

**QUESTIONS FOR THE HONOURABLE JOYCE MURRAY,
MINISTER OF WATER, LAND AND AIR PROTECTION**

For discussion at the Federation of BC Naturalists AGM, May 11, 2002, Victoria, BC

1. Park Interpretation Cut

Why was the Parks Extension Division cut ? Can some creative funding not be found (as has occurred for many other programs) so that at least some nature interpretation programs can run this summer?

Background:

The motto for the Federation of BC Naturalists (FBCN) is "To Know Nature and to Keep It Worth Knowing". We cannot understand how obliterating the entire Park Extension Division and the Nature Interpretation Programs and Visitor Information Services can be described as a responsible decision by government. To us it seems that a great deal has been lost for very little money saved.

For example, we understand that Parks Extension staff coordinated volunteer work in parks, a total of 130,000 volunteer hours in 2001 which could be valued at \$1.3 Million. In addition, some of these projects included outside funding, such as in 2001 there were 77 projects with a total value of over \$500,000. The dollar value of the volunteer hours and outside projects brought in more than twice the value of the wages and benefits paid to the 14 Extension Parks staff.

Not only will our young people miss this wonderful education opportunity, but it will harm the experience tourists have when they visit our wonderful parks, since an important part of that experience is learning about the local flora, fauna and cultural history. It's an educational and promotional package that cannot be achieved solely with printed material or displays.

FBCN is also concerned that a summer season without interpreters will mean that these knowledgeable people will move on to other jobs elsewhere, at a loss to BC.

2. Changes to BC Parks

We have heard that government is offloading some Provincial Parks to other levels of government, and downloading park recreation facilities to private interests.

2.1 Could you please advise whether some or all of this is true?

2.2 If this is true, what public process will you implement to ensure that BC citizens can voice their views on this?

2.3 If parks are to be offloaded to federal or municipal governments or to regional districts, will there be a stipulation in the transfer agreement to ensure the ecological integrity of these parks is upheld?

2.4 If leases are being arranged to transfer recreation facilities to private interests, can the term of these leases be kept as short as possible? This would serve as a trial period, so that in the event something is not working out in the best interests of the public, then government can legally end or correct the lease within a short time.

Background:

The Parks Legacy Panel consultation from 1997-2001 involved input from and discussions with hundreds of people in communities throughout the province. These consultations indicated overwhelmingly that BC citizens of almost every political leaning placed responsibility for the integrity and wise management of our parks in the hands of the Provincial Government, and that conservation of ecological values was of primary importance.

Given these results of the Parks Legacy Panel's work, it would appear that any drastic changes in how our parks are managed should first be cleared with the BC citizens through an open and transparent public process. The public should be able to voice opinions on any proposed increase in commercial management and private recreation facilities in our parks.

Commercial leases of all types should be drawn up in such a way that there is an initial short trial period in which non-compliance with the terms would be grounds for the lease to be cancelled. In addition this short trial period would allow for the lease to be legally terminated with short notice in cases where unforeseen problems might arise, including unexpected impacts on the natural environment. The initial trial period should allow for the lease to be legally terminated in cases of non-compliance, without ecologically and financially costly delays or court cases.

3. Staff Cuts to Wildlife, Fisheries, Habitat and Parks Programs

Seventy-one staff have already been cut from the Wildlife, Fisheries, Habitat and Parks Programs of your Ministry, and an additional 66 will be cut in the next couple of years.

Wildlife and Habitat Cuts

3.1 With the increasing need to better manage for Species At Risk, how can this be done with the cut of the Area Management position, the cut to population and habitat inventory in the Wildlife Program and cuts to staff at Habitat Protection?

Fisheries Cuts

3.2 Has the Urban Salmonid Habitat Program been completely cut? If so, how can you justify the cancelling of this protection, enhancement and restoration effort that over its seven year term is estimated to have brought in 400,000 volunteer hours, valued at \$4 Million?

Parks Cuts

3.3 With staff cuts so deep, how will enforcement of park regulations be handled? How will these fewer staff be able to adequately assess the numerous proposals put forward by commercial interests to operate in parks?

3.4 As for the conservation responsibility, what steps is your government taking to ensure the ecological integrity of BC's Parks?

3.5 Our BC Ecological Reserves are very important as a scientific bench mark and for conservation reasons. What management attention will BC's Ecological Reserves receive?

Background:

In considering these staff cuts, it is important to recall that the Wildlife, Fisheries and Habitat Protection Programs had already been cut by 50% before the Liberal government came to power. In addition, the Provincial Park areas had been doubled in size with no staff increases, thus staff were already stretched twice as far. The maintenance backlogs in Provincial Parks were already in the order of \$60 Million.

The Urban Salmonid Habitat Program was building partnerships, involving the community and increasing public awareness of the importance of streamside habitat in urban areas. This protection, enhancement and restoration effort over its seven years was estimated to have brought in 400,000 volunteer hours, valued at \$4 Million. Given the critical importance of such streams to salmon and other water-dependent creatures, cutting this program has killed a wonderful partnership of community and private involvement in conservation and environmental enhancement. Very little public money spent here, resulted in a very large private 'investment'.

With respect to Parks, FBCN appreciates that you are trying to have all your staff look beyond Park boundaries (both from within and without) to provide a more ecosystem based perspective. However, with this scale of staff cuts and this loss of knowledge, experience and dedication to our public lands, it is hard to see how it cannot but result in an erosion of biodiversity and conservation as overworked staff remaining attempt to cover an ever-larger area with ever-expanding responsibilities. These cuts are further compounded by cuts to Ministry of Forests, and cuts to Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management.

In theory, the Ecosystem Section idea of conservation across Protected Area boundaries has merit; however, lumping highly experienced parks staff with their specialized knowledge of Parks and other Protected Area Acts and Regulations, in with people having little or no knowledge of this area will lead to a 'race to the bottom'. Even within the Ecosystem Section system, it would seem much more productive to have individuals able to use their particular expertise and experience in that area.

FBCN is concerned with future management of areas of special designation such as Ecological Reserves and Wildlife Management Areas. As Crown land is sold and more commercial recreation permits awarded, the pressures on these special places will only increase. It will be even more important to protect the critical habitats they hold for species at risk as they become more and more threatened from surrounding activities.

4. Marine Protected Areas

In 1978 there was a joint federal / provincial initiative on Marine Protected Areas for Canada's Pacific Coast. **What steps is your Ministry now taking towards establishing Marine Protected Areas?**

5. Land and Resource Management Plans and Spruce Lake

5.1 Are you committed to stand behind the Protected Areas established through Land and Resource Management Plans?

5.2 Do you support the boundaries of the Spruce Lake Protected Area?

Over the past decade hundreds of citizens of BC have spent countless hours, days and weeks at round tables working towards consensus decisions as part of Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs). This intense and very public and open level of involvement where all interests gave in a little and ended up with a plan they could live with, has resulted for the most part in the end of the "War in the Woods". This huge improvement over the decade before LRMPs and CORE, is a considerable achievement for all concerned: government, industry, and environmental groups.

One specific case is the boundary of Spruce Lake (Southern Chilcotin Mountains) which was established by Order-in-Council on April 17, 2001. This was first proposed for protection by the Vancouver Natural History Society in 1937 and many of our members and clubs have worked over the decades to see this area protected. FBCN strongly supports the boundaries established for the Spruce Lake Protected Area a year ago.

6. Groundwater Legislation

What is the status of new legislation to govern disposition of groundwater?

B.C. is the only province not to have such legislation enacted and after situations such as Walkerton ON and Battleford SA, it would appear to be very much overdue here. Research scientists have recently reported that the upper Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, Langley, Chilliwack area) is a Walkerton-waiting-to-happen. Above ground activities, such as inadequate disposal of manure wastes, are a real concern on impacts water quality. In addition, regulations on volume and numbers of users of groundwater are necessary.

7. ATV Damage

What steps is your government taking to reduce damage from ATVs and manage illegal ATV use?

Background:

The severe damage that All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) of all sorts wreak in this Province, in particular on sensitive and fragile grasslands, has been repeatedly documented. Their tires destroy the critical cryptogamic crust, spread seeds of invasive weedy species, dig erosion-prone trenches in the land, and destroy native vegetation and wildlife habitat. The two-stroke engines of the motorbikes spew out almost half of the gasoline unburnt, further adding to the pollution of air, land, and water.

The Federation of BC Naturalists, along with numerous other organizations (including the BC Cattlemen's Association, BC Wildlife Federation, Outdoor Recreation Council and Grasslands Conservation Council) have expressed our concern over damage caused by All Terrain Vehicles to your Ministry for decades. We have been advocating legislation which would require all ATVs to display a visible license number. This would greatly assist in reporting offenders, especially if combined with an education program at the licensing stage.

With the cuts to your staff, and the cuts to Ministry of Forests Recreation Staff, we expect that even more damage will occur from ATVs in the wrong place at the wrong time, with no staff around to police. We are aware that legislation is planned for snowmobiles, which are already required to carry a license, but this will not cover other ATVs. We feel strongly that all vehicles capable of being used off-road should be covered under legislation and regulations.

8. Backcountry Permits

Who will be monitoring commercial backcountry and other ecotourism permits?

Background:

Many new commercial backcountry permits have been granted in the past year in an effort by your government to "clear up the backlog". The representative from LaWBC Inc

at the meeting with Ministry of Forests re Forest Service Recreation Sites on 28 March 2002 was quoted as saying he didn't know what "stewardship" is.

Your Ministry has been involved in the past in commenting on these permits, assessing when "enough intrusion is enough" in any one area. Public groups that also use those areas have been allowed to indicate their interests as well.

Staff cuts in your Ministry, cutting of public input into the granting of these permits, and decision-making in the hands of a Ministry that doesn't know what "stewardship" is bodes very ill for the "backcountry" of this wonderful province of ours. Who will be looking out for the needs of the plants, the wildlife, the lakes and streams?

9. Science-based decisions difficult with fewer staff scientists?

Given the extensive staff cuts, how can management decisions be "Science-based?"

Background:

Good management decisions cannot be made without good background data. This is as true for wildlife and land management as it is for business. Your government stresses constantly that management decisions will be "science-based".

Basic inventory of our wonderful array of plants and wildlife has only been carried out in a consistent manner throughout the province in the last ten years. Research to determine and to understand the needs of species at risk, let alone all other wildlife species has only just begun.

The severe cuts made to staff and funding in Parks, Wildlife, Fisheries, and Habitat Programs means that even less field work will be possible in future.

In the South Okanagan and Similkameen, an area that is home to more than 50% of these species in BC, there is now only one specialist to handle all Red and Blue-listed species and one other specialist to handle all the other species. Other regions have suffered even worse cuts. How much research can be accomplished with that level of staffing?