

# **Tourism and Protected Areas Management in British Columbia**

A background report prepared for  
BC's Parks Legacy Panel

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# 1. Tourism and Protected Areas

Too often tourism development in and around protected areas proceeds without a clear understanding of the management goals and objectives or how competing interests are to be accommodated. Either implicitly or explicitly, many planners adopt an integrated resource management (IRM) planning model to parks planning. Under an IRM approach, various values, as well as consumptive and non-consumptive uses, are identified. The full range of values and uses are generally recognized as legitimate, and efforts are made to accommodate all of these uses in some optimal way across the land base. Conceptually, the IRM model may be appropriate for most Crown lands which are dedicated to multiple uses.<sup>1</sup>

Protected areas, on the other hand, are different. Parks are areas that society has collectively said should be managed primarily for their conservation values, and secondarily, for uses that are compatible with these conservation values. Fundamentally, parks are about more than places to recreate. Since they are all the future generations will know of the pristine original world, they function as benchmarks for human survival as well as ecological lifeboats.

The view that the primary purpose of parks is to protect conservation values is strongly endorsed by the B.C. public. In recent opinion surveys, B.C. Parks found that of the nine possible benefits of having a provincial park system in British Columbia, a majority of British Columbians believe that the top two benefits of the parks system are preservation of the natural environment and protection of wildlife.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 summarizes the top four perceived benefits of the provincial park system from two recent surveys.

Responding in these surveys, eight out of ten British Columbians state that preservation of the natural environment and protection of wildlife are “very important” benefits of the park system, and rate these conservation benefits significantly higher than other use benefits, such as “places to relax”, “places to camp” or “attracting tourists”.

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<sup>1</sup> In theory, integrated resource management is being practiced on most BC Crown land. In practice, land management in B.C., most of which is dedicated to forestry, more closely resembles a ‘timber maximization with constraints’ model of resource management that often only entails limited constraints on the over-riding timber objective. (For an excellent review of current land planning approaches in B.C. and the elements of an alternative, ecosystem-based approach to land management, see The Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Practices in Clayoquot Sound. April 1995. *Sustainable Ecosystem Management in Clayoquot Sound. Planning and Practices (Report 5)*. Victoria, B.C. pp. 151-160).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks. November 1995. *Changing Public Views of BC Parks: A Comparison of Recent Surveys*. Victoria, B.C. Information is from mail surveys to BC households with a random sample of 2,500 to 3,000 adults and a response rate of 74 percent to 81 percent.

The fact that the public places a much higher priority on conservation as compared with recreation and tourism development in parks planning is one which cannot be overstated. Yet contrary to these public convictions, protected areas planners too often assume that a wide range of potential recreational uses of protected areas are legitimate and on par with conservation objectives. This leads to the all too common situation where increasing pressure on the park system to accommodate growing recreation and tourism demand leads to a progressive deterioration of the natural values upon which the protected area was preserved in the first place.

**Table 1: Most Important Perceived Benefits of BC's Provincial Park System from Two Recent B.C. Parks Surveys (1995 and 1989)**

<b>Perceived Benefit (% indicated "very important")</b>	<b>1995 Survey</b>	<b>1989 Survey</b>
Preservation of the natural environment	81	86
Protection of wildlife	80	83
Places to relax	58	53
Places to camp	56	50
Attract tourists	54	54

Needless to say, there will always be pressure on the park system to accommodate more recreational uses, especially those that generate jobs and revenue. This pressure can be expected to grow as the population increases and natural areas become more scarce. Given this, unless parks policy makers and planners are firmly committed to conservation, there will be a gradual but persistent degradation of the natural values of our parks under the guise of good 'integrated resource management'.

At the same time, given the loss of pristine wilderness in B.C. and worldwide, the conservation importance of B.C.'s park system will grow exponentially. What this means, therefore, is that all those involved in tourism development and protected areas management must respect the common, over-riding goal of conserving the natural values of our park system if we are to respond to the public's priorities and especially if we are to pass on an enduring legacy to future generations.

## 1.1 Tourism development must be consistent with conservation

British Columbians pay for their park system through taxes and the foregone natural resource revenues from timber and minerals. By establishing our park

system, British Columbia society has made a conscious decision to set aside these areas from commercial uses that would degrade their natural values. Many people think this means no logging or mining. But inappropriate tourism development can also be harmful. This means that anyone who uses the park system, especially tourism operators, must do so at the good will and approval of the public. They must not operate in a fashion that degrades and destroys the conservation values of protected areas. Conservation should always be the first and most important priority for parks management.

This means that the Precautionary Principle should be rigorously applied in parks planning. In other words, the onus of proof should rest with the proponent of a proposed activity or development within the park system to show that it will not degrade (but ideally maintain or enhance) natural values. It is not the Parks Service's responsibility to prove that there are negative impacts. If there is uncertainty as to the likely impacts, then the proposed activity or development should not proceed until there is further investigation and proper clarification of the impacts.

Whether tourism is beneficial or detrimental to the environment and parks depends on how it is developed and managed. For example, trampling of sensitive alpine meadows through heli-hiking tours, harassment of whales from overly aggressive whale-watching companies, flightseeing over key wilderness recreation areas or sensitive wildlife habitat, and development of golf courses in critical wildlife winter range, are just a few of the examples of the serious detrimental impacts that inappropriate tourism can have on wildlife and the environment. Indeed, if not managed properly, tourism can be just the latest manifestation of a 'gold rush mentality', that draws ever increasing numbers of people to a rapidly degrading resource. The challenge for B.C. Parks, therefore, and the tourism industry is to learn how to plan and manage tourism in an environmentally reasonable manner.

### **Ecotourism**

The phenomena of ecotourism has been a response to growing public awareness of environmental issues and the impacts of tourism on the environment. Events like the Brundtland report, the Rio Earth Summit, the Chernobyl nuclear accident and Exxon Valdez oil spill all contributed to heightened environmental awareness and concern in the 1980s and early 1990s which is now having an impact on tourism. Ecotourism operations have arisen worldwide to cater to tourists who have an affinity for nature and a desire to minimize their impact on the natural areas they visit.

To a large extent, the growth of ecotourism parallels the demographics of the 'baby boom' generation. Many baby boomers were heavily involved in outdoor recreation and conservation activities in the 1970s and 80s. In the 90s, boomers

have less time but more disposable income, and as a result, this has created an increasing demand for ecotourism products. As boomers age, there is expected to be a significant expansion in this type of tourism operation. According to the Pacific Asia Travel Association, tourists are increasingly identifying environmental issues as the prime reason to select a destination or facility. As well, the U.S. National Tour Operators Association found that 94% of adults surveyed expressed concern about environmental protection and were willing to spend more on environmentally sensitive tour products.<sup>3</sup>

Ecotourism operations are thought to be low impact and sensitive to the natural environment. In many cases they are. But all tourism has some impact, and if the intensity of use exceeds the social and biological carrying capacity of a natural area, even 'ecotourism' impacts can be significant. This suggests the need to assess prospective tourism impacts before they are permitted, especially in parks. However, to date in B.C., there is usually little or no information on wildlife and other values upon which to establish a baseline for assessing tourism impacts. Consider these examples: if heli-skiers and heli-hikers do not encounter mountain goats on the high alpine ridges, this may mean that there is no impact on the goats; or it could simply mean that the goats have abandoned the area and retreated further into the wilderness. Similarly, while a wildflower meadow may appear normal, it may in fact be less verdant than it used to because of the repeated trampling of hiking boots. Or consider a situation where grizzly bears may no longer frequent an outwash plain because the spot is now a popular camp for river rafters.

Clearly, if tourism is to be truly environmentally acceptable, tourism products and activities must be properly selected, sized and situated so as to minimize environmental damage. This means that parks managers must identify and avoid irreparable damage to known environmentally sensitive resources.

The following section introduces some tourism planning tools and techniques that have been successfully used to manage tourism resources in environmentally sensitive areas in B.C. These have been recognized internationally as being on the leading edge of tourism resource management.

## 1.2 Tourism as a Land-based Resource

Traditionally tourism has been viewed as a market-driven, service industry rather than a natural resource-based activity. The traditional focus of tourism planning has been on the development and marketing of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, golf courses, cultural sites, and entertainment complexes.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniels, A. All statistics Vancouver Sun, September 18, 1997. *BC tourism re-examines itself amid environmental concerns.*

The fact is that much of British Columbia's tourism sector should be seen as a natural resource-based activity. This is because like forestry, mining and fishing, the fundamental growth and prosperity of B.C.'s tourism sector depends to a large extent on the abundance and quality of the natural resources of the province. British Columbia is blessed with some of the finest scenery in the world including rugged, spectacular coastlines, mountain vistas, abundant wildlife, fresh water lakes, forested valleys, wild rivers, extensive wilderness and more. This rich abundance and diversity of natural landscapes provides the context for a wide variety of tourism products which provide the essential 'competitive edge' that allows B.C. to compete in the global tourism market place.

While British Columbia lacks the warm temperatures of the tropics, the historical and cultural sites of older nations, and the cosmopolitan attractions of European and Asian cities, it is the natural beauty of the province that draws tourists to B.C. British Columbia's "SuperNatural" qualities – especially as protected in its parks –are the marketing 'hook' that allows the province's tourism industry to attract and hold its market share of the world's largest industry.

The environmental quality and natural variety of the province is a major drawing card that attracts tourists to B.C, serves as a vital 'backdrop' to many tourism activities, and validates the holiday experience of many visitors, even those that do not directly visit B.C.'s parks. Indeed, our parks and natural areas are also a major reason why many British Columbians spend their vacation dollars at home, exploring their own province.

Given this importance of environmental integrity to the tourism industry in British Columbia, tourism products must be planned and managed to ensure that their quality is not eroded by indiscriminate tourism development or by the uninformed actions of other industries.

Seeing the B.C. tourism industry as a natural-resource based sector enables techniques long utilized for environmental planning in other resource sectors, such as forestry or recreation, to be applied to tourism. Inventory, zoning, conflict assessment, and resource mapping are some of the methodologies that can be applied to plan for tourism resource sustainability.

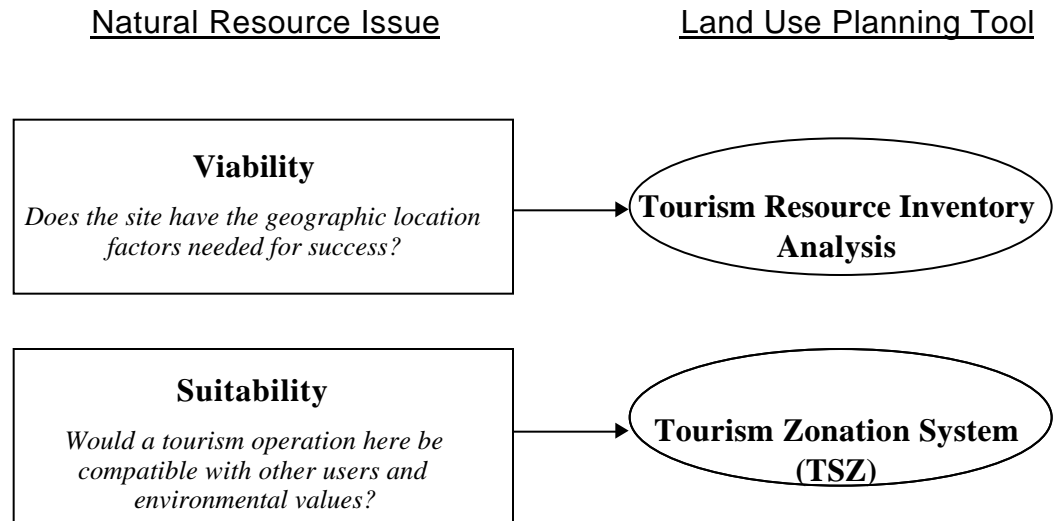
## **2. Tourism Resource Planning Tools and Techniques**

In order to protect the environment, and to develop tourism opportunities that are both economically and socially acceptable, a natural resource-based planning approach is needed for this sector. The planning approach should be capable of identifying tourism opportunities that are both economically viable as well as

environmentally and socially appropriate. The tourism planning process consists of two types of analysis, as shown in Figure 1:

- land use zonation; and,
- tourism resource inventory.

**Figure 1: Sustainable Tourism Planning**



Together, these tools – the Tourism Zonation System (TZS) and tourism resource inventory methodologies – can be used to identify suitable, low impact locations for specific tourism products and facilities that have a high probability of being economically viable and environmentally appropriate.

## 2.1 Tourism Zonation System (TZS)

The Tourism Zonation System (TZS) is a land planning technique that enables the integration of tourism development within conservation priorities.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is especially pertinent for the BC Park Service. This zonation system differentiates natural resource based tourism products into Urban, Frontcountry, Midcountry or Backcountry zones according to:

- degree of naturalness (from urban to wilderness);
- type of tourism outdoor experience;
- method of transport;

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<sup>4</sup> The Tourism Zonation System is discussed in detail in Ethos Environmental Inc. and L. J. D'Amore and Associates. 1987. *Towards a Strategy for Natural Resource-Based Tourism*.

- intensity of use; and,
- scale of facilities (e.g. from destination resorts to cabins).

The tourism attributes of these zones are briefly described below. It should be noted that the tourism zones roughly correspond with the current zonation system in use by B.C. Parks as follows: Backcountry Zone is equivalent to the combined Wilderness Conservation and Wilderness Recreation Zones (i.e. non-mechanized access and/or low frequency air access); Midcountry corresponds with the Natural Environment Zone (i.e. limited and/or controlled mechanized access and use); and, Frontcountry corresponds with the Intensive Recreation Zone (i.e. all-weather, public roads and high use). **However, unlike the existing B.C. Parks zonation system, the Tourism Zonation System is a land use planning tool to be applied to the entire provincial land base, and not just those areas within parks.** (See the accompanying maps on pages 11-13).

**The Backcountry/Wilderness Tourism Zone** provides a high quality (often world class) wilderness experience in a pristine environment to a smaller, though generally affluent clientele. Multiday river rafting, canoe tripping, photo safaris and nature treks, multi-day ski touring, guided mountaineering, sail charters, sea kayaking, and wilderness horseback trips are all associated with this zone. The absence of motorized access and lack of infrastructure characterize the Backcountry zone. The tourism experience emphasizes personal and small group interaction and physical activity within pristine natural landscapes. Examples of high calibre Backcountry zones that are found within the B.C. park system include the Tatshenshini, Tweedsmuir, Spatsizi, Purcell Wilderness and the Northern Rockies.

The Backcountry zone is a rapidly diminishing resource and yet it is associated with an especially attractive tourism image with strong appeal internationally. Few other areas of the planet still retain high calibre, large wilderness areas that are found in B.C. Given the shrinking availability of wilderness elsewhere in the world and the growing demand for it by an affluent traveling public, wilderness promises to play an increasingly important part in the future of British Columbia's tourism industry. Managing use and preserving the pristine wilderness is the key management challenge of this zone.

**The Midcountry/Natural Tourism Zone** is characterized by the provision of recreation experiences for 'intermediate' numbers of visitors in a quality natural environment. This zone is often associated with motorized access and accommodation, but on a smaller scale and to a lesser intensity than in the Frontcountry. For example, Midcountry accommodation might consist of small lodges with limited facilities. The rustic basics of comfort are provided but the emphasis of the experience is still on the natural environment rather than the facilities themselves. Access in the Midcountry might be by helicopter, float



plane, boat or unpaved resource roads. Heli-skiing, multi-day heli-hiking, motor launch cruises, mountain biking and some guest ranches are examples of adventure activities associated with this zone. Bowron Lakes, Cathedral Lakes and parts of Garibaldi Provincial Park and Manning Provincial Park are examples of Midcountry zones that have been allowed to develop in B.C.'s parks over the years.

The Midcountry/Natural Zone can be one of the most challenging areas to manage. Potential conflict with other users is significant in the Midcountry, where industrial forestry and mining activity predominates. Conflicts between mechanized and non-mechanized recreationalists can be more common in this 'transition' zone than in either Frontcountry or Backcountry. In parks, Midcountry operations (e.g. heli-skiing) can lead to key conflicts with conservation priorities. As a result, future expansion of Midcountry-style tourism is not recommended for lands protected in parks. Rather, they should be located outside the parks, around their perimeter. Containing the level of access and infrastructure are key issues in management of the Midcountry/Natural Zone.

**The Frontcountry/Intensive Tourism Zone** services large volumes of tourists in a naturally scenic though substantially human altered environment. Often, the more natural Mid and Backcountry zones provide the scenic backdrop for Frontcountry/Intensive zones (e.g. the Banff National Park Frontcountry looks into extensive Backcountry vistas). Tourism in the Frontcountry/Intensive Zone will often be closely linked to motorized, high volume transportation on major highway, rail corridors or proximate to airports. Tourism in this zone often involves the use and development of substantial infrastructure: destination resorts, motels, restaurants, shopping areas, entertainment services, ski areas and so on. Adventure tourism activities associated with the Frontcountry/Intensive zone include daytrip rafting, daytrip ski touring and nordic track skiing, daytrip heli-hiking, highway based nature viewing tours and paved road bicycle tours.

Frontcountry tourism activities appeal to those tourists seeking a short duration outdoor oriented activity. Tourists enjoying the Frontcountry often do not have the time to explore further into the Midcountry, or prefer to limit their natural experience in order to enjoy the full comfort and convenience of hotels and restaurants in the evening and mornings. Protection of viewsapes and scenic corridors is an important element of Frontcountry tourism management. Frontcountry zones have been allowed to develop in some of B.C.'s parks, for example in Cypress, Manning and Mt. Robson provincial parks with significant adverse conservation consequences. Within parks, the intensity of Frontcountry use and development leads to severe conflicts with conservation priorities. The example of Banff townsite development exemplifies this. Controversies of the type that have long plagued the Frontcountry style tourism at locations like Cypress Bowl Park indicate that future expansion of Frontcountry tourism within

parks should be strongly resisted. Such intensive tourism instead should be located outside of protected areas.

**The Urban Tourism Zone** is an integral part of the Tourism Zonation System, although as far as wilderness tourism and parks management is concerned in B.C., it is of minimal significance. This zone corresponds with urban areas with populations over 20,000 people where a wide variety of services are provided. Culturally-based tourism is the strongest feature of this zone.