

Editorial

The British Columbia government is currently engaged in a major advertising campaign to attract tourists to what most residents believe to be one of the more beautiful parts of our planet. The advertising catch phrase is “The best place on earth”. While few question the natural beauty and the biological diversity of the province, there is increasing concern that the course of ‘development’ (housing, roads, and other infrastructure) is more opportunistic than ‘charted’. The economists and economic planners call for more jobs and more growth and for infrastructure to support that growth. Politicians see the prospect of easy re-election because they can claim that all the good things (more development, hence more jobs) are the result to their insight!

During the 40 years that I have been lucky enough to live in BC, there have never been many voices who point out that British Columbia is a mountainous province with a very small land base to meet the energy, natural resource, housing, food, and recreational needs of both the 3 million+ inhabitants and the tourists who visit during all 12 months of the year. Such concerns are usually attributed to the eco-freaks and of course to those in the ‘ivory towers’ at the universities. Politicians have consistently ignored, or even gagged, the civil servants whose enormous knowledge and understanding of the natural resources and biological diversity sees them as nationally and internationally recognized experts. Science, particularly civil service science, has rarely been allowed to inhibit a politician’s drive for development.

The reality is that our current directions are not sustainable. The ecological land base which we rely on to provide all the necessities and amenities that we desire is being developed for a

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variety of human activities that make it increasingly difficult to sustain what we seem to see as our lifestyle rights. The paper by Lea in this issue points to the graphic and compelling record of ecological fragmentation that has occurred in one vitally important part of the province—the Okanagan valley. Long before the European invasion the few fertile regions of BC were nurtured and cared for by the First Nations. The subsistence farming practiced by early European colonists soon expanded as fruit growing thrived and export markets were developed. As always, agriculture needed and took the prime land. The biggest impact of the 20th century was the urban development which continues apace. Who should complain? The hot summer and the dry, if a little cold, winters have made the Okanagan a prime retirement region.

But the biological diversity is now beginning to show serious decline. Even in the relatively small region included in Lea's paper, the visible record of decline revealed by comparison of natural vegetation cover from 1800, thru 1938 to 2005 should be sounding serious alarm bells in the minds of all who claim interest and commitment to keeping BC "The best place on Earth". The lists of endangered species are growing, but more important these species are either unique to the region or at the very limits of their northern distribution. For those cynics who see global warming as conveniently increasing the warm dry regions, it may be useful to understand that no matter who or what is causing the current climatic changes, there is no record anywhere in human history to suggest that humanity can recover lost or reduced biological diversity. Studies such as Lea's should remind us that we have little understanding of how to retain the ecosystems, let alone try to regrow native species for use in reclamation efforts.