

Green Scene: BC Parks are Province's Tarnished Jewels

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(published July 29, 2011 - *The TriCity News*)

In the last *Green Scene*, I outlined the history of Strathcona Park, BC's first provincial park, and described the struggles to protect this supposedly-protected place from mining, logging and hydroelectric development. Today, Strathcona remains somewhat tattered but it is still an impressive park, first among the almost thousand parks and protected areas which now cover over 13% of BC's land base. While the size and number of these protected areas are impressive, so too is BC's spectacular wild environment. As Canada's most biodiverse province, there is much that merits protection in BC.



In Pinecone Burke Park, protected in 1995, a temporary log crossing built by volunteers provides low-water passage over Pritchett Creek on the popular Woodland Walk trail. With adequate funding, BC Parks could construct a proper footbridge. *Ian McArthur photo.*

After the creation of Strathcona in 1911, several other large mountainous parks were established. These included Mount Robson (1913), Kokanee Glacier Park (1922), Mount Assiniboine Park (1922) and Garibaldi (which originally included what is now Golden Ears Park) in 1927. Because no funds were available for park development at that time, it was mainly up to volunteers to create hiking trails and document the flora and fauna. With regard to Garibaldi, volunteers from the Vancouver Natural History Society were glad to oblige. One of these volunteers was John Davidson who started BC's first botanical garden at Essondale (now called Riverview Hospital). While the onset of the 1930s economic depression brought a temporary

halt to park creation, relief programs created work opportunities that led to the construction of access roads, bridges, trails and some facilities in provincial and federal parks within BC.

Five more large provincial parks were subsequently added - Tweedsmuir (1938), Wells Gray (1939), Manning and Hamber (1941) plus Liard (1944). Over time, the boundaries of some of these parks have been altered but these changes have been mostly beneficial with the exception of Hamber which is now a mere 2% of its original size. With the expansion of the highway system after World War II, there was a need for smaller roadside parks to enhance enjoyment of the outdoors by the travelling public. By the 1950s, other values of parks, such as heritage, were also recognized and historical parks such as Barkerville (1959) and Fort Steele (1969) were added to the park system. However, it was not until recent decades that there was much thought given to include all of BC's significant ecosystems, such as low elevation wetlands and old growth forests, within provincial parks.

The number of provincial parks has grown considerably over the decades, most especially in the 1990s. However, policies relating to parks management and maintenance budgets have waxed and waned. As described in the recently published book, "BC's Magnificent Parks, the First 100 Years" by James Anderson, the 1970s was one of the best times for funding when many new park facilities were constructed and nature programs were provided in almost 30 provincial parks. Sadly, all such interpretive programs have been cancelled in recent years and the present budget for BC Parks is a dismal one fifth of what it was in the mid 1990s. Compared to other provinces, BC is the worst when it comes to park funding on a per hectare basis. We now have only 10 full time park rangers in all of BC which is about the number of rangers I can easily count on a visit to any single national park in the USA. In a report on BC Parks released last year, B.C.'s Auditor General concluded conservation policies were not being consistently upheld and little action was being taken to ensure the ecological integrity of our protected places.

Parks, of course, have many values. They offer awesome landscapes, intact wilderness, wildlife habitat and fantastic opportunities for recreation. They also provide a relatively inexpensive place for family vacations and memorable camping experiences. A 2009 study on the economic impact of parks in Canada showed that for every dollar governments spent on parks, park visitors spend \$5.72 on travel, accommodation, food, etc. and, of this, 44 cents is returned to government in the form of taxes. Parks also create jobs and, especially in rural communities close to parks, bring substantial and much-welcomed economic benefits. Thus, it's hard to understand why our provincial parks now suffer from such woefully inadequate budgets. Overflowing toilets and closed trails are hardly good ways to promote tourism in super natural BC - or inspire a sense of civic pride among BC residents. In a year when we should be celebrating a century of BC parks, the current state of their neglect is truly appalling.