSC at the international level (FSC-AC) from decisions made by national and regional working groups (e.g. FSC-Canada, FSC-BC).

## Interviewee 34, Industry

What this above quote clearly demonstrates, is that the decision of who belongs in which chamber, as well as the decision to have four chambers, are ultimately based on the underlying social construction of appropriate interests. For the above respondent, an appropriate economic chamber member might be a forest industry CEO or a logging contractor, for another, it might be an ecotourism operator or environmental consultant. All such interests have an economic stake in the outcome of the certification standards, yet each is likely to exert a very different influence on the nature of those standards. Adding to this complexity, the composition of the FSC-BC Economic Chamber was split between an industry representative and representatives of BC's forest woodlot community actively engaged with Silva in supporting ecoforestry. Thus it was possible, as indeed ultimately occurred, for the FSC-BC standard to be approved by FSC-BC in the complete absence of industry support (FSC-CAN, 2003).

FSC-AC's definition of chamber interests does not provide sufficient guidance to resolve these issues. While this could be viewed as a shortcoming on the part of FSC at the international level, it is hard to imagine a definition of "economic chamber" that would ensure a balance of interests with anything close to universal acceptability.

Meanwhile, a number of respondents suggested that the division of interests into chambers served to heighten perceptions of group differences, and/or "politicize" the process. For example:

*FSC is too political for our liking ... how do you de-politicize FSC? ... I don't think that the way it's set up, with its chambers and its structures, that you can actually de-politicize it ...*

Interviewee 22, Small Business

What the above quotes in sum suggest, is that the legitimacy of FSC-BC's decision-making structures based on an appropriate balance of interests was very much under dispute, at least among producer interests. Furthermore, the considerable work done to formalize and publicize the standard-setting process did not appear to build widespread acceptance across the major interest groups. What it may have done, however, is strengthen the ability of FSC-BC to defend their standards via abstract arguments of legitimate governance and therefore also strengthen chances of approval by FSC-Canada and FSC-AC.

The end result was the "very prescriptive and procedural" standard described by the industry respondent 33 above. Indeed subsequent research involving detailed comparisons of certification standards back the perception that the FSC-BC standards were highly prescriptive. Adopting a definition of "prescriptive" as involving specific substantive requirements that prescribe on-the-ground behavioral actions including quantitative performance thresholds, this research indicates that the FSC-BC standards are among the most prescriptive forest certification standards worldwide (McDermott and Cashore, 2008; McDermott et al., 2008). Was this, then, enough to make the standard "certifier proof"? Not according to the following respondent, whose comment on the near final draft was:

*"The way it {the FSC-BC standard} is now, there is still a lot of room for interpretation by the certifier."*

Interviewee 37, Environmentalist

## 6. Evolving outcomes

The FSC-BC standards were approved by FSC-Canada in 2002 as "Preliminary FC-BC Standards" (FSC-BC, 2003), without support from the FSC-BC industry representative on the Steering Committee. After some moderate modifications, they achieved full endorsement by FSC-AC in 2005 (FSC-CAN, 2005).

Since the approval of the standards, the growth of FSC on the ground in BC has continued to be notably slow compared to elsewhere in Canada. FSC certification now covers 2.7 million hectares in BC, or 4.7% of the total forest area. This compares to 13.1% of the forest area certified to FSC in Canada as a whole, and over 20% of the forest area in other leading wood producing provinces (Alberta (20.4%), Quebec (23.3%) and Ontario (21.7%)) (Certification Canada, 2011; NFI, 2011).

The relatively slow growth of FSC in BC stands in marked contrast to the expansion of competing certification schemes. The US-based SFI and Canadian-based CSA, both endorsed at the global level by the industry-backed PEFC, are together responsible for 50.2 million hectares of certified forestlands in BC, amounting to 86.6% of the province's forest area<sup>5</sup> (Certification Canada, 2011; NFI, 2011). These schemes have notably less prescriptive standards than the FSC-BC, reflecting industry's relative influence over the SFI and CSA standard-setting processes and the lack of influence of BC stakeholders who distrust certifiers and industry to apply flexible standards (McDermott and Cashore, 2008; McDermott et al., 2008).

The few cases of BC industry participation in the FSC are illustrative. These include Tembec, a firm headquartered elsewhere in Canada, and whose commitment to FSC certification was made at the national rather than provincial level (Wood, 2009). The certification of Tembec's Tree Farm License 14 in Southeastern BC in 2004 and a Tembec concession in Northeastern BC in 2008 – indicates that industrial licensees can, at least under some circumstances, meet the FSC-BC standards if so motivated. Following this in 2009 the Coast Forest Conservation Initiative, a partnership of five firms including WFP with timber harvesting rights on the central coast of BC, was certified. This latter initiative was the result of years of negotiations with environmentalists and First Nations regarding logging on BC's central coast (Dempsey, 2011). FSC certification in this latter case could be viewed as affirming the importance of trust building among producer and non-producer interests as a precursor to FSC acceptance and adoption.

In 2000, after several years of bureaucratic challenges and substantial expense, Silva achieved FSC accreditation to certify in Canada. By 2003, Silva revoked its accreditation, stating that "it is doubtful that we can continue to raise the funds necessary to effectively carry out our responsibilities as an accredited certifier" (Silva Forest Foundation, 2009). In other words, the FSC-AC accreditation program proved too costly for the certifier that pioneered certification in the province and was the most trusted by many of BC's leading non-producer interests. KPMG, in contrast, has received accreditation (ASI, 2011). Meanwhile only two non-profit certifiers, SmartWood and the Soil Association, are listed as having produced FSC certificates in BC (Certification Canada, 2011).

The FSC-AC, meanwhile, has made a number of significant changes to its accreditation process mostly in conformity with ISO standards. Firstly, FSC-AC has split off of its accreditation function to the separate, for-profit Accreditation Services International (ASI) (FSC-AC, 2009b). FSC-AC policy now explicitly outlines areas of required conformity with ISO policy (FSC-AC, 2009a). ISO-like objectification of the audit process is further reflected in adoption of the ISO term "conformity assessment body" to refer to certifiers (FSC-AC, 2009a).

However, FSC-AC has made some changes that depart from ISO policy and could come closer to addressing a core source of stakeholder distrust. In particular, FSC-AC has further elaborated its requirements for stakeholder consultation in forest evaluations (FSC-AC, 2009c). This addresses part of the instrumental trust attribute of benevolence, i.e. responsiveness, although certifier

<sup>5</sup> This may include some double counting of operations certified under more than one scheme, but nevertheless illustrates the widely different scale of certification under the different schemes.

objectivity would preclude exercise of the affective dimension of benevolence meaning “concern or care”. This could force a degree of responsiveness among certifiers who otherwise would ignore stakeholder input. However as a control-based measure it could also incite legalistic battles over the interpretation of the requirements while encouraging liability-driven certifiers to adhere to minimum standards rather than take pro-active responsibility for building trust.

## 7. Summary and conclusions

The role of certifiers, and of trust and distrust, in shaping certification standards and outcomes has been understudied and undertheorized. Instead the literature on forest certification has emphasized the “legitimacy” of certification as a form of authoritative control. This has led to disproportionate emphasis on standard-setting processes as the locus of rule-making authority, and abstract arguments about legitimately balanced processes, that fail to consider how trust in certifiers may affect the very need for authoritative control in the first place.

This research revealed major variation in trust in certifiers, with those most trusted by environmentalists, distrusted by industry, and vice versa. In order to explain this variation, and consider its implications for the design of certification schemes, I examined stakeholder perceptions of certifiers in light of four potential determinants of trust: outcome-oriented value salience and the instrumental attributes of competence, integrity and benevolence. Among environmentalists in particular, the perception that certifiers shared visions of appropriate forestry was strongly associated with trust. Perceived value salience also appeared to positively affect perceptions of certifier integrity and responsiveness. While competence and conflict of interest are core concerns of rationalistic systems, all certifiers were generally viewed as competent, and social ties between certifiers and forest operators increased trust when it served to demonstrate commitment to shared values but reinforced distrust when not.

Meanwhile global control of accreditation allowed certifiers distrusted by BC stakeholders to “certify” BC firms. In response, these stakeholders used the FSC-BC’s four chamber governance structure to over-ride industry veto and develop highly prescriptive and procedural standards to control certifier behavior. The growth in FSC area over the proceeding eight years has been quite slow relative to FSC competitor schemes. To the extent FSC’s slower growth is due to higher performance expectations, then it could be viewed as a legitimate outcome. However high performance and high levels of formalized requirements are not one and the same: there are other factors that may motivate high performance as witnessed by the many ecoforestry operations in BC that are not FSC certified. Rather large numbers of formalized requirements, and accompanying emphasis on formal documentation and verification, drive up the costs of certification. They also signal distrust in the certifier and the forest producer. As this article has revealed, global certifier accreditation, in particular, facilitated a spiral of distrust that motivated the need for more prescriptive performance requirements that in turn demotivated producer uptake of desired forest values.

Since approval of the FSC-BC standards, the FSC has further ISO-ized their accreditation procedures and rebranded certifiers as “conformity assessment bodies” to signal impartiality. Together with prescriptive certification standards, increased emphasis on documentation, procedural requirements and surveillance of certifiers (i.e. surveillance of surveillance) raises the costs of certification and does not address the importance of normative and emotional trust in certifiers.

An alternative approach would be to treat the act of certifying as an integral part of constructing shared meaning around good forestry. In this context local trust in the certifier and companies

seeking certification would be viewed as a pre-requisite to certification, rather than something engineered through rationalistic systems designed at the global level. This would involve a more decentralized approach of encouraging companies to develop their own reputations of trustworthiness before seeking certification, and to engage stakeholders in selecting certifiers that have likewise proven themselves to be widely trusted. Stakeholders may then be more willing to empower these certifiers to exercise their judgment, guided by their personal and organizational commitment to outcome-oriented values, rather than view them as technocrats driven only by economic concerns who must be controlled by inflexible standards and ever-expanding spirals of distrust and surveillance. While such an approach may appear inefficiently populist from the perspective of output-oriented legitimating arguments (Scharpf, 2006), it is hard to imagine a less efficient outcome than the imposition of distrusted certifiers on local stakeholders ready and willing to actively resist.

The significance of these findings extends far beyond the particular time and place of this research. As one critical example, BC’s ongoing conflict among government, industry, indigenous and environmental groups over publicly owned forests, and in particular old growth rainforests, bears many similarities with tropical frontier areas—areas targeted for expansion by both the FSC and PEFC. Similar to BC in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many tropical countries were colonized by foreign governments who failed to recognize indigenous resource claims and suppressed local cultural practices (e.g. Coates, 1998; Scott, 1998). Once governments in these countries gained independence, they frequently declared public ownership over forest resources leaving the land claims of indigenous and local communities unresolved (e.g. Agrawal et al., 2008). Logging concessions were then distributed in areas of insecure tenure contributing to conflict with local populations and attracting the international attention of conservationists concerned with preserving old-growth rainforest (e.g. Global Witness, 2009).

While there is pressure to certify tropical forest operations, none of the fourteen certifiers accredited by the FSC to conduct forest management certification are headquartered in tropical countries (FSC-AC, 2011a). The combination of long-standing conflict over forest rights, international concern over old growth forests, and foreign certifiers could exacerbate distrust among tropical forest stakeholders resulting in battles for control. Highly unequal distributions of wealth and power among these stakeholders may make reciprocal trust-based relationships very difficult to build. Particularly in such cases, it may be necessary to institutionalize decision-making structures that ensure the meaningful participation of historically marginalized groups. At the same time, in order to avoid a downward spiral of distrust and desire for ever more layers of formalized control, more attention needs to be paid to what actually builds trust in different local as well as global contexts and throughout all phases of the certification process, from standard-setting to on-the-ground implementation.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deep appreciation to the many BC and FSC stakeholders who participated in this study, as well as those who provided specific feedback on various drafts of this article, including: Ralph Matthews, Benjamin Cashore, Melanie McDermott, Graeme Auld, Catherine Dolan, Deborah Davenport, Ariella Helfgott, Heike Schroeder, Kersty Hobson.

In addition, I would like to acknowledge the editor and reviewers for their insightful comments, as well as the many people who have discussed these ideas with me over the years. Finally, my appreciation is owed to the broader forest certification community for their contributions to global learning on forest governance.

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