

## The skittish invasion

While his gut-wrenchingly astute reporting from the darkest corners of Alberta's oil sands continues to loom large in *The Tjee*, Andrew Nikiforuk's fifth book demystifies the other massive scourge taking root in the Calgary-based environmental journalist's home province. The front line of the mountain pine beetle's epidemic attack on lodgepole pines is pressing toward Saskatchewan and into the boreal forest, having breached the Rockies and razed 16 million treed hectares of British Columbia — an area as large as the province's entire park system. Nikiforuk investigates what hatched the invasion and the rich history of the beetle's pivotal role in regenerating the forest, turning the image of a mountain valley blanketed by dead red trees into a mirror. Not surprisingly, the problem started with an economically misguided view of the insect

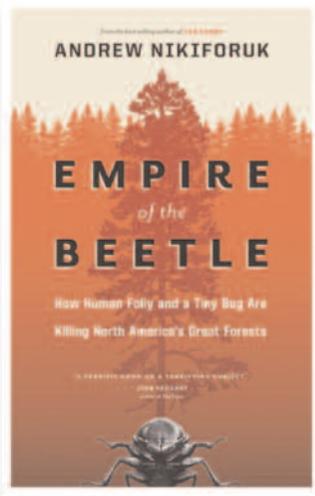
as a pest devouring profit, and the dogma of modern forestry led the devastation to balloon.

Nikiforuk makes broad, incisive leaps to connect a range of ailing ecosystems. The handful of major infestations that has hit western North America in the past quarter-century (see "Unbeatable beetles" on page 21) is vividly framed by dissident entomologists and ecologists, whose work highlights the futility of aggressive prevention and the beetle's remarkable talents. The "prowess" and "marvels" of these "engineers of decomposition and global protein renewal"

are recalled through antiquity, wherein beetles have always preserved "the common wealth of trees and other plants by safeguarding diversity," making room for fresh growth by "gardening, dissembling, pollinating, boring, pruning, killing, recycling and refuse eating."

Although we now have an amazing arsenal of chemical weapons at our disposal, humans have fought the same Sisyphean battle with beetles since the 1700s, when Germans started single-species, high-yielding tree plantations that would eventually render so many forests as vulnerable to plague as any

other monoculture crop. In British Columbia, an epidemic was inevitable, especially with beetles thriving in a warming climate. By 1990, more than half the province's forest volume was a "uniform, dense and expansive patch of aging lodgepoles," planted about a century ago. Containment measures were exacerbated by deep government cuts to forest services and ill-fated strategies such as arsenic injections, which killed a lot of woodpeckers, a bird that preys on the beetle. Nonetheless, Nikiforuk writes that "trying to prevent a bark beetle from doing



### ENVIRONMENT

#### EMPIRE OF THE BEETLE How Human Folly and a Tiny Bug Are Killing North America's Great Forests

By Andrew Nikiforuk  
Greystone

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its anointed work in an aging forest is about as fruitful as trying to stop a flood or an avalanche."

*Empire of the Beetle* recontextualizes the beetle as a "sentinel of climate change," an unparalleled global custodian and communicator. Concisely and thoughtfully, Nikiforuk translates the insect's message as a warning to heed, rather than a threat to engage.

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