

# Green Scene: The purpose of parks

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[photograph]

[caption: Mountain goats use alpine areas in summer but descend to lower elevations in winter. B.C. has over half the world's population.

Bruce Brandhorst photo]

[subtitle: It's nature, not the accommodations, that matters]

[transcribed from the article as it appeared in the Tri-City News]

An ongoing concern for naturalists is trying to protect habitat for wildlife when local governments zone for more development.

Although there are species at risk living within municipal boundaries, it's usually a losing battle trying to retain much more than narrow strips of trees along creek corridors.

The same is true when it comes to dealing with forestry or mining issues within B.C.'s 'working landscapes'. For example, senior governments remain unwilling to forgo a little logging revenue so old-growth forests can be retained for the remaining 17 spotted owls struggling to survive.

Thus, I look to B.C.'s protected areas as the one place where the needs of other species can come first. B.C. has more species than any other province in Canada but, of our 484 bird species, 80 of them are considered to be at risk.

The remarkable biodiversity of this province is a legacy we must ensure gets passed on to future generations. If other species don't receive protection in parks, where else can they go?

Years ago, I served on a committee to discuss the future of Colony Farm and had the unsettling experience of working with a city staff person who said that while he didn't object to providing land for wildlife, this shouldn't happen in areas suitable for people. His vision for Colony Farm was residential; he thought the birds should fly up to the mountaintops.

In fact, it is low elevation areas that are the most suitable for many species. These are fertile lands, rich in vegetation, food sources, fresh water and a variety of habitat. Mountaintops are inhospitable places for the vast majority of species.

Although 13% of the land base in B.C. is protected as parks, only small portions of these parks consist of biodiverse, low elevation lands. A disproportionately high percentage of our parks consists of those inhospitable mountaintops. Thus, it is especially important to protect low-elevation lands within parks. Yet it is these areas that tend to be most coveted by people and where, I suspect, the provincial government proposes to establish new resorts in at least a dozen parks.

Why do people go to parks? Is it to eat and sleep? I visit parks to experience awe-inspiring landscapes that show little evidence of the hand of man, to take delight in wildflowers and catch tantalizing glimpses of wildlife. I can enjoy none of these experiences while I snore.

Granted, there are some provincial parks that have highways already going through them and paved roads to alpine meadows so they do appeal to more car-oriented visitors. But, guess what - Manning Park already has a lodge in it, as do most parks that might be considered suitable sites for resorts. Resorts require roads, paved parking lots, water and sewage treatment, food plus a variety of other services and activities, all of which you can be sure will result in the loss of wildlife habitat.

Nor do I think the guests of these proposed high-end resorts will appreciate the poorly maintained trails, lack of signage, brochures, staff and interpretive programs that have become the hallmark of our woefully under-funded provincial park system. It's not as if these parks don't pay their way - studies have shown that parks contribute \$170 million to the provincial tax base while costing taxpayers only \$28 million in operating expenses.

The operating budget for parks was slashed as part of Premier Gordon Campbell's cuts when his party came to power in 2001. Five years later, our provincial park system is showing massive signs of neglect.

What our provincial parks need is not a lot of new resorts but an increase in operating budget so visitors can safely enjoy parks in a low-impact manner.

As much as I take pleasure in house guests, I like it best when they leave no trace but happy memories. I will continue to try to do the same whenever I am a guest of wildlife in our provincial parks.