

Consider BC's Parks

If there was ever any doubt that Strathcona Provincial Park continues to be under the same threat of industrial development and logging that led to the 1988 protests the recent words of the Minister of Forests together with Premier Eby should dispel any doubts.¹ Speaking at the Council of Forest Industries, Eby and Forests Minister Ravi Parmar re-asserted once more that the government's priority is to increase the industry's access to wood fibre and to protect jobs. It seems that there are "management proposals" to log in Manning, Tweedsmuir and Wells Gray Parks. It should not surprise anyone to see Strathcona added to this list, given the depleted timber supply around the park.

As should have been expected, given the timber crisis in BC, BC Parks are now being targeted to bolster the timber supply. As pointed out by Michelle Conolly of "Conservation North":

"Minister Parmar promoted the notion that all natural forests including old growth require logging in order to be resilient, which is one of the most Orwellian, clown-world statements one could make about natural forests and nature." "The overwhelming driver of fires is climate change, and given that industrial logging is the third-highest emitter in B.C. after oil and gas and transportation, you'd think this would have come up...but it did not."

The social and economic priority of Canadian politicians, and most of the public, is the economy. It is not the environment. As per the *BC Parks Act*, BC parks are viewed primarily as recreational sites, and as per the 2014 Christy Clark era *Bill 4*, which the NDP governments of Harcourt and Eby never repealed, BC Parks are open to industrial development.² The crisis at Fairy Creek, and the current cuts to the edge of Strathcona Park that dubiously grace the access to Buttle Lake and at Darkis Lake next to the campground, which are visible for all tourists to see, should have signalled to all concerned just how dire the timber situation has become. The cuts reflect the extent to which the government is willing to collude with industry in the further destruction of forests and conservation areas.

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/11116219/bc-softwood-us-trade-war/>

² <https://thenarwhal.ca/bill-4-passes-b-c-parks-now-officially-open-pipelines-and-drilling/>

This is no time for the many environmental organizations around BC that claim to be “Friends of...” to abandon their activist mandates to protect our natural heritage. It does not matter how old and tired you may be - environmentalism is a daily endless struggle. A friend does not abandon a friend in need, and the need of our parks and conservation areas is daily and continuous. It never stops, because predators are by definition patient and always on the look-out for prey opportunities, as this latest statement from the Minister of Forests evinces. The wolf is always at the door. Getting in bed with politicians and governments who are beholden first and foremost to the industry only gives license to the further destruction of our natural heritage.

The problem is pervasive and systemic. It is important to understand that the attack on the environment that we see around us is systemic and global. It is not incidental. It ranges from the dismissal of environmental assessment requirements, the opening of protected areas to logging and the overt criminalization of local environmental protest. The judgments handed to protestors at Fairy Creek and Wet’suwet’en, may not have been as extreme as the British Labour government’s legislation criminalizing environmental protestors, but they are intent on criminalizing peaceful protest. In a period of manufactured global economic crisis national interests have become a cover for the facilitation of business as usual and the disregard and suppression of environmental interests. What we see Trump doing overtly in the United States, we also see our provincial and federal governments doing surreptitiously in order to facilitate industrial interests.

Increasingly the public has come to take the BC Parks system for granted. As with nature, the public’s concern for parks and natural spaces only surfaces incidentally as a distant afterthought. Parks and nature are for most people a given. It is the green space that we all assume will always be out there for recreation somehow forever for generations to come. We forget that whatever parks exist today history shows that they were wrested out from the claws of industry and developers in a constant struggle. Parks are not a given. They can be taken away and irreparably destroyed on a whim. Recent developments in the United States and what they mean for the relationship of Canadians to their parks should be a source of concern at several levels, long before the logging trucks roll in.

First in the immediate, the Trump administration is opening national forests to logging and oil and gas. It has opened the Arctic Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas, and rescinded the “roadless rule” in order to open the Tongass forest to industrial development.³ It is re-drawing national monument and park boundaries. It has laid off 3,500 forest service employees, and 1,000 National Parks staff, usually targeting and gutting supervisory positions. While it has subsequently moved to “fill the gaps” with temporary untrained seasonal positions, the void created will make the re-hiring process more challenging and parks operations more chaotic. The general understanding is that about one quarter of parks and national forest recreational sites in the United States will be closed. The lack of staff patrolling parks will also affect park and outdoor recreation safety.

Based on reports in the American media, foreign tourists who were planning a US Parks vacation are now planning to vacation in Canada. With a lower Canadian dollar and the lack of space at home, American tourists are also expected to flock to vacation in Canada.

These changes pose an immediate problem for BC Parks. While nationalist sentiment promoted by both the federal and provincial governments encourages Canadians to vacation at home, and promotes the use of BC Parks, little or no consideration seems to have been given to the fact that BC Parks are already in crisis. In past years BC Parks have been unable to address problems posed by the reservation system. Most British Columbians find it difficult to go camping because of the restrictions imposed by the reservation system. There is a lack of capacity. To give an example, of the two campgrounds at Buttle Lake, at the Buttle Lake campground the 86 sites are by reservation only, and the Ralph River campground has 75 campsites, only 2 of which are on a “first come first serve” basis. Parking at trailheads like the Elk River trail to Landslide Lake overflows along the highway, it is indicative of overcapacity at the two back-country campsites. (Parking capacity has been partially addressed, but trail usage and camping capacity have not.)

It is against this background that we need to consider the environmental implications of the current drive to encourage Canadians to vacation in BC. We are looking at a significant environmental impact on parks like

³ <https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2025/01/sierra-club-statement-trump-order-revoking-tongass-roadless-rule>

Strathcona whose surface area has not been increased to meet the 12% which the 1989 *Larkin Report* called for, and no consideration has been made to increase it in keeping with the current federal 30x30 strategy. If Strathcona and other BC parks have not really met capacity in past years, the implications of expanded use in 2025 for both recreation and conservation are now as nightmarish as the Minister of Forests proposal to clearcut in parks.

To date Strathcona Provincial Park's trails show the impact of steadily growing usage with which BC Parks staff and contractors are barely, if heroically, keeping up. From a conservation perspective, pristine areas of BC Parks are stressed by growing outdoor recreation pressures. The fact is that against the background of growing recreational pressures, the world is everywhere experiencing a very real extinction crisis. Sensitive conservation areas are at a premium in an age of climate change and biodiversity crisis. Protecting sensitive conservation areas needs to be the priority.

If we are to meet the increased recreational demands advocated for and promoted by the provincial and federal governments, Strathcona Provincial Park and other BC Parks need to be expanded to create "climate and recreational buffers." Currently parks are bordered by clearcuts and young second growth. This increases fire potential and creates an edge effect on park biota. Expanded buffers around existing park borders need to be added and complemented by enhanced restoration efforts to meet growing recreational demands and future mix use. Additions to the parks are needed in order to relieve pressure on conservation values which our parks currently house. These additions are also needed if we are to lower the impacts of climate change and associated extreme fires which have become increasingly common in recent years. If our parks are to endure for future generations, they must be fully protected by the public, as Strathcona Provincial Park was in 1988. When governments serve industry, it is only the public that protects nature.

The only politics that matter are the politics of the planet we steward and hand to future generations. That is a line that should never be compromised. Politics that propose to damage this planet by irreparably logging in old growth protected areas, as suggested by Eby and Parmar, are the opportunistic politics of economic criminality, and should be decried as such.

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