



Mounties Always Get Their Man; Here's Help for Those Elusive Trees

By Solange De Santis

DNA matching is helping to catch many a murderer. Now, Canadian law-enforcement officials are hoping it will finger another group of criminals: tree thieves. The idea is to test not the suspect's genetic material, but the tree's.

Police think they will be ready to use the tests in court by the end of the year. Canadian government researchers are preparing to present the technique to a conference in Victoria, British Columbia, in October.

Each tree, like each person, has a unique cell structure. Natural Resources Canada, a federal ministry, is developing markers to match the DNA in the stump of a tree to the DNA of a log in the back of a thief's truck.

"We believe it's going to be very beneficial," says Jerry Hunter, a forester with the compliance and enforcement branch of British Columbia's Ministry of Forests.

Tree theft is a nagging problem in Canada, largely because the wood industry is so vast. In British Columbia alone, the forest-products industry generated 15 billion Canadian dollars (US\$ 10.1 Billion) in sales last year, according to consultant PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP.

An estimated C\$75 million to C\$150 million of timber is stolen from government or private land in the province every year. Thieves have even been known to enter wildlife sanctuaries and cut down 250-year-old trees that were being preserved for their historical or habitat value, says Mr. Hunter.



Western red cedar, used in roofing materials, is the most attractive target, Mr. Hunter says. A single cord of cedar, which can fit into the back of a large pickup, is worth as much as C\$1,200, and the prime-grade cedar used for musical instruments can command as much as C\$6,000 a cord.

But unless the thieves are caught in

the act, it's hard to prove a load of lumber was stolen. Legitimate timber producers make a distinctive mark on their logs, but some mills will look the other way if a load comes in without a mark, law-enforcement officials say.

"In the past, we might be able to match the log with the stump" before it was milled, says Eleanor White, a Natural Resources Canada researcher in British Columbia. "But now the thieves cut a slice off the bottom so it can't be matched."

If police are able to match the DNA of the cut portions to that of the stump, it could constitute proof the wood was stolen, says Royal Canadian Mounted Police Constable Peter Jadis of the Forest Crimes Unit in Surrey, B.C. ■

(Solange De Santis is a Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal. This article originally appeared in the July 19, 1999 issue of The Wall Street Journal page B1.)



New DNA Technology

A new process that will allow on-scene DNA screening by law enforcement to determine who was at a crime scene was unveiled in Albuquerque, New Mexico, by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). The DNA chip currently is being used to identify people at risk for certain diseases. NIJ determined the device has criminal justice applications that will enable law enforcement to use DNA information at the crime scene, rather than wait weeks

for analysis in the lab. "This chip can be a powerful crime-fighting tool because of its speed of analysis, the vast amount of important DNA evidence it can contain and its economy," says NIJ Director Jeremy Travis. "The type of crime-fighting technology that we once considered to be science fiction, like the DNA chip, will be tools to help us create a safer nation in the 21st Century." The Forensic DNA Chip, which cost between \$10 and \$15, can be brought to a crime scene. On-scene

evidence would be inserted into one end of the chip placed in a small computer mounted within a police vehicle. The computer will up-link the information to a national criminal justice database and search the DNA profile identified on the chip. The chip will be available to law enforcement within two years ■

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