

Green Scene: The Value of Regional Parks

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In addition to offering beautiful natural areas, regional parks like Minnehada with its heritage lodge offer an attractive venue for events such as the recent "Art in the Park" Festival. *Bruce Brandhorst photo.*

Like many people who enjoy outdoor recreation, I am a big fan of parks - most especially our regional park system which provides a delightful variety of parks and offers readily-accessible opportunities to get out and experience nature. Metro Vancouver currently manages 22 regional parks, 5 greenways, 2 ecological conservancies and 4 regional reserves which all together consist of over 14,500 hectares of protected land in the lower mainland. The ecological conservancies include Burns Bog and Codd Wetland in Pitt Meadows. The regional reserves, i.e., mostly parks-in-waiting, include areas such as Widgeon Reserve in northeast Coquitlam and Blaney Bog in Pitt Meadows. Local regional parks include Belcarra, Colony Farm and Minnehada. Getting outside and experiencing nature is not only good exercise; studies also show it is beneficial for our mental health.

Whether you seek an interesting beach-side stroll in Belcarra, a hike over the boulder-laden trails of Minnehada or a pleasant and pastoral walk along the level dykes of Colony Farm, our regional parks offer a variety of ecosystems to explore and enjoy. In addition, Park interpreters and volunteers offer nature tours and a number of programs for a small fee or, sometimes, for free. Programs in Regional

Parks offered in August included bat-watching, star-gazing, canoe-paddling, geo-caching, nature walks and learning to fish. What's not to enjoy?

Unknown to most people, the Metro Vancouver Board is currently examining the role and function of its park system. Last February, the Board which is comprised of municipal mayors plus a few councillors instructed staff "to examine the long-term regional parks function, the relevance of the regional parks function in the future and how the growth of this function will be managed." It is expected that the Regional Parks Service Review Plan will be ready this fall for the Board's perusal. Anticipated changes to the Regional Parks Plan could be forthcoming. I am worried this review of our park system is happening in the absence of any public consultation. After all, these parks were created to be used by members of the public. In this regard, they are highly successful ventures with over 10 million visits per year. The cost of these parks to taxpayers is minimal – an estimated \$12 per person per year, the mere cost of a movie.

In addition to offering an interesting variety of outdoor experiences for all ages, our regional parks also provide critical habitat for a number of species at risk. Over a hundred species at risk and many more not at risk rely on the habitat found within regional parks. In fact, were it not for regional parks, it would be an almost impossible challenge to provide the low-elevation habitats that a number of our local species at risk require such as the Oregon spotted frog, painted turtle and short-eared owl. Years ago, when I served on a Committee to recommend future uses of Colony Farm (prior to it becoming a park), another committee member lamented that, if only the birds could be convinced to fly away to the mountain tops, there would be more space for people to build houses. However, nature doesn't work like that. Species have evolved to live in different habitats and, typically, the areas where people like to live are often the most productive and hospitable for a number of other species.

Regional parks offer other benefits as well. Rather belatedly, we now recognize nature provides a number of benefits to people known as ecosystem services. If, for example, we were to experience another devastating Fraser River flood such as occurred in 1894 and 1948 with a near miss in 2007, Colony Farm Regional Park would provide space, first on the Port Coquitlam side, on its floodplain for rising waters. This would help to prevent flooding in residential areas.

There are a number of other benefits provided by nature – these include the regulation of our hydrological cycle, the provision of clean air and carbon storage. Wetlands help to improve water quality but, in the lower mainland, we have lost most of our wetlands to development, industrial or agricultural uses. Trees remain the best mechanism to provide carbon storage which helps to lessen the impact of climate change. Trees also improve air quality and stabilize the salmon streams that ultimately provide us with a source of food. Natural processes maintain soil fertility and wild habitat provides nesting space for pollinators of agricultural crops such as bumble bees or naturalized honeybees. A study undertaken in 2010 estimated the value of the ecosystem services provided by natural areas in the lower mainland - many of which are regional parks - to be a whopping \$5.4 billion per year.

I hope the review of the park system undertaken by the Metro Vancouver Board will recognize these tremendous benefits and recommend that our regional park system continues to grow to keep pace with the ever-expanding human population in the lower mainland.