**BC Elders Council for Parks Dialogues on Protected Areas and Climate Change –**

**What We Heard and Mapping a Path Forward**

1. **Introduction:**

Science has made it clear that to bring the planet back to a more ecologically stable condition, we must increase the proportion of our world that allows nature to function effectively and reduce negative human influences on land and water. The world is finally responding to this call. From the UN to Canada, the US and beyond, a pledge to protect 30% of land and water by 2030 is supported by governments and the public. What does that look like in BC?

In BC we have reached about 16% in some form of protection, either as a designated park or protected area or in some form of Tribal Park, *Wildlife Act* Designation, private land trust holding, etc. It is crucial to identify the best way to double this level of protection and to manage the entire land base to protect ecological processes most effectively, to manage social use fairly, and to maintain appropriate economic benefits. A thoughtfully redesigned and expanded protected areas system will need a consistent system of management to ensure effective stewardship. This is no simple matter as it must be done in a manner that will build public understanding and the political will to make it happen.

The BC Elders Council for Parks sponsored a series of three stakeholder dialogue sessions to bring together current ideas on designations and design for expanding protected areas, land management systems, and outreach on natural solutions to the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. The sessions were held virtually via the Zoom video conferencing system during the March to May period in 2021. The specific objectives of these dialogue workshops were to explore 1) the role of protected areas as the core of a natural solution to climate change; 2) how protected areas need to be expanded, buffered, connected, fully representative of the ecosystems of the province, and include special and rare ecosystems; 3) how the system must be properly managed for ecological integrity; and 4) how to build public understanding.

Accordingly, the first workshop held on March 31st focussed on nurturing biodiversity through expanding and connecting our protected areas system, the second held on April 28th explored the management changes and innovations needed to support a protected area system and manage the entire land base to nurture ecological and human health, and the final session held on May 26th discussed the best approaches for getting the public and politicians to understand the need and champion necessary actions. The sessions were attended by 80 people with between 48 and 57 at each session. They were evenly divided between academics (students and professors), government employees (current federal, provincial, and municipal employees), representatives from ENGOs, members of the BC Elders Council for Parks, and independents. There were two indigenous attendees. The format of each session consisted of introductions, a brief plenary to introduce the session objectives and questions to be addressed, six breakout discussion sessions, and a wrap-up plenary to report out on each of the breakout group results. Each breakout group was assigned a facilitator, and a rapporteur who kept detailed notes of the discussions.

1. **Dialogue 1 - Expansion of the Parks System in BC**

The first of these Dialogue sessions explored how to support biodiversity and adapt to climate change by expanding and improving our current park and protected areas systems. Parks and protected areas are a core component of a broader framework needed to protect and restore ecological integrity and biodiversity. Expanding and better managing parks and protected areas has enormous potential to contribute to both mitigating climate change directly by maintaining and sequestering reservoirs of carbon in the soil and biota, and by providing the structure and function needed if ecosystems are to adapt to the changes in climatic conditions now and in the future. The co-benefits of managing the land base for climate adaptation (biodiversity) and mitigation include clean air and water, extreme weather buffering, support for pollinators, food sources, solace, and recreation.

The current system of national, provincial, regional, Tribal Parks, and other Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in British Columbia has more than doubled since 1990, however ecosystem diversity remains poorly represented across most of the province. Protected areas are not distributed uniformly and are often designated in high elevation areas, areas of lower biological diversity or productivity, and areas prioritizing recreational use over conservation. The opportunity to double the system again, in line with pledges at the national and international level, will allow better representation and connectivity to play their critical roles. There are several other land designations that need to be recognized as additional elements contributing significantly to biodiversity conservation, including Wildlife Management Areas under the *Wildlife Act*, some Wildlife Habitat Areas (e.g. caribou, Marbled Murrelet), some Ungulate Winter Range, and spatial Old Growth Management Areas under the *Forest and Range Practices Act* and the *Oil and Gas Activities Act*, various special management zones and objectives designated in Higher Level Plan Orders under the *Land Act*, and conservation lands owned by land trusts, governments, and others.

It has been shown that current provincial government policies often poorly represent old growth values particularly in productive sites in coastal and inland temperate rainforests. Building ecosystem resilience to climate change is going to require large, buffered, and connected protected areas, protection of critical refuges, ecological approaches to land management beyond areas set aside in protected areas, and the restoration of key areas damaged through management activities in the past. Several ideas have been proposed coming from government (30% by 2030), NGOs (Nature Needs Half) and local coalitions (Kootenay Resilience – 25% protected, 25% connectivity, 25% buffers and 25% well managed).

Each of the six breakout groups was asked to address two of the following three questions:

1. What is the ideal design of protected, connected, buffered, representative land in BC?;
2. How do we get there from here with buy-in from the public? This includes industry (where they work), government (that they vote for and support with taxes), and First Nations who have a long and storied history with the land, and
3. What are the opportunities that can be heralded and the challenges that must be heeded?

Key messages from the breakout group discussions are summarized below based on the notes taken by the respective rapporteurs.

**Protected Area Design:**

1. Significant new additions to the protected area system are required to address significant challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change. Priorities should include protecting ecosystems at risk and ensuring ecological representation at the landscape scale. Low elevation, high biological productivity sites are critical. Protected area objectives need to include size, representation, ecological productivity & functionality, and connectiveness, as well as protection of fine-scale critical and rare ecological niches. Ideal conditions no longer exist on the landscape so an emphasis needs to be incorporating restoration of critical ecosystems in the design of protected areas.
2. Ecosystem resiliency requires connectivity at landscape and regional scales – conservation design dictates an integration of the protected area system with land use across the landscape. Landscape context is critical (eg. valley bottom to upland, slope and aspect, landscape features, soil, relationship to riparian and marine). There are multiple barriers to connectivity that need to be addressed – this is particularly the case in valley bottoms where private property, fencing, road networks, built-up areas, etc. create barriers for wildlife.
3. Uncertainty about future conditions dictates an adaptive management approach. This requires new and significant research and monitoring programs to understand ongoing ecosystem impacts, modelling future scenarios, and applying risk management options accordingly.

**How Do We Get There:**

1. There is cautious optimism in the federal government’s commitment to protecting 25% of nature by 2025 and 30% of nature by 2030, however strong leadership is needed to get support from the province in order to achieve these targets. Only including narrowly defined parks and protected areas may be too strict for the province to help meet the 25% by 2025 goals. Federal government funding will be needed to help push BC’s provincial government to prioritize protecting more areas.
2. Moving forward requires addressing issues which include absence of commitment by the provincial government for expanding the protected area system, lack of support from resource industry sector and resource dependent communities, and First Nations mistrust of protected areas that historically excluded indigenous access or direct governance. Working with First Nations will be critical to moving forward on expanding the protected areas system which integrates complex land use interests and rights and title issues. There needs to be new governance mechanisms which will integrate the need for reconciliation of indigenous rights and title with broad scale strategic conservation design.
3. Expanding public support for protecting nature is critical to expanding parks and protected areas. Building awareness campaigns emphasizing the economic value of ecosystem services and biodiversity, and conducting regular public surveys to get a sense of public support for parks, will be valuable in putting pressure on governments.

**Opportunities and Challenges:**

1. Nature provides an opportunity to provide carbon sequestration in support of climate change mitigation. The economic contributions in carbon sequestration provided by protecting old growth forests, grasslands, and wetlands should be recognized through emissions pricing.
2. New provincial legislation which will reform forest practices and take back tenure from major forest licensees has the potential to support conservation objectives. There needs to be strong support for ensuring land use objectives prioritize ecosystem health and resilience over resource extraction. Landscape planning could provide a mechanism for communities to advocate for the conservation of nature, shifting the paradigm to sustainable ecosystems through sound forest stewardship, and encouraging value-added local use of forest products as opposed to log exports.
3. British Columbia does not have dedicated species at risk legislation – although there is caution that significant impacts expected to many species from accelerated climate change dictates both a coarse-scale ecosystems approach as well as a fine-filter species approach.
4. The Covid pandemic has resulted in significant public interest in accessing nature providing needed support of increasing parks and protected areas. Youth movements in support of climate change mitigation and protection of nature are an important opportunity to build on.
5. There is strong interest by many First Nations to create indigenous protected and conserved areas (IPCAs) – there is a need to build relationships with First Nations through research and support – although need to recognize their interests may not always align with conservation priorities.
6. A realistic political lens needs to be applied – governments not paying attention to the socio-economic reality don’t stay elected very long – this speaks to the need for broad stakeholder consultations by federal, provincial, and First Nations governments. Emphasis is needed on transitioning to a greener economy that provides support to communities currently dependent on resource extraction.
7. ENGOs play a critical role creating multiple opportunities such as direct land acquisition, their advocacy campaigns building public awareness and pressure on governments, and localized land stewardship initiatives. Y2Y is a good example of using a single species (eg. grizzly bears) that’s a keystone with large space requirements which can be a good way to protect many different ecosystems and connectivity. However, the numerous nature protection groups across the province lack coordination; greater coherence would increase potential political impact and support for action. Communications should target conservation priorities and successes, incorporating indigenous storytelling, featuring charismatic wildlife and ecosystems, benefits of nature to health and well-being, carbon sequestration opportunities, creating media attention targeting pressure on politicians, etc.
8. **Dialogue 2 – Improving Protected Areas Management**

There is little point in enlarging the parks and protected areas system without considering how it can be sustainably managed.

The history of land management in BC is clear and stark. First Nations, for thousands of years, managed BC’s land and water in a sustainable fashion integrating culture and nature. Settlers then came in increasing numbers and mostly exploited the land for economic benefit with relatively little thought for the impacts of their activity on natural systems. In a reaction to this and recognizing the value to humans of outdoor recreation, the National Park System was established, followed by provincial systems, and then regional systems designed to protect wild spaces from ecological damage and provide healthy recreation experiences. The quality of sustainable management of these areas has varied greatly as have the entities responsible for their management.

National Parks, occupying 0.4% of BC’s land base, has shown the highest commitment to ecological management and have pursued First Nations engagement with the most vigor. BC’s Provincial Parks and Protected Areas is now providing a contracted camping delivery system that has been highly successful, until recent recreation demands overwhelmed it in some areas. BC Parks’ ecosystem management has been seriously underfunded to the point of being dysfunctional in many areas and inadequate policing of inappropriate recreation activities has damaged some parts of the system. Our regional parks systems have had an emphasis on recreation and some regions are well managed as they can tap into informed local populations and tax-based funding sources.

BC Parks and Canada have a variety of co-management agreements with First Nations that vary in their success. There are areas where First Nations are able to apply traditional skills to foster ecosystems locally and areas where local organisations provide excellent ecosystem management in collaboration with governments. There are new areas emerging as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas which have been designated by First Nations who have assumed the management role; and they have shown much promise, especially when they receive adequate support from provincial or federal governments.

There are no universally applied and monitored standards of ecosystem management across BC and as Dialogue 1 has pointed out many of the existing park and protected areas are not located optimally to foster biodiversity and link smoothly across our natural ecosystems.

So, it is in this context that dialogue participants were asked to think about how the current protected areas system needs to evolve to provide optimal management. This management would need to support an expanded and more complex parks and protected areas system where biodiversity thrives and intact ecosystems provide services and also support compatible human activities that contribute to our well being. Specifically, participants were asked to address:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of current park and protected area management regimes?
2. What are the best solutions for reducing the destruction of areas that require protection from human use in order to reach 30 to 50% protection targets?
3. What needs to be done to bring more management focus and support for the protection of marine based species?
4. What are the best options for generating the needed funds for the acquisition and management of our parks and protected areas system (ie. planning, capital infrastructure programming, and stewardship)?

Key messages derived from this session are:

1. Parks and protecting nature are strongly supported by the public. There is significant increased demand for recreational access to parks and nature even to the point of considerable environmental and social impacts due to overuse (eg. mechanized access such as snow machines, motorcycles, and other all terrain vehicles have significant impacts on critical habitats, people and off leash dogs affect wildlife populations). There is a need to balance between recreational access and biodiversity protection objectives, ultimately ecological integrity objectives need to be paramount.
2. Public education about the role of protected areas is critical to building support for conservation, better funding and management of parks, and the need to regulate overuse. Providing recreational access is needed to instill in people a basic understanding about nature, conservation priorities, and respect for nature. There needs to be better funding for park naturalists, outreach programs, and communications such as signage advocating the protection of sensitive ecosystems.
3. Zoning is needed to address ecological integrity, wilderness protection, a spectrum of recreational access, and indigenous reconciliation – this needs to include regulations to buffer development activities adjacent to protected areas.
4. While expansion is needed to address gaps in ecosystem representation, critical habitat protection, and landscape connectivity, it can build on BC’s current 16% in protected areas. The 1990’s Protected Areas Strategy needs to be modernized through a community based multi-stakeholder process – indigenous leadership will be critical to successful implementation of this process recognizing their rights and entitlement.
5. More marine protected areas need to be established; and there needs to be better education and communications about marine values and protection as the public does not have a mental map of what and where they are and why they matter such as the need to build appreciation of the link between terrestrial and marine areas. The prime example of this link is the value of salmon as wildlife that builds the forest.
6. Funding for the parks system is inadequate to manage the challenges of climate change, ecosystem restoration, and planning and management of recreational use versus ecological integrity. There is a dire need for improved research, monitoring, and enforcement capabilities. The Federal government has dedicated $2.3 billion[[1]](#footnote-1) to fund federal provincial agreements that can support nature-based solutions for climate change. BC must be able to access an appropriate portion of these available funds and match them accordingly.
7. There is a need for protected area system coordination across federal, provincial, regional, and indigenous authorities, as well as private lands held by conservation trusts and other land owners.
8. Parks staff are motivated and enthusiastic despite being under resourced.
9. There needs to be better support for volunteers. They lack organizational support through legislation and funding.
10. It is time that a significant dedicated proportion of the provincial budget be invested in the land and water that supports our lives and lifestyles, User fees are not politically welcomed by the public, and would restrict equitable access. However, fees can raise significant funds for cost recovery, improved stewardship, ecosystem restoration, and mitigating overuse in some locations. Increasing tenure holder user fees should be evaluated for generating funding.
11. Significant funding is provided by private sources willing to support the expansion of the parks and protected areas system such as land trusts, the BC Parks Foundation, and other organisations. These groups need to be further funded for land acquisition and operations..
12. **Dialogue 3 – Building Public and Political Understanding**

The third and final dialogue aimed to take the messages heard in the first two dialogues and craft them into clear statements with associated actions to wake up both the public and governments. If the public does not understand park values and doesn’t demand their protection, then governments do not invest in the ecological management of land and waters.

Ultimately we were addressing this question: How could we work with others to build public awareness and create the political will for governments, especially our Provincial Government, to meet its mandate to preserve the ecological integrity of parks and protected areas as part of a nature-based solution to the urgency of a climate emergency?

Our session goal was to create some clear and powerful messaging on parks and climate change and to come up with creative and effective ways of delivering these messages so that they are reflected in government action on BC’s Build Back Better agenda.

Although the focus was on the climate emergency, bringing these messages to both the public and governments will increase their understanding of the large contribution of protected areas in the solution to three of the biggest issues of our day-- the climate emergency, loss of biodiversity and reconciliation with indigenous peoples. Restoring the permeability of the landscape by expanding, restoring, buffering, and connecting our protected lands is not incompatible with jobs, cultural uses, and recreation. We cannot hope to have a liveable future without a functioning landscape.

A series of messages was proposed to the entire session and each break-out group was assigned two of the statements. Each group was asked to sharpen the message and provide strategies to address one or two statements. The ideas flowing from the break-out discussions are presented below:

1. The public must put pressure on the province to develop a clear and specific action plan to reach the federal government’s targets for protected areas (25% of land and water by 2025, 30% by 2030) in collaboration with federal government, First Nations governments, local and regional governments, the private sector, NGOs, and the public.

* Teach the public the value of public land. Make environmental issues tangible and accessible. Public supports issues that it understands.
* Help families understand that new protected areas can create jobs if properly funded.
* Modern land use planning incorporates climate change, recognizes IPCAs and FN primacy on the land.
* One way forward is to immediately recognize all the IPCAs that have already been established. This would get BC to the first target (25% by 2025). The next 5% could target refugia, connectivity, representation at the regional level.
* There are technical people in government who are working at identifying these important areas. Middle managers are important to get onside, but often do not have the understanding to push hard.
* Federal government has provided $2.3 billion to support planning for new federal protected area targets.
* Encourage key MLAs to enter into a nature agreement (ie. Federal-Provincial partnership) with the federal government. Hold them to their campaign promises.
* Northern BC is short on conservation support. Working with groups such as Conservation North could expand these ideas out of the lower mainland and coast.
* Indigenous groups may need to see a direct benefit to new protected areas such as co-management or some resource extraction opportunity.
* Stop logging community watersheds.
* Need mapping of likely areas in BC that could be conserved to reach 25% by 2025.

1. Provincial investment in lands and water acquisition, effective sustainable management, planning, rules enforcement, and third-party monitoring should be a percent of the provincial budget that reflects the critically important role that natural spaces play for biodiversity, carbon storage and adaptation to climate change.

* Local government is where initial action takes place, so interactions between local government and grassroots organizations can be very effective in influencing provincial and federal governments to take actions.
* Indigenous groups are key in conservation and they need to feel empowered because they have a lot of influence through rights granted under the Constitution.
* Showing the public examples of successful municipal/local government conservation projects can help emphasize the importance of tax dollars going towards land management/stewardship projects.
* Put some of the money from property transfer tax towards land management initiatives.

1. A new integrated provincial land planning and management system covering all of BC must be developed, to respond to the climate and biodiversity crises, and to changing public values and concerns. Planning for future land use and development should use an ecological rather than an economic lens.

* Land use planning is an important tool to ensure a social-ecological balance as we redesign land uses at various scales. Regional scale is important.
* We need modernized land-use planning exercises. NDP promised new Vancouver Island land-use plan modelled on the Great Bear Rainforest. Needs to be followed by a conservation design exercise that builds resiliency to climate change - needs tactical planning, not only strategic planning. We need to have carbon sequestration values and ecological values at the centre.
* Increase capacity of the land base to support carbon sequestration. Carbon needs to become the new currency, not money. How do we manage the 50-80% of the land base not protected or urban/industrial, on an ecological basis?
* Overarching goal for old-growth should be conservation of biodiversity… and jobs that go with it, tourism, restoration, carbon, green energy. Over time more wealth from the land is created and it’s more sustainable. Need a workers’ transition plan from a logging fraternity to a sustainable watershed economy based on a range of value from tourism, carbon, and indigenous values. Need a time frame of a decade to make the transition.
* Focus on success stories where land use planning with a more ecological focus has worked such as in the GBR and Haida Gwaii, showcasing the economic opportunities that have resulted. In those locations, there was conservation financing to support local First Nations to generate employment and revenue without logging.

1. The concept of protected spaces must be more fluid, enabling protected lands to have a variety of goals and uses while retaining their ecological integrity and protecting crucial habitats and corridors where species can move freely.

* 50-80% of land base is available for redesignation (from simply extractive logging & mining) and this area needs to be shifted toward a more ecological basis for management.
* There needs to be more of a spectrum of management zones over the province ranging from protected to carefully managed with ecological criteria.

1. We need to embrace and honour indigenous leadership, engagement, knowledge and wisdom, and the promise of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas.

* Need indigenous governments on side.
* Bring more attention to IPCAs. Many First Nations have created IPCAs and there are opportunities for more.
* Draw parallels to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres’s statement of Dec 2, 2020.

*"Indigenous knowledge, distilled over millennia of close and direct contact with nature, can help to point the way. Indigenous peoples make up less than 6 per cent of the world’s population yet are stewards of 80 per cent of the world’s biodiversity on land. Already, we know that nature managed by indigenous peoples is declining less rapidly than elsewhere. With indigenous peoples living on land that is among the most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation, it is time to heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights."*

1. All programs designed to increase biodiversity and tackle the climate crisis should also foster social justice, economic stability, ecosystem health and aboriginal reconciliation.

* Need straightforward messaging like ‘Nature Needs Half’.
* Advance indigenous sovereignty.
* Spread tourism revenue from urban to rural areas.
* Stay positive: it is possible to do all these things; highlight how far we’ve come.
* Tailor message to each audience. Go to the audiences you want to reach.
* Find the recipe for increasing biodiversity and reversing climate change.
* Ask for input; build partnerships; make connections that last
* Broad based movements require different approaches and voices to succeed. Build coalitions with good communication. Play to each group’s strengths.
* Call on government to reignite land use planning.
* Environmental movement is fractured. Need to build coalitions.
* May need to monetize biodiversity to get public understanding.

1. The climate emergency means that many things will change. We need our governments to change, evolve and collaborate. We cannot operate as islands anymore. We need climate and biodiversity-aware leadership.

* Amalgamating park agencies (municipal, provincial, federal) may overlook the different objectives each one is working towards, but there does need to be an agency that facilitates communication between these groups.
* Citizen science initiatives will give the public an opportunity to help out in any park at any level they feel comfortable.

1. An initiative is needed to engage people widely in exploring how the much-needed transition to an ecologically sustainable and socially just future will also provide jobs, protect health, and support community and Indigenous well-being.

* Need to give people hope and optimism.
* Learn from other countries and regions. France has *Minister for the Green Transition*. Wales has a *Commissioner for the Wellbeing of Future Generations.* Japan has held neighbourhood charettes that focus on the future.
* Citizen assemblies are effective at engaging people and building consensus. Need to be representative of the population. Potential frameworks to keep these focused include One Planet, Community wealth building, doughnut economics and ecosystem-based management. Could occur at municipal level. Need a coalition to get this going.

1. **Moving Forward**

In the last few hundred years we have severely damaged our planet. Without creating the conditions for it to heal, it will continue to deteriorate. We must urgently help it repair itself. One of the most effective ways, at a modest cost, is to expand the proportion of the planet that allows nature’s systems to flourish. Expanding and improving our parks and protected areas system in BC will contribute to a stable climate while allowing natural systems to heal and making progress towards reconciliation.

While the dialogues were full of detailed suggestions for actions, the broad strategies for moving forward are,

1. Expand BC’s Parks and Protected Areas system by a) encouraging completion of a BC – Canada agreement to protect nature; b) accepting the work of First Nations on IPCAs; c) making sure the new areas address connectivity and representation; and d) placing more emphasis on marine and watershed protection.
2. Manage the expanded Parks and Protected Areas system in the context of a comprehensive landscape management system for the province. This includes centrally supported but locally driven planning processes that cover management for nature on all public land including protected land. The management system should adequately cover stewardship, recreation, and restoration. It will be necessary to modernize government structures, processes, and legislation to accomplish these tasks.
3. Communicate clearly to the public so that they understand the benefits of natural solutions and the long history of appropriate management by indigenous peoples. Understanding can lead to lobbying their governments to adequately fund and manage natural areas.

The scale of the change needed to address climate change requires that elected officials and governments understand how to introduce change in a way that is positive, measurable, and acceptable to all British Columbians. People need respect; people need jobs and safety; they need a roof over their heads and food. They also need each other. We must redesign governance processes at all levels of government, so they work better and build greater support across all sectors of the population, especially for indigenous people.

1. In 2021 the Canadian Government dedicated $2.3 billion for nature. This is to be used over a 5 year period and help Canada reach their goal of 30% protected by 2030. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)