



BRITISH COLUMBIA'S PROVINCIAL PARKS:



THE BEST PLACE ON EARTH?

BC's Provincial Parks: In dire need of help



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Whether it is hiking in the Walbran, cross-country skiing at Silver Star, swimming at

Sun-Oka Beach, canoeing on Bowron Lake or having a picnic at Golden Ears, BC's provincial parks have something for everyone. Alpine meadows, grizzly bear sanctuaries, old-growth temperate rainforests, sweeping grasslands and majestic mountain peaks are just some of the special wild places that have been protected by generations of British Columbians for the benefit of our children and grandchildren.

Together, we have created a park system that is second to none. From our first provincial park, stately Strathcona Park on Vancouver Island which was established in 1911, our parks and protected area system has grown to **13.5 million hectares** – providing vital refuge for wildlife,

protection against climate change and an opportunity for people to reconnect with nature.¹

Parks belong to us. We entrust this public legacy to governments, to manage on our behalf. But today, this legacy is in trouble.

Over the past decade, BC parks have struggled under a litany of funding cuts and regressive policies implemented by a provincial government that doesn't respect the ecological value of our protected area system, and doesn't understand the importance of that system to the public. Park interpretive programs were among the first cuts, and park rangers have now become an endangered species. In 2003, the BC government introduced legislation that opened BC park boundaries to industrial road-building and resource extraction, and even tried to introduce private for-profit resorts into BC parks.

Ironically, the steepest cuts happened when the economy was on an upswing. Today, BC Parks' \$31 million operational budget² is \$10 million less than it was in 2001.³ Indeed, comparisons with neighbouring jurisdictions show that BC ranks dead last in provincial parks funding – investing just \$2.29 per hectare in its park system, compared to \$25.29 for Alberta.⁴

Funding cuts have been justified

by the claim that parks don't pay for themselves. But a BC government report shows that provincial parks *more than* pay for themselves, providing a \$392 million boost to our GDP and supporting over 5,000 full-time jobs. In fact, every dollar invested in our protected area system generates \$8.42 in visitor expenditures.⁵

The result of a decade of neglect is declining attendance. Park visits have dropped by 25 per cent since 1998.⁶ Trails have fallen into disrepair. Some parks have closed permanently and 45 provincial parks have had their operating seasons shortened.⁷ Pinecone Burke Provincial Park, established in 1996, is still waiting for its first outhouse. In Strathcona Park, snowmobiles and motorized traffic freely access non-motorized zones, because there are no rangers to enforce regulations. And in Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park, an 800-year-old cedar tree was poached right next to a closed park ranger station.



Photo top: Garibaldi Provincial Park, **above:** Alpine meadow in Wells Gray Provincial Park. Fisherman at Quiniscoe Lake, Cathedral Provincial Park (Michael Wheatley).

Despite these troubling developments, all is not lost. **With vision, planning, commitment and proper funding we can ensure that our provincial park system regains its leadership role in North America.**

Read this paper to find out the first steps that need to be taken.



Tree poaching in Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park

If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?

That is the question that was asked when tree poachers went into Vancouver Island's Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park in early 2012 and cut down a giant 800-year-old redcedar tree adjacent to a closed ranger station. Cedar is a valuable type of wood because it is rot-resistant, and it can fetch a high price as roof shingles or "shakes".

The poachers cut through 80 per cent of the nine-foot-diameter trunk before temporarily abandoning the job. Staff at BC Parks were eventually alerted to the hazard and felled the tree because of the danger it posed to

the public. Once felled, the giant cedar was left by park staff as a "nurse log" to decompose and return nutrients to the soil. However the tree poachers had something else in mind, returning at their leisure days later with heavy equipment to haul the massive log into the parking lot to cut it up and turn it into shakes.*

The poachers operated with impunity because they knew there was little chance of being caught. Although BC has over 1,000 parks and protected areas, **there are just 12 full-time park rangers to patrol 13,500,000 hectares*** – a truly impossible task.



Photo: WC Campaigner Torrance Coste with poached tree in Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park (WC files).

The Auditor General's warning

A report on BC Parks released by the province's Auditor General in August of 2010 found that the provincial government was "not meeting its goal" to conserve the ecological integrity of parks and protected areas in BC.

The critical report found that ecological plans for parks and protected areas were outdated or non-existent, conservation policies were lacking and that many protected areas were too small and fragmented to support biodiversity. The Auditor General also found that several biogeoclimatic zones, such as the critically endangered Douglas-fir ecosystem, remain "significantly underrepresented" in the protected area system.



Photo left: Mountain caribou (John E. Marriott), right: Black-capped chickadee (Robert McCaw).



"Hey buddy, can you spare a dime? And a ranger?"

In 2010, after hearing rumours that rangers didn't have enough money to put gas in their vehicles, the Wilderness Committee filed a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to determine the transportation budget for BC park rangers. What we discovered could not have been more shocking.

Government documents showed that **60 per cent of seasonal park ranger jobs had been terminated**, reducing numbers from 144 seasonal rangers to just 87 seasonal park rangers. Combined with the 12 full-time park rangers, this meant that in the busy summer season there were only 99 rangers left to patrol over 1,000 parks and protected areas.

Perhaps the most surprising discoveries were the draconian budget cuts to remaining staff. The FOI showed park staff pleading for money to conduct basic ranger patrols, travel

between and within parks, service pit toilets, install an avalanche warning sign, buy \$100 worth of bolts needed to repair a potentially dangerous bridge, and even to supply toilet paper for park visitors."

Due to budgetary constraints we are all having to deal with, I am inquiring about any material you may have to finish off a couple of small projects I am working on... wish list... 24 8-inch lag bolts. Need to secure bumper rail on bridge so users do not slide off the edge in the event we may get some rain in the coastal rainforest... 3-inch material required as the bridge is a main route that has been used by both Parks and Search and Rescue to haul out people in emergency situations. Let me know if you have any material like this that you would be able to share."
– BC Parks Staff ¹²

The documents revealed that dozens of park ranger vehicles had been recalled, with the government telling rangers in some cases to rely on public transit. The 195,000-hectare Garibaldi Park

was reduced to just one park ranger, so the boat at Garibaldi Lake – which was used for public safety – could not be operated as it took two rangers to do so. The lack of vehicle availability and park ranger capacity eventually led to provincial parks in the very busy Sea-to-Sky Highway region being unpatrolled on a busy holiday long weekend.

Not surprisingly, these significant cuts resulted in some very untenable situations; in Garibaldi Park garbage accumulated along trails and people defecated near campsites because outhouses were closed.¹³



Garibaldi Park's visitor services are provided by rangers and its facilities are extensively used winter and summer. Stock of toilet paper has been diminished. Impact to 85,000 annual visitors if not provided. Human health and environmental impacts may occur."
– BC Parks Staff ¹⁴

Photo: Closed ranger station at Manning Provincial Park (Gwen Barlee).

"At this time I am unable to secure the necessary resources to fix the outhouse at Confederation Lake. In the short-term I think we should close the outhouse... the outhouse floor is about to collapse and could cause serious harm to the unfortunate user..."
– BC Parks Staff ¹⁵



Photo: Tiger swallowtail in Wells Gray Provincial Park (Mike Grandmaison).

Imaginary park rangers?

One of the most sustained criticisms of the BC government in its management of provincial parks is the very low number of rangers protecting our parks. Shockingly, there are just 12 full-time rangers for 1,000 parks and protected areas in British Columbia, covering 13.5 million hectares of land! More part-time rangers are hired during the summer season, but in 2009 their numbers were cut from 144 seasonal rangers to just 87. To add insult to injury, their patrol season was reduced from five to just four months.¹⁶

The limited number of park rangers has been an embarrassment

to the BC government, but not enough of an embarrassment that they actually hired more rangers. Instead they created "virtual" park rangers. In 2012, the provincial government "deputized" dozens of forest technicians and science officers by handing them a card that said they were authorized to undertake park ranger duties.

Astoundingly, these new "virtual" employees – who already had full-time jobs doing other important tasks such as reforestation and checking soil quality – received little to no park ranger training. The deputizing of virtual rangers seems like a cynical attempt by the government

to fool the public into thinking that additional "real" park rangers had been hired.

The virtual rangers were "deputized" just weeks after the BC government was heavily criticized for the lack of park oversight relating to the illegal poaching of the 800-year-old cedar tree in Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park.¹⁷



Photo: Canoeing in Manning Provincial Park (Gwen Barlee).

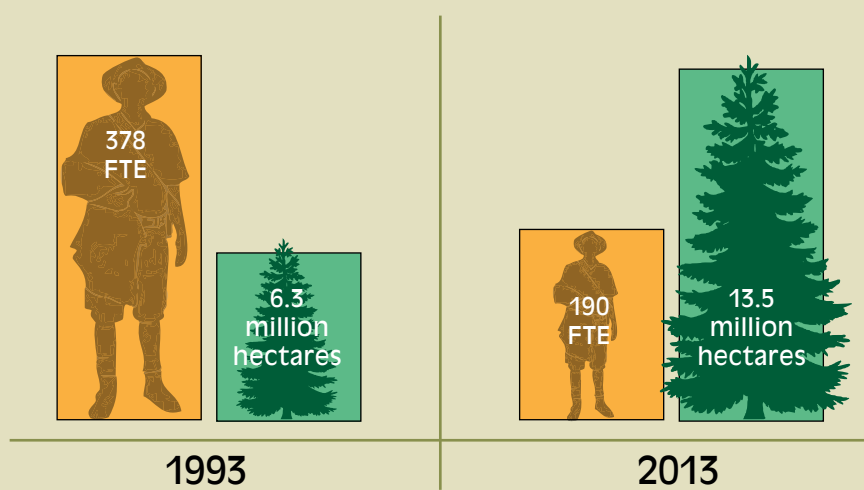


Photo left: Hiking at Garibaldi Provincial Park (Alexis Stoymenoff), bottom: American badger (Isabelle Groc), Canoeing at Bull Canyon Provincial Park (Joe Foy).



Who's minding our parks?

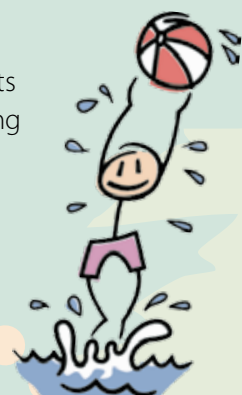
In 1993, when BC's park system was roughly half the size it is today,¹⁸ there were 378 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff working for BC Parks.¹⁹ Today, with a park system covering 13.5 million hectares, there are less than 200 FTE staff to manage our parks.



Nature deficit disorder

Studies show children are spending more time indoors than ever before. Computers, iPhones, television and video games are conspiring to keep children out of the great outdoors. In Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, the author reveals that both the amount of time spent outside and the average area that children explore outdoors has greatly diminished over the past 30 years. According to recent statistics, **kids now spend about 90 per cent of their time indoors**, while parents can often recall daily outdoor play during

their childhood. This phenomenon, coined "nature deficit disorder," has led to a startling disconnect between children and our natural environment. This disconnect is concerning because scientists have found strong links between the mental and physical health of children and their connection to the natural world.²⁰



BC Parks' budget going, going...

The operational budget for BC Parks in 2013 is \$31 million – roughly \$10 million less than it was in 2001. This works out to just \$2.29 allotted per hectare of protected land, which is far lower than neighbouring jurisdictions such as Alberta and Washington State.

The BC government has argued that it doesn't have the money to increase the operational budget for BC Parks. But it is important to note that between 2006 and 2010 the provincial government provided roughly **one billion dollars** in subsidies to profitable oil and gas corporations.²¹



Photo: Mountain goat (Roberta Olenick).

Parking for profit?

Last year, after years of negative press and public opposition, the BC government finally removed parking meters from 42 popular parks in the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and the Interior. The parking meters, which were introduced with no public consultation in 2003 and 2004, were beset by a host of problems. These included massively missing their revenue projection targets, scaring away over 700,000 visitors in their first year of operation and being in chronic need of repair.²² The Wilderness Committee led the charge against the unpopular meters and is pleased that British Columbians can once again enjoy parks without having to plug a meter.



Photos above: Parking meter before removal (Joe Foy), Western bluebird (Wayne Lynch).



Photo: Entrance to Mount Robson Provincial Park (Joe Foy).

Making BC parks the best place on earth, again

Improving BC's park system isn't rocket science. In order to create a world-class park system, what's really needed is a little TLC and an adequate budget.

First steps include:

- a doubling of BC Parks' operational budget, as recommended by the government-appointed Park Legacy Panel
- full implementation of the Auditor General's recommendations to protect the ecological integrity of our park system
- the reinstatement of park interpretive programs
- a meaningful increase in the number of park rangers

We need a pledge by the BC government that our parks and protected areas will be the same source of pride for our children and grandchildren as they have been for us.

DID YOU KNOW?

According to a 2005 BC government poll:

- 95% of British Columbians say having provincial parks is important or very important
- 65% of British Columbians participating in outdoor leisure activities did so in a BC provincial park

TAKE ACTION!

Please write to BC's Premier and the Leader of the Official Opposition to let them know how much you value BC's provincial parks and want to see them properly protected and funded.

BC Premier

Room 156, Parliament Buildings,
Victoria, BC, V8V 1X4
☎ 250-387-1715 Fax: 250-387-0087
@ premier@gov.bc.ca

BC Leader of the Official Opposition

Room 201, Parliament Buildings,
Victoria, BC, V8V 1X4
☎ 250-387-3655 Fax: 250-387-4680

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Yes! BC's Provincial Parks should be protected!

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