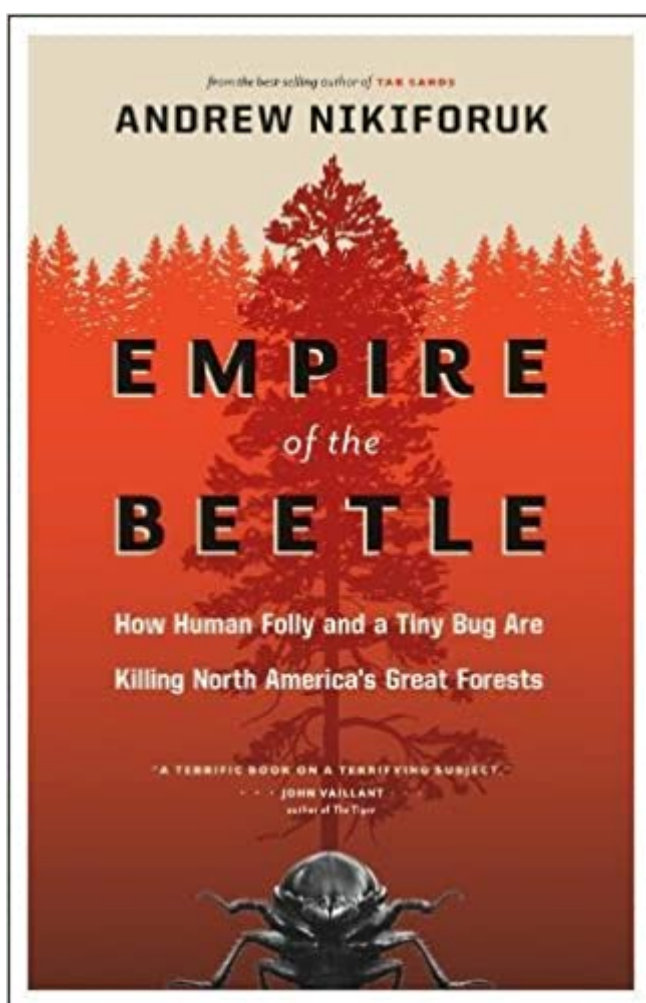


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# Empire Of The Beetle: How Human Folly And A Tiny Bug Are Killing North America's Great Forests (David Suzuki Foundation Series)



## Synopsis

Beginning in the late 1980s, a series of improbable bark beetle outbreaks unsettled iconic forests and communities across western North America. An insect the size of a rice kernel eventually killed more than 30 billion pine and spruce trees from Alaska to New Mexico. Often appearing in masses larger than schools of killer whales, the beetles engineered one of the world's greatest forest die-offs since the deforestation of Europe by peasants between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The beetle didn't act alone. Misguided science, out-of-control logging, bad public policy, and a hundred years of fire suppression created a volatile geography that released the world's oldest forest manager from all natural constraints. Like most human empires, the beetles exploded wildly and then crashed, leaving in their wake grieving landowners, humbled scientists, hungry animals, and altered watersheds. Although climate change triggered this complex event, human arrogance assuredly set the table. With little warning, an ancient insect pointedly exposed the frailty of seemingly stable manmade landscapes. And despite the billions of public dollars spent on control efforts, the beetles burn away like a fire that can't be put out. Drawing on first-hand accounts from entomologists, botanists, foresters, and rural residents, award-winning journalist Andrew Nikiforuk investigates this unprecedented beetle plague, its startling implications, and the lessons it holds.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Nikiforuk leavens this tragic, instructive history with curious facts about the complex, intelligent

insect" **• Publishers Weekly** "Sometimes called the "Katrina of the West," these infestations received very little publicity but caused the loss of millions of dollars worth of lumber ... Well written and informative... Highly Recommended" **• Choice Reviews** "A terrific book on a terrifying subject... a chilling, fascinating, and important contribution to our understanding of a rapidly changing world." **• John Vaillant**, author of *The Tiger and The Golden Spruce* "A compelling look at what may be the single biggest impact of climate change, and a harbinger of life to come on a warming planet." **• Jim Robbins**, Science Journalist, *The New York Times* "Empire of the Beetle is a work of great skill and passion, and vital to anyone courageous enough to be interested in the ecology of the future." **• Rick Bass**, author of *Winter: Notes From Montana* "[T]he Iliad of the bark beetles. It really demonstrates how intertwined nature is... as Andrew shows so well, we are part of nature." **• John Perlin**, leading U.S. solar energy expert and author of *A Forest Journey*

Andrew Nikiforuk is an award-winning journalist who has written about education, economics, and the environment for the last two decades. His books include *Pandemonium*, *Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Oil*, which won the Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and *The Fourth Horseman: A Short History of Plagues, Scourges and Emerging Viruses*. His bestselling book *Tar Sands* won the Rachel Carson Environment Book Award.

As a layperson reader for Beetle books I found plenty of chapters to enjoy: that is to say there is something for everyone who has an interest in the beetle invasions in North America. It is easy to think your region is the only one suffering and fighting and fearing the results of the BUGS. Here you get some perspective and some ideas of how the beetles are managed or not in different places. There's a great "sources and further reading" section. And my favorite quote is on page 118 it begins, "we should never look at a landscape as being etched in stone.." (Les Safranyik). This book is a good mix of data and creative response to the "storm" or war in the forest. Recommended reading for folks trying to get a grip on the changing landscape and the orange trees.

Journalist Andrew Nikiforuk keeps me captivated even with the statistical narrative. An easy read - a memorable read - a must read for an excellent background to the Bark Beetle Dilemma people face around the world.

Very well written, lots of research done for the book. I thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the

beatles, their communities and the human impact and causes on the huge devastation of the forests. Should be required reading for all the naysayers of climate change. I have been personally involved with the U.S. Forest Service and beetle eradication attempts in our Wasatch-Cache National Forest. Also witnessed a lot of the loss in Alberta and British Columbia last summer. An eye opening and scary book.

Bark beetles have been destroying the great coniferous forests of the Western US and Canada. Before humans started mismanaging the forests, these beetles played a useful role and did no great harm. But a century of fire suppression and industrial forestry, to which is added a warming climate, has brought on a crisis which may lead to the permanent loss of these great forests. This book does a great job of telling this disastrous story. The author interviews scientists, loggers, government officials, and ordinary people affected by the beetle outbreaks. It's an excellent book, very well written, but very depressing.

Same old, "pick the answer that's easy and makes the best sound-bite science." On the beetle infestations, don't forget that they weren't caused by global warming when they occurred in 1810, 1870, 1910 and 1970. Only in the 2000s do any of the dastardly effects of human villainy have anything to do with it. And we all know that the epicenter of global warming is Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. The heat just radiates out from there, working its way south to Colorado and New Mexico by first heating higher elevations and working its way down the mountainsides, as evidenced by anybody who has seen the progress of beetle kill in the Rockies. It matters not that the immutable laws of physics are violated by each of Nikiforuk's contentions. All that matters is that you know that it's your fault, you evil money-grubbing, American capitalists, and not his.

What I liked most about this book is the last chapter and the broader message on tipping points, critical thresholds, and quick catastrophic, irreversible changes in ecosystems. The book is an easy, entertaining read full of interesting characters, although at times I found it a little full of cutesy metaphors and sexy sound bites. What I liked least about the book was some of the information was incorrect and could not be verified. The worst offender for me was the statement that bad science led to fire suppression for decades. It is unclear to me how science led to fire suppression policies in the first half of the 20th century - that was public sentiment at the time and management decisions and politics. We (people/the public) wanted to save forests and trees for the future. It

wasn't science that created Smokey the Bear. At the time, we didn't realize the critical role that fire plays in many ecosystems - we've since learned about the role of fire and public perception is (slowly) changing about wildfire. We now know that wildfire is a natural and necessary part of many ecosystems. SCIENCE taught us that and is responsible for our changing perceptions. Science has changed our understanding and led to this change in perception; I don't see how science was responsible for fire suppression in the first half of the last century. Some examples of other issues I had with the book were:- The statements around woodpeckers increasing 85-fold in bark beetle-infested stands and 12 woodpeckers feeding on one tree. I could not confirm any numbers close to this. A fair bit of research has been done on natural enemies of MPB, including woodpeckers. Many woodpeckers in conifer forests are territorial and so their numbers don't increase to such extreme levels. In addition, biologically, it seems improbable that they could increase 85-fold during the course of an infestation because they do not have the reproductive capacity and life cycle to allow such an incredibly dramatic increase over the course of a few years (the typical length of a bark beetle outbreak in a specific stand).- The statements about logging trucks hauling infested logs causing outbreaks along roads. There are strict guidelines for industry around hauling logs during the beetle flight, which are taken very seriously, and there are no documented cases of logging trucks starting infestations. There are several more examples, which make me question how well the book was researched. Talking to researchers is great, but they're mainly qualified to talk about their own research and some are prone to exaggeration. Most of the people interviewed were scientists - the book lacked interviews with on-the-ground folks (the decision-makers), yet the author was very quick to criticize all management decisions that were made. What I really wonder, is if I read some of the author's other work - on topics I actually know little about - how will I know which information is accurate and which isn't? Will I be able to tell where his bias so obviously lays? Undoubtedly, his writing is persuasive and will play a role in shaping my view on the subject - that is why I feel so strongly about the inaccuracies and bias. Interestingly, near the end of the book, the author talks about the seminal work of Buzz Holling, a Federal Government Scientist, on eastern spruce budworm and how his findings were in contrast with govt. policy and management at the time. I think the author missed an opportunity to discuss driving forces behind policy and management decisions - public perception, pressures and desires. And conflicting public pressures. He talked to a lot of experts that did research and I think a nice balance would have been to also talk to the people that were on the front line in terms of dealing with public and industry pressure and the situation in the forest (the provincial govt. that actually decides what to do on BC's land base). While the author is quick to use 20/20 hindsight to condemn govt. and industry reaction

to bark beetle outbreaks and he talks about public opposition to harvesting (and I agree there's room for criticism of the provincial govt. response), he doesn't adequately investigate the incredible pressure that was on the provincial govt. to do something and he doesn't talk about what they did that was good. There is certainly opposing public opinion that feels more control and harvesting should have been done. Look at the current situation with mountain pine beetle in Montana right now - incredible public support (including from environmental groups) for active management through harvesting, thinning and insecticide (carbaryl application). I think the author could have represented opposing public opinions in the book to give more balance and show the complex reality that humans must address as we make decisions about how we manage our forests and the environment in general. Stating your opinion and making everyone else sound like an idiot for not agreeing with you or having your 20/20 hindsight only serves to polarize people on complex issues and decisions that we have to make about our environment.

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