



June 21, 2023

Elders Council for Parks in British Columbia
Presentation To:
BC's Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

The Elders Council for Parks in BC's mandate is to:

- Recognize the heritage of the regional, provincial and national park systems;
- Build citizen understanding, engagement and support for all public parks; and
- Enable the effective sustainable management, both ecologically and financially, of parks in British Columbia.

The Council's Directors include retired professionals from Federal, Provincial and Regional Parks organizations and environmental advocates from around British Columbia.

Parks and protected areas are important for: conservation, recreation, tourism, personal health, fighting against climate change, and fulfilling British Columbia's obligations to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples through the creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA). They also contribute to preserving our cultural heritage, help BC meet its requirements under Species at Risk legislation, and ensuring healthy fish and wildlife populations for viewing, hunting, fishing and associated outdoor-oriented businesses. The Ecological Reserves component provides small areas for research and study of intact ecosystems, which grow in importance as more of our natural areas are disturbed through human activity.

The province has committed to protecting 30% of British Columbia's land and water by 2030 (30/30), primarily, if not exclusively, through indigenous led conservation. Achieving this goal as quickly as possible leads to land-use certainty that is critical to a healthy environment and a healthy economy for all British Columbians. The recommendations that follow are meant to help government achieve their goals for the environment, the economy **and** for indigenous people (BC has 204 First Nations Bands), and for Ministers to successfully meet the requirements of their mandate letters.

Priority 1 – Funding Land Use Planning

Making timely decisions related to land use is critical, and the lack of certainty is holding up the health of our environment, our economy, and our relationship with First Nations.

Beginning in 2018, the BC government provided \$8,000,000 a year for land use planning (LUP) while providing \$25,000,000 a year for forest landscape planning. LUP considers economic objectives as well as conservation objectives. Clarifying which lands are appropriate for forestry and mining and other natural resource economies ensures greater clarity and predictability for industry, and land use planning done collaboratively with First Nations means permitting and authorizations, if aligned to the plans, can be processed faster and at reduced cost.

There are other benefits such as reducing the risk of federal government species at risk interventions and ensuring that First Nations maintain their rights and title interests without taking the province to court, thus avoiding both confrontation and expensive litigation.

We therefore request that government triple the land use planning budget annually to \$24,000,000 beginning in 2024 and continue to evolve LUP program policies to clearly identify how government will proceed with getting to 30%. Government goals without adequate resources or well-understood strategies to achieve the goals will create public mistrust.

Priority 2 - Working With The Federal Government

The federal government is also committed to 30/30 and is providing financial incentives to provinces to work with them, and First Nations, in partnership to achieve the goal.

Of critical importance is the signing of the Nature Agreement between Canada, BC and BC's First Nation's Leadership Council, scheduled for summer or fall of 2023. It is estimated that there is over \$200,000,000 available to BC by signing the agreement.

Following the signing of that agreement, **it is critical that the BC government ensures adequate long-term funding in 2024 and beyond to achieve the 30/30 target with full and meaningful participation and engagement of First Nations.**

BC should also match the \$50,000,000 offered by Canada's Old Growth Fund. The federal government set aside funding in budget 2022 to support action on old growth across Canada. It is included as part of the negotiations of the Nature Agreement, and participating in this program can help protect old growth in BC and contribute to reaching 30/30.

On July 2, 2019 British Columbia, Canada, the Lower Similkameen Indian Band and the Osoyoos Indian Band signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work towards establishing a National Park Reserve in the South Okanagan – Similkameen region of British Columbia. **The province should take a leadership role in bringing this important National Park Reserve proposal to a successful conclusion.** It would be an important contribution to reaching 30/30!

Priority 3 - Adequate Funding For BC Parks

British Columbians, and visitors to BC, love and appreciate our provincial parks with an estimated 28,000,000 visits in 2022. In 2001, BC Parks budget was \$40.69 million. In 2002 that was reduced to \$31.09 million where it remained for the next 15 years. The budget began to increase annually in 2017/18 (\$39.39 million plus a \$10 million endowment for the Parks Foundation) and in 2022/23 was set at \$58.97 million. The 2023/24 budget is \$69.6 million. There are over 1000 protected areas managed by BC Parks covering over 14 million hectares – 14.4% of the province.

BC Parks is currently funded at around \$5 per hectare. Alberta Parks is funded at \$20/ha and Parks Canada at \$25/ha.

It is recommended that the 2024 budget for BC Parks be increased to a minimum of \$100 million or \$7.14/ha which is still far below funding provided for managing parks in Alberta and for National Parks.

On behalf of the Directors of the Elders Council, I would like to thank you for your time today. We are here to help government achieve their goals for conservation and reconciliation with BC's First Nations.

Wayne Stetski
President

While our submission is limited by the rules to only three priority recommendations, I have included three additional recommendations for the Committee's information and consideration:

Priority 4 - Key Areas For Conservation

Depending on how you do the counting, 19% of the land in BC is currently set aside for conservation. Current negotiations for IPCAs with First Nations would add another 8%. Additional priority areas for consideration for IPCAs should include:

- **The Flathead River Valley in SE BC (Ktunaxa Nation)**
- **The Great Caribou Conservation Area north of Clearwater (Southern Dakelh Nation Alliance, Northern Shuswap Tribal Council).**

Priority 5 - BC Parks Foundation

As the official charitable partner of BC Parks, the BC Parks Foundation is leading an expedition to create the best park system in the world. The BC government contributed \$10,000,000 to the Foundation on June 1, 2023.

It is recommended that the BC government **provide an additional contribution of \$10,000,000 to the Foundation in 2024 and annually after that**, to support the important work they do to

support Park Ambassadors, provide nature programs for newcomers (the Mosaic initiative), securing critical pieces of private land for conservation (23 areas purchased so far), and to assist First Nations in protecting land (3500 Ha Tenh Dzetle Conservancy with the Tahltan nation) to help achieve 30/30.

Priority 6 - Ecological Reserves

The Ecological Reserves (ER) program has largely been ignored by governments for the last decade while the value of undisturbed key areas of land and ocean as benchmark areas for research, and study, grows. These are generally small in size but large in their importance, and should be a priority in setting aside land to achieve 30/30.

The government should work with the Friends of Ecological Reserves to establish up to 10 new Ecological Reserves in BC in 2024.

I appreciate the Committee taking the time to review these additional recommendations and respectfully ask that they be included in the final report. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Wayne Stetski

President, Elders Council for Parks in BC