

Green Scene: Celebrating a Century & Learning from our Mistakes

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This Saturday, Parks Day in Canada, is a good time to celebrate 100th anniversary of British Columbia's parks. Strathcona Park (named after Lord Strathcona, the railway promoter who drove the last spike at Craigellachie on Canada's first transcontinental railway line) became our first provincial park when it was created in 1911. Thus began a rather complex and, often, troubled, history of protecting our province's spectacular landscapes and rich diversity of plants and animals. No park better than Strathcona exemplifies this complicated and, sometimes, compromised process.

In the early 1900s, rumours that the federal government wanted to create a new federal park in BC as well as lobbying by the local tourist industry convinced Premier McBride to fund a 1910 expedition into the wilderness areas of Vancouver Island with the goal a creating, instead, a provincial park. As a consequence, on March 1, 1911, the provincial government passed the Strathcona Park Act.



Slightly lower in elevation than the Golden Hinde, the rugged Mount Colonel Foster (left side of photo) is one of several majestic peaks in Strathcona Park. *Ian McArthur photo.*

Originally designated as a triangular piece of land to the west of the E&N Railway land grant, the first major failing of Strathcona Park was that its boundaries did not follow

watershed contours. Its main features included some spectacular waterfalls, the rugged spine of Vancouver Island including its highest peak, the Golden Hind (elevation 2200 meters), and, on its western flanks, beautiful Buttle Lake which drains eventually to the Campbell River. With no nearby railway to bring visitors, road construction was seen as an immediate imperative. Such work was undertaken in 1912 with plans for lodge construction and steamboat services on Buttle Lake to follow.

Ideas about park management in the 1910s were quite different than existing policies. To enhance the main road into Strathcona Park, hundreds of London Plane trees as well as mountain ash, chestnuts, and elms were planted. To further beautify the area, 300 pounds of broom seed (of three varieties including Scottish, Spanish and Portuguese), 8000 ivy plants plus foxglove, periwinkle and many others were planted along the road. Some of these plants are now known to be highly invasive species and contemporary efforts are focused on

eradicating them from protected areas. However, the idea in 1911 was to create an attractive landscape that would appeal to visitors. The outbreak of World War I soon focused attention elsewhere and quickly brought such plans to a halt.

Following the end of World War I in 1918, the Strathcona Park Act was amended to allow mining. In 1927, the Act was amended again to permit the raising of water levels in its water courses. Despite this, in the decades that followed, the residents of BC developed a growing appreciation for Strathcona's natural values. In 1939, all provincial parks were classified. A Class A Park, which apparently was applied to Strathcona, was the highest form of protection whereas in Class B parks, logging, mining and hydroelectric projectors were allowed. Class C Parks were very small parks which protected a unique feature.

In 1953, construction of the Strathcona Dam impounded Upper Campbell Lake and backed water up into Buttle Lake which raised its level by 8 meters and required logging along its shores. Not surprisingly, this led to considerable public outcry. Thus, in 1957, Strathcona was reclassified as a Class B park and, to make matters worse, in 1959, the Westmin Mine opened at the southwest end of Buttle Lake. To appease critics, the provincial government created nature conservancies in three roadless wilderness areas of Strathcona, "parks within parks", so to speak. However, logging continued to be allowed in Strathcona throughout the 1960s. This was apparently justified (to some minds) because it allowed the acquisition of protected areas in Long Beach, China Beach, Rath Trevor and, finally, Cape Scott in 1967.

Over time, Strathcona has had some positive additions. In 1968, 12,000 hectares of mostly alpine meadows (and, thus, land with few forestry values) in the Forbidden Plateau area were added in 1968. On the west side, the Clayoquot Sound land use decision in 1995 added the entire Megin River and Talbot Creek watersheds down to tidewater.

The various deals made on Strathcona Park have stiffened the resolve of those who wish to protect parks in BC. While Strathcona has returned to being designated as a Class A Park of 250,000 hectares, it also contains enclosed within its boundaries another "park within a park", i.e., the 3328 hectare Class B Strathcona-Westmin Park where zinc mining continues to this day right next to beautiful Myra Falls. Strathcona is a poignant reminder that the people interested in protecting the significant ecological spaces of BC must remain forever vigilant.