

September 19, 2011

From:

Burke Mountain Naturalists

PO Box 52540, RPO Coquitlam Centre

Coquitlam, BC V3B 7J4

Submitted by Elaine Golds, Ph.D., Conservation Chair and Vice President

To:

Metro Vancouver Parks Committee and Staff Members

Re: Public Consultation on Regional Parks Plan, September 7-19, 2011

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the regional parks plan although we are disappointed with the overly hasty public consultation process. The quick turnaround required for comments has challenged our ability as volunteers to be able to respond in a thorough manner. This is most unfortunate as we believe our regional parks system brings immense value to Metro Vancouver residents. Having a network of parks in which people can hike, cycle and enjoy natural landscapes contributes very much to enabling healthy lifestyles. Creating a network of parks which protects ecologically significant areas and critical habitats also contributes very much to the sustainability of the region as we cannot truly claim to be sustainable if our actions imperil the other species with which we share this corner of the province. The past actions and policies of Metro Vancouver have built a firm foundation in terms of a regional park system. It is very important that this continues in much the same way in the future so that we can also leave a legacy for future generations.

Introductory Comments:

On page 4, we recommend that the word “possible” be dropped when describing impacts of climate change. There is no doubt there will be impacts from climate change even if we cannot predict exactly what they will be. Using “possible” here suggest there is doubt either with regard to climate change or its impacts.

On page 5, examples should be provided if Metro Vancouver is granting exclusive use of regional parkland to corporations, etc. This is a provocative statement and needs to be clarified. In general, it would seem inadvisable to be granting exclusive use to any agency or corporation when park land is held in the public trust for public use.

On page 7, we recommend that the type of outdoor recreation services provided by Metro Vancouver be clarified so that people understand Metro Vancouver does not provide sports facilities but rather, more typically, “passive” outdoor recreation on trails, waterways, etc. that bring people in close contact with the natural environment. Wildlife viewing should be mentioned as a popular activity.

On page 9, no linkage is shown to important documents such as the Sensitive Ecosystems Inventory and Strategic Directions for Biodiversity Conservation as well as the recently adopted Ecological Health Plan. Such omissions are most surprising in a regional parks plan. Also, it is implied in this figure that all the documents are “plans”. This is not the case as the Food System document is a “strategy”.

Goal 1 Promote Ecological Health

When the implementation plan is prepared, it is very important that there also be public consultation on this plan. In general, the 2011 parks plan is a weak shadow of the plan developed in 2005 which contained many more details, better language around conservation values and budgetary directions.

The definition of ecological health is very feeble and places too much emphasis on ecosystem services that directly benefit people, namely, air, water and fertile soils. Ecological health must be more fully defined especially in regard to maintaining biological integrity, protecting biodiversity, enabling robust ecosystems and providing critical habitat for species at risk. The conservation values inherent in “ecological health” have been almost completely overlooked – something which is quite shocking in a regional parks plan.

Strategy 1.2.1 - Secure land with high ecological value: We certainly support the acquisition of land with high ecological values but recommend that grassland habitat be included in this list. Such habitat supports several species at risk but protected grassland habitat is a rare feature in the lower mainland...probably more so than salmon streams. Agricultural practices (e.g., the construction of large greenhouses) have changed dramatically in recent years with the result that much farmland no longer supports grassland-dependent species. In addition, airport and industrial expansion has eliminated much of this habitat. We believe the protection of such habitat within regional parks merits special attention along with that of wetlands. In contrast, protection of riparian areas has improved tremendously in recent decades with many of the newer residential developments now offering fairly adequate protection for streams and maintenance of water quality.

We also encourage Metro Vancouver to pay special attention to protecting greenways not only for their ecological values but also for the value provided to people in terms of having pathways for cycling, etc.

Strategy 1.1.5 - Carbon Sequestration: The proposal to develop some carbon sequestration strategies in parks sounds very noble but requires more detailed explanation. For example, grassland habitat is a valuable and scarce ecosystem type within the regional park system so we would not support a carbon sequestration strategy to convert such grasslands into forests even if the forests might eventually sequester more carbon. This is new terminology for most people and certainly merits a more detail discussion so that people fully understand exactly what is implied.

Strategy 1.1.6 and 2.1.5 - Farming in regional parks: The proposal to develop farming in regional parks is a new focus which requires detailed discussions and its own full round of public input before going forward. We suggest such a new policy would vastly benefit from undergoing full public discussion rather than slipping it into this plan. Given that Metro Vancouver Parks struggles now to have an adequate budget to manage its existing parks as well as acquire new lands, we question if it is even sensible to take on this new policy direction. For example, the Sustainability Plan for Colony Farm is estimated to require a budget of approximately \$30 million to implement. Is that sustainable? Where will these funds come from? What regional park programs would have to be abandoned to implement this plan for commercial farming at Colony Farm?

Farming activities could drain park budgets and staff time: Certainly, our experience with Colony Farm Regional Park has been that introducing farming into parks requires not only substantial finances but also much time on the part of staff. We feel it has diverted staff attention and budget away from traditional core park functions such as providing washrooms and maintaining trails. A few years ago, a non-profit group in Surrey received a grant to initiate farming in one field at Colony Farm but, once their grant funds were gone, so were they. Thus, we worry about Metro Vancouver getting into new projects that will require ongoing infusions of public funds for infrastructure maintenance that would provide mostly private benefits. Is it appropriate for Metro Vancouver to provide expensive assets in terms of buildings, field drainage, etc. even for educational institutions when such activities could divert funds which would otherwise be used to support core park functions such as trails or allow for significant land acquisitions for future generations?

Farming activities could have negative impacts on wildlife values and public use in parks: We also have concerns about negative impacts on wildlife habitat and public use of parks that could come from some

farming practices and feel these must be adequately thought through and addressed before proceeding with having working farms in regional parks. For example, a u-pick berry farm is proposed at Colony Farm. Such a berry farm would attract bears and starlings. Increased bears on the trails at Colony Farm would create conflicts for people using the trails; increased numbers of starlings, an aggressive nonnative bird species, would have negative impacts on the very rich nesting songbird population at Colony Farm. Many other examples of negative impacts could be given if time allowed.

Farming in regional parks could undermine existing farmers markets and compete with farm tours on true working farms: In addition, we object to the concept that commercial activities such as farming are appropriate within a regional park funded by tax-payers. While renting bicycles or canoes to enhance the park experience for visitors create obvious benefits, it is hard to understand why commercial farming would be an appropriate activity in a regional park. Another question we ask is if it is appropriate for Metro Vancouver to be undertaking commercial activities that could compete with and undermine the existing farmers markets or the “Farm Circle Tours” that commercial farmers have done such a great job of developing in recent years?

Is it appropriate to provide park land and park assets to educational institutions? We question if it is appropriate for Metro Vancouver to sign over the use of large tracts of land within parks even to educational institutions for training farmers – is that not the responsible of post-secondary educational institutions? Certainly a full public discussion on this topic is warranted. Such related policies must be well formulated before Metro Vancouver goes off on this new tangent.

Support allotment and community style gardens in regional parks: There is a rapidly expanding interest in people growing food at a time when many people no longer have backyards in which to carry out such healthy activities. Thus, we suggest more attention should be paid to developing community or allotment type gardens in appropriate regional parks. This would certainly fall within the objective of having “healthy people and healthy parks”. Providing space for people to grow food would meet the ecological health objective providing food services but in a way that would bring more people into parks and have them more involved in the process of growing food. Productivity in regional parks should be measured by the pairs of hands in the fields rather than the pounds of potatoes produced. Community gardens also bring educational benefits and add to visitor’s park experience. Expensive improvements in drainage can be avoided in such gardens by the use of raised beds. We recommend that Colony Farm would be an ideal place to experiment with providing a number of models of allotment or community style gardens because it is so well situated in the heart of Metro Vancouver and well served by public transit. For the same reason, it is not well suited to become a commercial working farm or training ground for new farmers. Such activities, if they belong at all in regional parks, would be best suited closer to rural areas where farming is an established activity. Farmers need a community in which to thrive – this includes neighbors to borrow implements from and assist with projects. Young farmers will need mentors in a nearby farming community.

We appreciate and support the interest in restoring some heritage orchards etc. but feel this is more along the lines of supporting public education, protecting heritage values and promoting cultural values rather than being described as a commercial farming interest within parks.

Goal 2 – Promoting Outdoor Recreation for Human Health and Wellness

We certainly support this goal (with the exception of providing working farm landscapes as discussed above). Providing public education opportunities to help people understand and appreciate nature should receive some recognition here. Such activities merit more mention in this parks plan. This is an especially important activity to be providing in a multi-cultural setting as people coming from other countries may have had little opportunity to experience nature previously.

As noted above, we object to providing opportunities for working farms within regional parks but we encourage Metro Vancouver to develop more opportunities for residents to garden within parks.

Strategy 2.1.6 - Experience the Fraser: We also support the “Experience the Fraser” concept (although, sadly, we have not heard much about this plan – more details should be provided). Developing a greater appreciation for the Fraser River and providing opportunities for more trails, etc. along its banks sounds very appealing. The Fraser River is a significant part of our heritage and we certainly support a special focus on it in the regional parks plan. Again, we caution that the development of more commercial tourism should be carefully reviewed to ensure it meshes with the goals of the regional park system.

Goal 3 – Supporting Community Stewardship

Again, the introductory statement talks about promoting a sense of responsibility for the ecosystems that support human life. Why is there not also a focus on the ecosystems that support other species including those at risk? Why is this missing? Nature interpretive activities within regional parks are a core value that must continue and receive adequate focus. Why is wildlife viewing not mentioned as an important activity in this regional parks plan?

Goal 4 – Promote Philanthropy and Economic Opportunities

We do not think it is appropriate to promote economic activities within regional parks except for those services which augment the outdoor experience, e.g., bike and canoe rentals, etc. The economic activities which are described more properly belong under Goal 3, Strategy 3.2.1, i.e., to partner with other groups to provide programs and facilities to augment park services.

Final Remarks

In closing, we thank you for this opportunity to comment but regret that the short time frame does not permit us to comment further or extol the many virtues of the regional park system (or have time to correct “typos”). Whatever else, it is most important that the great work of the past in creating this outstanding legacy of natural systems plus the opportunities for public enjoyment will continue in the future. Present day users of the regional parks benefit from the wisdom and efforts of previous park acquisitions and management policies. We must ensure our efforts will augment those of past decades and leave an even better legacy for future generations.