



Press release from BC Nature – for immediate release

Proposed wildlife management plans alarm BC's naturalists

Nature-lovers across BC are expressing concern over a proposed new method for managing wildlife in the province. Speaking on behalf of BC Nature, the federation of naturalist clubs across BC, president Dr. Alan Burger said “Our members are alarmed by recent statements by government ministers indicating that wildlife management might be handed over to an external agency supported by special interest groups, specifically hunters and guide-outfitters”. This model of wildlife management will undoubtedly work against the interests of the vast majority of British Columbians, added Burger.

Recent statements by Ministers Steve Thomson (Forests, Lands and Natural Resources Management) and Bill Bennett (Energy and Mines) suggest that, if the BC Liberals win this election, much wildlife management will be handed over to an independent agency, funded in part by hunting and fishing licences. Both ministers made these statements while flanked by members of the BC Wildlife Federation, the influential hunting and fishing advocacy group. It is well known that BCWF has long been lobbying the government for a greater say in wildlife management, citing the millions of dollars paid in hunting and fishing licences as the reason for greater input.

“This proposal is flawed at several levels” stated Burger. First, the economic argument is false. Hunting and fishing licences are an important source of revenue and BC Nature agrees that there should be a greater share contributed to wildlife management. But, there is much greater input to the BC economy from the non-consumptive users of wildlife – the tourism and wildlife-watching industry, people selling binoculars, camera gear, field guides, outdoor gear etc. and, most importantly, the vast majority of British Columbians that spend money traveling and camping to simply enjoy seeing animals alive in the wild.

BC has not undertaken research recently to investigate the economic benefits of wildlife-watching, but in neighbouring Washington the research shows that wildlife-watching contributes five times the economic benefit (\$1.5 billion) that hunting does. A study in 2006 by the US Fish and Wildlife found that over 71 million Americans spent nearly \$45 billion on retail sales while observing, feeding or watching wildlife in the US. Canadians are likely to spend even more *per capita*. Wildlife viewing is a growing business and BC is becoming a world-class destination for this highly sustainable activity.

Second, the proposed method for implementing wildlife management is flawed. There is no doubt that much more money is needed to enhance wildlife and ecosystem management, secure critical habitat and deal with the increasing impacts of industrial and human footprints in our province. Habitat loss, in particular, is a huge issue across many ecosystems in B.C. But this needs to be done by government and not through some external agency, which might be heavily biased towards consumptive users of wildlife. The B.C. Fish and Wildlife Branch and related departments within the provincial government have a long and proud history of serving the people of this province. They haven't always made the right decisions and their hands are often tied by the political goals of the ruling party, but

they are professional, accountable to the electorate, can bring in expertise and resources from other government departments and outside consultants, and remain independent of powerful lobby-groups like the BCWF. "This new proposal verges on privatization of our wildlife management" said Burger.

Proponents of this new wildlife management plan indicate that it will follow the model of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC, which currently manages recreational fishing as well as freshwater hatcheries in B.C. "There is a fundamental difference between recreational fishing and terrestrial wildlife management", continued Burger, who taught wildlife ecology at UVic for many years, "Wildlife, like mammals and birds, is enjoyed for many more reasons and in a much wider range of habitats and locations, than the fish taken by recreational fishing. One cannot equate the two management scenarios".

Third, the words of the two ministers and the enthusiastic endorsement of the hunting lobby indicates that there is a very real risk of wildlife management in BC being more narrowly focused on big game. This is a retrograde step, because the BC government has been slowly moving towards a more scientifically sound ecosystem-based approach, giving appropriate value to the 99% of organisms that are not game animals. This proposal pulls out one component of our ecosystems (big game) and plans to manage it separately. Nature is not compartmentalized. We cannot manage one aspect of the system in isolation.

Finally, it appears that only the hunting-fishing lobby was consulted on this proposal. The ministers' announcements came as a complete surprise to BC Nature. There is also no evidence that the tourism and wildlife-watching industries, First Nations or the general wildlife-enjoying public was consulted.

People who enjoy viewing wildlife and who endorse a broad ecological approach to managing our province will be watching closely to see where this proposal goes. "It will be good to see wildlife management become an election issue" concluded Burger, "It has been a neglected topic by all major political parties for too long. But this new proposal by the current government is clearly not in the interests of the BC public and seems to serve only a narrow interest-group".

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