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CITY



The tops of dead trees near Lovers Walk in Stanley Park were photographed June 21 by a drone operated by SkyScoutAI. Infestations have taken a toll on many trees.

TRACKING TREES

New website lets you explore photographs of every dead tree in Stanley Park

LORI CULBERT

Just steps from popular Third Beach, the Lovers Walk gravel path begins weaving through the towering splendour of Stanley Park, bordered by Western hemlocks and Douglas firs. Michal Aibin gazes skyward as he navigates the path, but not to admire the healthy green leaves. He's searching for clusters of trees with peeling bark, and dry brown branches devoid of life.

"Look over there," he says, pointing to six ghostly grey trees not far off the busy path that cuts through the centre of Vancouver's crown jewel.

"How can we improve the forest health? How can we reduce the flammability risk?"

Aibin, director of BCIT's disaster resilience research hub, has created a new online tool that he hopes will provide "another layer of information" for the emotional and controversial debate over what to do with the park's dead trees.

Aibin received approval from Transport Canada and Nav Canada for a drone to fly over the park on June 21, when it collected more than 7,000 aerial photographs that capture nearly every spot in the 400-hectare peninsula.

He used the photos and artificial intelligence to create the Park Scout site, which breaks the park into 283 sections, each with statistics for dead vegetation, debris piles, moisture levels and type of terrain.

That information, and other data, is then used to create a daily wildfire risk assessment for each section. Right now that risk is low due to all the recent rain, said Aibin, the chief technology officer of SkyScoutAI, the Vancouver company that powers the tool.

Aibin hopes the new website will allow Vancouver residents to investigate and understand the health of their beloved park during this unusually hot and dry summer, as about 130 wildfires burn in the province.

While fire scientists and other experts interviewed for this story had mixed opinions of SkyScout's model to predict wildfires in Stanley Park, many agreed the use of drones and aerial mapping can be part of the future battle to assess forest health and potential fire hazards.

B.C. Wildfire Service information officer Jean Strong wouldn't comment on the SkyScout tool because the service hasn't used it. But she added the service now uses satellites, aircraft and drones to collect landscape images and is "exploring" the use of AI for wildfire management — although she stressed that's done in conjunction with experts on staff.

"AI has the potential to improve our ability to analyze data, predict wildfire behaviour and support operational decision-making. ... Remote sensing (imagery) can also support broader wildfire risk assessment by identifying changes across the landscape," Strong said. "While emerging technologies may help identify areas for further investigation, they do not replace operational expertise or field validation."

Between 2020 and 2023, a hemlock looper moth outbreak killed or dam-



Eric Saczuk, an instructor at BCIT's remotely piloted aircraft systems hub, uses a drone June 21. It captured more than 7,000 aerial photos of Stanley Park, which were used to create three online maps tracking the health of the trees. SKYSCOUTAI



Michal Aibin, SkyScout chief technology officer, surveys Stanley Park after an aerial mapping tool collected photos that he used to create the Park Scout site that tracks statistics on dead vegetation, debris piles and more. NICK PROCATYLO

aged 160,000 of the park's half-a-million trees, prompting an impassioned debate between the city, which wanted to remove hazardous trees, and residents who staged a legal battle to halt the chainsaws.

In the end, the city won. Since 2023, more than 14,000 trees deemed to be "public safety" risks have been removed from well-used areas near the Causeway, Prospect Point, the Aquarium, Brockton Point and popular trails.

On its website, the city says it has now "treated" nearly three-quarters of the park's forested areas. In addition,

75,000 new seedlings of several species have been planted.

120,000 DEAD TREES

Aibin, though, said his drone images captured up to 120,000 dead or dying trees scattered throughout roughly 60 per cent of the park. If the branches of all those dead trees were lined up beside each other, Aibin calculated that would cover 44 hectares, roughly 17 per cent of the park's forested areas. This calculation includes a small number of beetle-infested trees and deadwood debris piles on the forest floor.

HOW TO SEE EVERY DEAD TREE IN STANLEY PARK

Vancouver company SkyScoutAI linked 7,000 aerial photographs of Stanley Park with daily weather and ground moisture updates to create an online tool that lets you see the dead trees in the park and explore its health. You can toggle between three map interfaces on the site.

How to use the tool:

Go to vancouver.sun.com/parkscout

Map 1 — Wildfire risk: The first map shows the wildfire risk across the park, as predicted by the algorithm on the site. The map is colour-coded to indicate low, moderate, high or extreme risk. On Friday, the risk was low (green) because of the recent rain.

Map 2 — Points of interest: The colour-coded map shows all the dead trees (yellow), deadwood debris piles (brown), and beetle-infested trees (red) captured in the photos. You can zoom in and click on each item to find its location and a link to the photo of the dead or dying vegetation.

Map 3 — All locations: SkyScout divided the park into 283 sections. When you click on a section it takes you to a drop-down menu with the name of that specific location. Click on the location's name to find data for that precise spot:

- Ground moisture
- Fuel flammability (dead vegetation and debris)
- Weather risk (temperature, wind, rain)
- Terrain (slope and elevation)
- Size of that location
- Fuel load (the number of dead trees and debris piles)
- A link to the photos for that spot. Each location has about 25 photos