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Reconciling Parks and Local People? Community Initiatives for Recreational Space in British Columbia, 1925-2007

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Our understanding of park history in North America is based primarily on studies of how governments have established, designed and managed parks, and the impacts that parks have had on local residents. These studies point out the inequities in park-making: local residents lost their homes, their land use activities were criminalized, and their participation in parks was limited to working as guides or labourers (MacEachern 2001, Jacoby 2001, Dubinsky 1999). Residents were dispossessed from land that was used to make the national parks. The parks were then opened to temporary visitors, in particular the urban middle-class with leisure time and the means to travel (MacLaren 1999). This body of work underlines the important tensions between national park administration and local residents. It also implies a binary opposition between urbanites and rural residents, the latter apparently uninterested in preserving "*un*worked land" (Cronon 1996, 79; Zelko 2004).

A closer look at park-making in twentieth-century British Columbia suggests that there were numerous occasions when residents of the province's hinterland communities did attempt to preserve unworked nature, through labour, promotional campaigns, and letters to government (Wilson 1998, 144). This paper compares three local initiatives by settler communities to create recreational space in twentieth-century British Columbia:

the Forbidden Plateau on Vancouver Island in the interwar period, the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy in the Kootenays at the beginning of the postwar environmental movement, and Powell River trail builders on the Sunshine Coast since 1987. I conclude that if governments are seeking ways to create parks that satisfy local desires for recreation and economic stability, they could begin the process of park establishment with locally-initiated recreational spaces, while respecting local economic goals and cultural landscape designs.

Community efforts to create accessible parks and recreational spaces were characterized by different combinations of voluntarism, creativity, formal and informal economic development, and political involvement. Local residents made trails, shelters and equipment from readily available materials to ensure inexpensive access. Creativity was imaginative as well as material: participants gave new meaning to natural spaces by re-interpreting them as landscapes of leisure and adventure (Braun 2002). Local residents regarded their forested hinterland as a combination of commons and commodity. While enjoying leisure activities, local visitors often harvested non-timber forest products, such as mushrooms, salal, and berries. The notion of a commons, a resource that is "shared by a community of producers and consumers" (Oakerson 1992, 41), is problematic in British Columbia where most "Crown land" has not yet been alienated from First Nations. Yet in practice, self-provisioning from common lands has been a key element of British Columbia's informal rural economy, defined as activities outside the capitalist economy (Ommer and Turner 2004, par 1). Recreational lands could also be a commodity in the cash economy as boosters promoted these areas for tourist use.

The Forbidden Plateau on Vancouver Island was a popular recreation area for forty years before it was protected as part of Strathcona Provincial Park in 1967. Located in the mountains west of Courtenay, the landscape of the Forbidden Plateau is open and subalpine, with meadows, lakes, sparse and low vegetation cover and some forested valleys. This area was granted, along with one-fifth of Vancouver Island, to the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway Company in 1883. Steep canyons and poor quality wood at higher elevations discouraged logging. Very little changed about the physical nature of the plateau from the 1910s to the 1920s, yet it underwent a dramatic social reconstruction. During the First World War, the plateau was inhabited by trappers, prospectors and men avoiding conscription (Mayse 1990, 36, 150). From the mid-1920s, local boosters re-branded the plateau as a landscape of adventure for both genders.

After hiking there to determine the source of the city's water supply in 1926, Clinton Stuart Wood, a civic employee and Secretary of the Courtenay Board of Trade, collaborated with the local newspaper editor, Ben Hughes, to rename the plateau, provide it with a history, and give it a reputation as mysterious and alluring. The name "Forbidden Plateau" appeared in an article about Wood's first trip into the area. Wood and Hughes heightened the "mystery" by inventing a legend of Indigenous women and children kidnapped on the plateau by hairy giants(Wood 1968). The term attracted rather than discouraged the adventuresome. Wood and Hughes echoed romantic notions popular in interwar Britain to construct a landscape imbued with myth, legend and the supernatural (Trentmann 1994). The local newspaper described the Plateau as "a fairyland of green pastures and flowing streams, and tree-dotted glens and valleys." A peak named Castle Mountain was said to resemble "a medieval keep of some predatory

baron," whereas nearby Moat Lake looked like "Maxfield [Parrish's] engravings of the Arabian nights" (*Comox Argus* 1928).

While the Board of Trade was turning the plateau into a marketable commodity, a younger generation of hikers found ways to access the plateau inexpensively during the Depression. In some cases visitors ordered their equipment from catalogues, but they also built and modified their own equipment, finding new uses for old and low-value material and learning new design and construction skills, preceding the ways in which postwar Canadian families made do and "domesticated" household objects (Parr 1999). Visitors made their own packboards, fit the skins from locally shot seals to the bottom of their skis for grip when climbing hills, and transformed jam tins into flashlights called "bugs" to light their way when hiking at night (McMonnies 2006; Masters 2006; Ellis 2006). Jack Gregson, a teenager when he explored the plateau in the 1920s and early 1930s, built a toboggan "out of plywood and turned up cheese box for the front," and made skis from "floor-boards with tomato cans at the ends" (Gregson 2006). Jim Greig remembers adapting his winter boots so he could wear them with skis: "We only had one pair of shoes in the winter time and that was boots to go to school in, so we cut grooves in the heel, and you put the straps around" (Greig 2006).

Reflecting broader trends in the relationships of rural and working-class communities to their natural hinterland, for some people a visit to the Plateau combined recreation with productive activities (Greer 1990). Local users derived economic benefits from the Plateau by establishing camps for paying visitors, by working as packers and guides, and by fishing, harvesting plants, and prospecting for minerals. Eugene Croteau operated a camp that offered "spring beds… under canvas" and "well-cooked meals"

(Croteau 1932). Fish stocks that the Dominion government introduced to lure tourists became a source of purposeful leisure for Depression-era fathers (Capes 1933, Ellis 2006). Sid Williams, a shoe-store owner and amateur actor, skied in the winter on the Plateau and prospected there in the summer (Masters 1986, 78; Hagen 1996; McMonnies 2006).

In contrast with the Depression of the 1930s, postmaterialist values and an established welfare state provided new motivations and opportunities for rural British Columbians to participate in park-making in the late 1960s. As Frank Zelko explains, postmaterialist values resulted when "the growth of an economically secure and well-educated middle class was marked by an increasing concern with quality-of-life issues such as the state of the environment" (Zelko 2004, 222). The Kootenay region was particularly attractive to American draft dodgers and countercultural migrants going "back to the land" (Kostash 1980). In the late 1960s, newer and older settlers who valued the ecological integrity, recreation potential, and aesthetics of natural areas, collaborated to seek the preservation of the Purcell Mountains. Kootenay citizens used a variety of tactics to this end, including re-building a historic trail, applying for government funding, proposing ecological reserves, publishing guidebooks and poetry, holding public meetings, and writing protest letters (Fry Creek letters, 1972-1973; Wood 1983; McLeod 1972).

One element of the Purcell Wilderness campaign, the Earl Grey Trail building project by residents of Argenta and Johnson's Landing, illustrates how small rural communities directed government funding towards their own goals of watershed and landscape protection. From the early 1950s, Argenta, at the north end of Kootenay Lake,

had a significant population of Quakers, who had left California because of McCarthyism

(Delta Co-op of Argenta). Argenta residents provided a haven for other Quakers and,

later, for pacifists during the Vietnam War. Concerned that the nearby Hamill Creek

valley might soon be logged, and seeking to safeguard its historic and ecological

qualities, residents of Argenta and neighbouring Johnson's Landing decided in November

1969 to rebuild the historic Earl Grey Trail through the valley. Quaker and non-Quaker

residents, and youth from neighbouring communities, planned and built the trail over the

summers of 1970 and 1971.

The Earl Grey Trail benefited from provincial and federal programs of the day

that allocated grants to community-building projects. Government funding was not

without controversy. Older neighbours thought that younger residents received too much

money for projects they never finished (Kostash 1980, 120). Hoping that recognition

through funding would secure protected status for the area, the trail builders negotiated

for a modest grant of $125 from the province which was celebrating its centennial (BC

Centennial '71 Committee). The trail builders received a much larger grant from the

federal Liberal government's Opportunities for Youth (OFY) program. This program was

inspired by the principle of "participatory democracy" embraced by Prime Minister

Pierre Trudeau to integrate potentially alienated youth (Clarke 1976, 29). OFY supplied

about $10,000, which the trail building group used to hire local youth to complete the

trail and publish a short hiking guide (Earl Grey Pass Project 1972).

Although the Earl Grey Trail builders were successful in re-opening the trail and

attracting public attention to the area, the project was set back by the challenges of

incorporating local design into provincially managed recreational areas. The young trail

builders were limited in the materials they could purchase and carry in, and they designed

the trail according to the newly popular leave-no-trace ethic (Turner 2002). Neither the

trail builders nor the Province could have foreseen that by 1974, the election of the New

Democratic Party and broad public support for conservation in the East and West

Kootenays would lead to the incorporation of the trail into the provincial Purcell

Wilderness Conservancy. Yet this lack of foresight meant that the completed trail did not

meet official park standards. In August 1974, local park rangers John Duncan Carter and

Craig Pettitt conducted a reconnaissance of Hamill Creek to prepare for Park Branch

administration of the new Conservancy. They reported that the OFY trail had "not been

constructed to a good grade nor has much time, if any, been spent on cutting windfalls,

roots and rotten logs." Nevertheless, the OFY group had improved the historic trail by

reducing water crossings and keeping the trail to one side or the other of the creek. What

was needed, advised Carter and Pettitt, was a crew of six and a foreman working for two

summers to bring the trail up to the standards of the Park Branch (Carter and Pettitt

1974). Time and resources had been wasted because the Park Branch and the local

community did not share the same vision of what constituted a good trail. Training of

local trail builders according to Park Branch standards and an openness to local aesthetics

by the Branch might have solved this problem at an earlier stage.

       In Powell River on the Sunshine Coast north of Vancouver, an independent group

of skilled volunteers have been building bridges and trails that are so well made that the

Forest Service supplies materials free of charge but does not tell volunteers what or

where to build. Self-titled the B.O.M.B. Squad, an acronym derived from "Bloody Old

Men's Brigade," this group is composed of retired men who have built about 60 bridges and 200 km of trails on public land for public use in the past twenty years (Godau 2007).

Retirement has given members the freedom to volunteer their time, and a commitment to community improvement. Their working lives provided them with the skills to create long-lasting structures. Many of them had held highly skilled jobs at the Powell River pulp and paper mill. The Bomb Squad follows "Roger's Rules," composed by carpenter Roger Taylor, and based partly on his mill work training, to construct solid and safe bridges. To complete the Bomb Squad tasks, Taylor also had to learn the properties of different kinds of local woods, because the ecological niche around Powell River provides a wider variety of materials than are sold at the local lumber store. As Taylor explains: "this is something you learn in your trades, that you look at everything that's possible, for every angle… You just automatically observe everything" (Taylor 2007).

The Bomb Squad may owe some of its success to skills developed at the mill, but the group carries out its tasks quite differently from mill work. Bomb Squad members volunteer at least one day a week. They use their building skills in a more creative and aesthetically pleasing way than they did in the mill, admitting that they work harder in the bush than they did when they were paid (Carlson 2007). Mill work was hierarchical and time-disciplined, while the Bomb Squad lacks formal organization. Members do not ask permission and treat the backcountry as a commons where they can manipulate the landscape for their own enjoyment and for the benefit of others (Hooper 2007).

One of the original philosophies of the Bomb Squad was to create access to the bush by spending little or no money (Hewitt 2007). Bomb Squad members use and share

their own tools to work mostly with materials found on site. They adapt a cultural landscape that already contains the raw ingredients of a trail and bridge system. Logging roads provide access to hiking trails that often incorporate decommissioned logging railway tracks. The Bomb Squad transforms old growth cedar, cut decades ago and left behind, into planks and shakes for bridges. The result is low-cost recreation for the builders, the community, and hikers. Powell River trails not only build on the local forestry and pulp mill industries, they also form a link in the informal rural economy. The trail system facilitates the harvest of non-timber forest products, including salal, mushrooms, yew and ash branches for canes, yew bark for Taxol (an anti-cancer drug), ferns, and huckleberries (Carlson 2007).

These case studies demonstrate how local initiatives have redesigned natural spaces as recreational areas worth protecting, without withdrawing these landscapes from the formal and informal economies. In two cases, the Forbidden Plateau and the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy, local efforts provided the impetus to create parks or protected areas. Local residents first had to build the infrastructure and convince a broader public, then government authorities, of an area's value. In the third case, the Powell River trails are not protected as a park, and Bomb Squad members have mixed feelings about whether park status would be appropriate. At least one member feels that national park status would attract tourists to a formerly resource-based community. Another member, however, expressed a valid concern that any more government involvement, apart from the assistance they receive from the Forest Service, would curtail and overly regulate their activities.

What can these case studies offer in terms of recommendations for parks management? When creating parks, provincial and federal governments can recognize and foster local initiatives, as long as they do so in a flexible and respectful way, in order to create recreational areas that are satisfying to the local community. This might mean incorporating local design and using local materials rather than imposing standard design. Several benefits could result from building on local recreational areas: communities may be more receptive to park establishment, and parks can benefit community economic health. Park managers could consider allowing relatively sustainable aspects of the formal and informal economies to continue to operate in these areas, although this decision must be made carefully based on the long-term ecological impacts of specific activities. Finally, encouraging volunteer labour not only offers social and creative opportunities for local residents, but could also eliminate park fees and allow access for everyone.

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