Editorial

September 28th-29th 2003 and December 15th 2006 were momentous days on Canada's coasts. In 2003, Hurricane Juan swept directly up Halifax, Nova Scotia harbour, leaving a wide swath of damage and destroying almost all the trees in that city's urban jewel, Point Pleasant Park, as well as in other city parks. The 2006 storm in Vancouver blew directly into Stanley Park, that city's urban forest jewel, blowing down many trees and causing considerable damage to many others. Unlike Point Pleasant, which looked like a clear-cut logging operation, many very large trees remain in Stanley Park

Civil society's responses to the two natural events were significantly different. Maybe because Halifax has experienced hurricane or near hurricane storms several times in living memory, responses were mostly 'clean up and let's get on with life'. Vancouver's response was to create a 'relief' fund and call on the federal and provincial governments to provide financial aid.

The responses have since become more balanced. In Vancouver, there will soon be plans for clearing dangerous trees and reopening the trails as well as major discussion about how the work of restoration should proceed. No doubt there will be replanting, but replanting of what? And where? In Halifax, it was obvious to the most inexpert observer that planting new trees must occur to bring the park landscape back into service as a retreat for the urban community.

In Vancouver, it seemed that the politicians saw Mother Nature as some sort of selfish vandal who was destroying 'our birthright'. Some even predicted a major downturn in the economy as international tourists stayed away because there would be no point in visiting when Stanley Park had been desecrated. Once the anger had subsided, the ecologists, the arborists and the park biologists began to be heard. They reminded us that Nature had done this before and each storm had created opportunity for renewal by blowing down trees that were past their

Iain E.P. Taylor, Professor of Botany and Research Director,
UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research,
6804 SW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z4.
iain.taylor@ubc.ca

prime – many of the felled logs in Stanley Park had substantial heartwood rot – but each fallen tree left space through which light could penetrate to the forest floor and support the growth of lower canopy vegetation. In addition, fallen trees in the Halifax Public Gardens provided park planners with the chance to replace, rejuvenate and diversify the plantings in that space.

The UBC Botanical Garden, located on the peninsula immediately south of Stanley Park, has suffered tree losses over the years. The responses to loss of living and dead trees has been to try to use the opportunities provided by increased light on the forest floor to plant more materials for the David C. Lam Asian Garden collections. Clearly Stanley Park is not a specialist collection to be expanded by planting exotic species, but the management of plant growth over decades will always be punctuated with natural disruptions each of which will require a response that balances the recreational and aesthetic values with simply leaving Nature to take its course.

Natural interventions are never successfully handled when single 'corrections' are proposed. In 2000, the suggestion that Point Pleasant Park should be cleared to control the brown spruce long horned beetle caused a major campaign, led by my namesake Dr. Iain C. Taylor, to protect the park. Three years later, Hurricane Juan did the clearing on a far greater scale than the Canadian Forest Service had proposed. In the early winter of 2006-2007, it has become obvious that the mountain pine beetle has done massive damage to the forest of central British Columbia. Once again, the part of the solution may well be to let Nature take its course. Dead trees are a hazard to those who work in the forest, but taking them down will alter the rate of snow melt in the spring and inevitably erosion will lead to mud slides into water ways that will affect those living hundreds of kilometres down stream.

So the plans that emerge after natural disasters seem set to follow similar courses. In the case of urban parks, it seems sensible to return public access to pre-storm levels, to take the chance to remove the potential dangers, and let Nature do the rest. After all, the attraction of both parks was the sense of being closer to Nature. The scale of the BC infestation may well require ecologists and foresters alike to search for some new approaches that will eventually be seen as opportunities well taken.