

Where there's fire, there's alumnus Bruce Blackwell



Growing up in Vancouver, **Bruce Blackwell** attended Prince of Wales Secondary School and started his academic career at UBC studying biology. That changed when he had an opportunity to fight forest fires in the summer. "I got exposed to fires and forestry and said to myself, 'this is what I need to do,'" he says. He moved over to Forestry and completed a BSF in 1984.

"The problem was that I graduated in a recession. We had over 100 people in my class, and only 5 had jobs at graduation," he says. "I worked building mountain trails and in sports retail."

Eventually Bruce got a job at UBC preparing wood and soil samples for research. That small project grew into a much larger one, then became the basis of Bruce's Master's research. His thesis on the effects of prescribed fire on soils, vegetation and fuels was the foundation of his professional career.

"I thought I could make a career consulting on fires, but at that time (1989) people just wanted to put them

out," he says. "So I drew on other parts of my education and consulted in silviculture and other aspects of forestry. I called my firm BA Blackwell and Associates, but in the beginning there was just me."

From that modest beginning Bruce has built a thriving consulting business with a focus on integrated forestry and environmental consulting services. Today the North Vancouver-based company has a team of 5 associates and 25 staff, and is the premier resource for fire and fuel management expertise in British Columbia.

Bruce's firm has been involved with strategic planning for Vancouver's urban forests, restoration of Stanley Park following the 2006 blowdown, a provincial government review of the 2003 wildfires, a watershed strategic plan for the Capital Regional District, and advice during First Nations treaty negotiations. In addition, Bruce and his team have developed numerous wildfire protection plans and wildfire

risk management systems across British Columbia and Alberta.

"My business has grown gradually, and I've always tried to emphasize quality over growth. I learned from the recession not to get too big too fast," he says.

Bruce has consistently hired UBC graduates, especially those from the BSF and MSFM (Master of Sustainable Forest Management) programs. He taught fire science at UBC before Dr Lori Daniels joined the Faculty, and is a popular guest-lecturer in her course on fire. He's also been a volunteer speaker at the Student Industry Networking evening, offering advice about careers in forestry.

"Connecting with students works both ways," he says. "I can teach them some of what I have learned, and in return I meet them and talk to them and can eventually hire the best ones for our business. Consulting work isn't for everyone – it's deadline driven; there's a lot of stress – but it's very rewarding."

In 2015 Bruce established the BA Blackwell and Associates Scholarship in Fire Science. The scholarship is awarded annually to a graduate student studying fire science. "I really think we need to emphasize fire more," he says. "Over the years I've mentored many people in this area, and now some of them have businesses of their own. But there's so much work to do there's no real competition among us."

Bruce urges students to get as much practical experience in the forest as possible. "You need that operational experience if you want to practice in BC," he says. "Getting your RPF, for example, is just as valuable if you want to work in a niche area like urban forest conservation."