



Province of
British Columbia
Ministry of Lands,
Parks and Housing
Parks and Outdoor
Recreation Division
Planning and Design Branch

EXECUTIVE PRESENTATION PACKAGE

CONTENTS:

A - PARK PROPOSAL DOCUMENT - PUBLIC

Robson Bight (Michael Bigg)

Ref. No.: **337**

ECOLOGICAL RESERVES COLLECTION
GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
VICTORIA, B.C.
V8V 1X4

ROBSON BIGHT - TSITIKA RIVER PARK FEASIBILITY STUDY

June 1981

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* Photographs are located on pages 8 + 10

A. SUMMARY

*This report reviews the resources, opportunities, problems and alternatives for the Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division at Robson Bight and the Lower Tsitika. The heart of the issue is conservation of whales and their habitat, and secondly effective visitor management at a special natural feature - possibly the world's most significant known core habitat area for killer whales (*Orcinus orca*). This document recommends establishment of a provincial park over the area.*

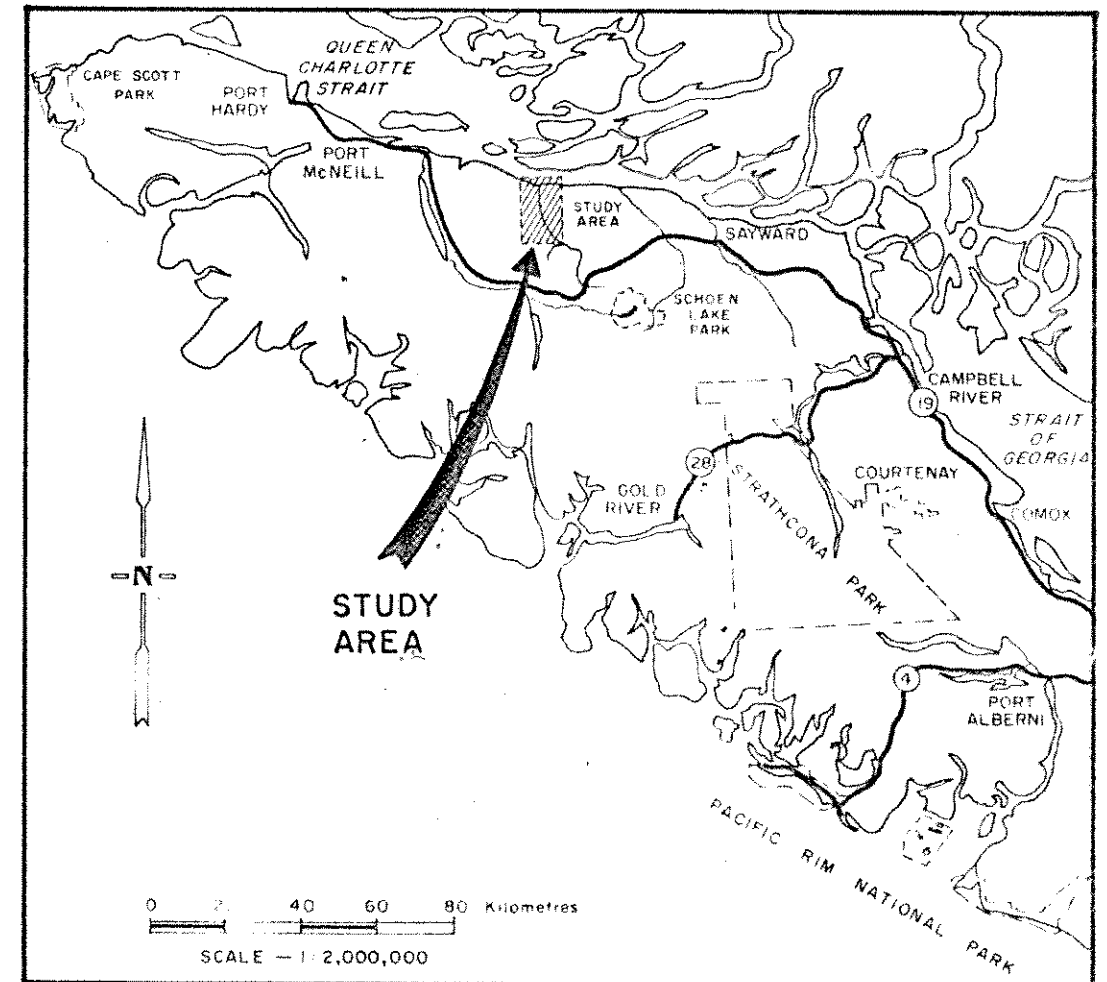
Project Justification: In late 1980, high media attention and public concern developed over the question of the future of the killer whale habitat in the vicinity of Robson Bight. In relation to industrial forest use in the Tsitika Valley and Robson Bight, a western Canada environmental group proposed that, in addition to an ecological reserve being established over the habitat zone, a provincial park should be established over adjacent upland.

Alternatives Weighed:

- 1) Management by an agency other than the Division (eg: Ministry of Forests; Ecological Reserves).
- 2) Establishment of an upland park adjacent to an ecological reserve over the bay and estuary.
- 3) Establishment of a provincial park over Robson Bight and the Lower Tsitika Valley.

Recommendation: That a class A provincial park, as outlined in Alternative 3, should be established.

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF STUDY AREA



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Goals Served:

Primary: Conservation of a special natural feature, killer whale habitat.

Secondary: .Representation of the Johnstone Strait-Queen Charlotte Sound Marine Environment.

.Provision of unique opportunities for viewing and appreciation of the whales.

.Enhancement of tourism.

Public Implications:

- 1) Due to the magnitude of public interest, conservation of the area would have a favourable impact.
- 2) There may some negative reaction to the idea of public use vis-a-vis a provincial park at this site, however, such use is inevitable and must be accommodated.
- 3) The forest industry will have concerns about the erosion of its land and forest base, however, suitable exchanges (compensation) may be possible.

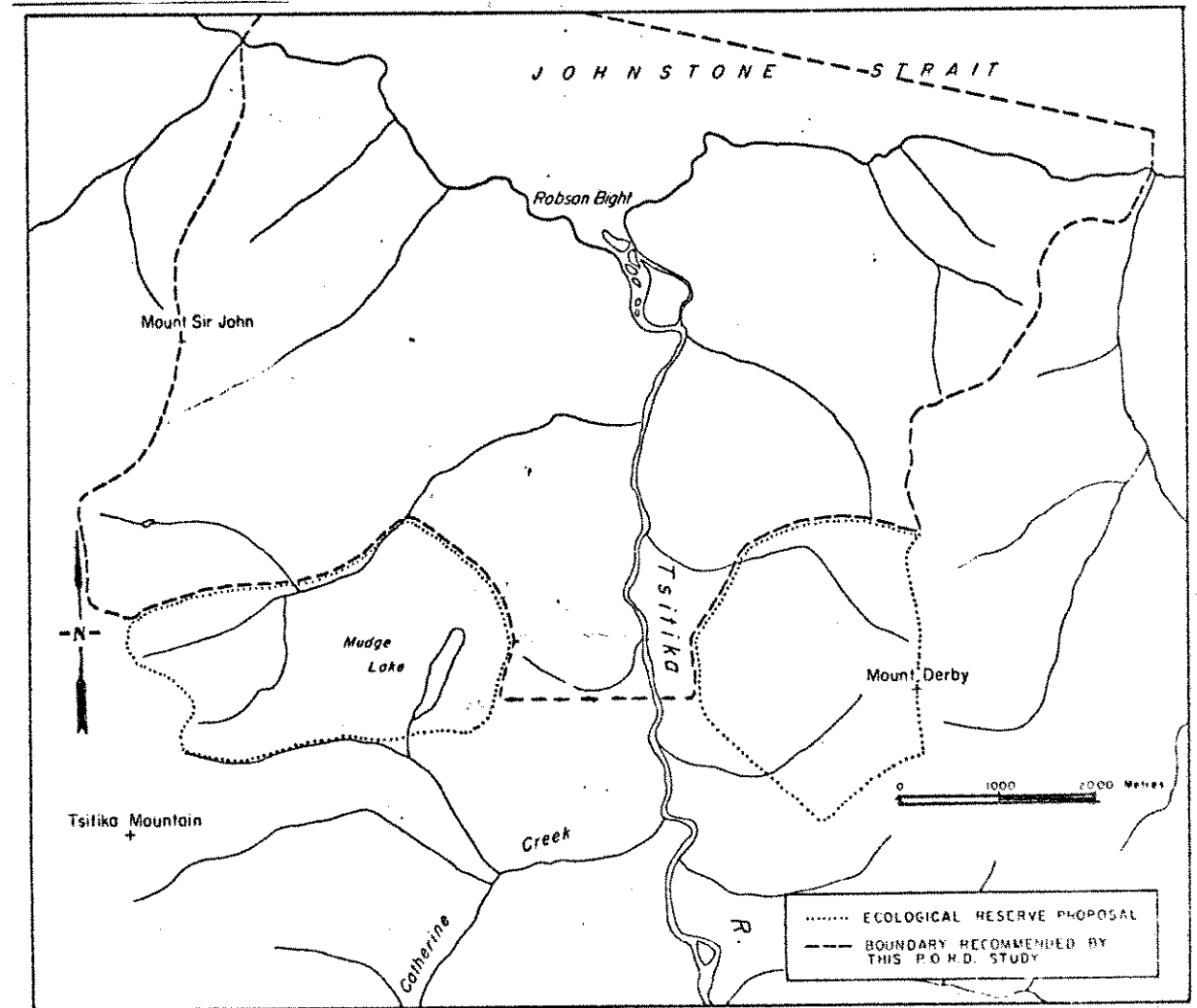
Implications for Other Government Agencies:

- 1) A park proposal in the Tsitika Valley must be reviewed and sanctioned by the Tsitika Follow-Up Committee as such is a departure from the approved watershed plan.
- 2) The ecological reserve proposed for the Tsitika estuary and Robson Bight would not be necessary.
- 3) Federal agencies, particularly the Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans and the Ministry of Transport, must be contacted. Compatible regulations should be sought. Positive conservation action concerning Robson Bight will be a credit to the provincial government.

Private Sector Implications:

- 1) McMillan Bloedel Ltd., which holds the timber rights in this area, will probably desire compensation. This may take the form of money, land, timber or a combination.
- 2) In the long run, the tourism industry and the economy of northern Vancouver Island will be greatly enhanced by establishment and effective management of a park at Robson Bight.

FIGURE 2: PROPOSAL OVERVIEW



B. BACKGROUND

The Tsitika River and watershed has received much attention since the mid-1970's. At that time, in relation to plans to log the valley, environmental groups claimed that, as the last significant unlogged watershed on the east side of Vancouver Island, the Tsitika Valley should be conserved. In 1977, the Schoen Lake area, which had been part of the controversy and debate, but was not in the Tsitika watershed, was established as a provincial park of 8100 hectares. At the same time, through public advocacy, a related commitment was made to set aside the Gold Lake area near Strathcona Park. After considerable study, review and public debate, the Tsitika Planning Committee submitted the Tsitika Watershed Integrated Resource Plan to the Environment and Land Use Committee in 1978. In addition to prescribing a basic forestry plan, wildlife, forest recreation and ecological reserve values were recognized. The plan was adopted and the E.L.U.C. established the Tsitika Follow-Up Committee to oversee implementation of the plan.

In 1980, reports began to emerge that Robson Bight, the bay at the mouth of the Tsitika River, is an extremely important area for killer whales. Indeed, it seems that while this factor was previously unknown to the Tsitika Planning Committee or the Follow-Up Committee, scientists, conservationists, and certain commercial filmmakers have been observing this congregation of killer whales for several years. In 1980, in reaction to plans to create a major log handling facility in Robson Bight, an ecological reserve to protect the whale habitat was proposed by a marine-oriented conservation group. This proposal was adopted by the Ecological Reserves Unit of the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing as a refinement of an earlier proposal including the estuary.

In January 1981, the provincial government established a study reserve over the Robson Bight area for three years or until current ecological studies could be completed. In addition, a inter-ministry study committee was formed to examine the conflict between whale habitat and log handling in the bay. The report of this committee notes that:

- 1) The Tsitika Plan did not resolve the question of industrial use of the estuary.
- 2) The whale habitat in Robson Bight was not considered at the time the Plan was prepared.
- 3) Log handling in the bay would probably not be compatible with the use of the area by killer whales.
- 4) While an ecological reserve is recommended for the bay and an adjacent fringe of upland, such status may not be the most effective mechanism for providing active management at the site.
- 5) It is advisable that an immediate decision be made to conserve the whale habitat.

Because the Robson Bight ecological reserve proposal included only a narrow shoreline zone of upland, the Sierra Club of Western Canada developed the concept of a provincial park adjoining this proposed reserve and occupying about 4,500 hectares of the lower Tsitika Valley. The major purpose of the park would be as a buffer protecting the whales from the impacts of society and industry. The proposed park would be left largely in an undeveloped state in order to limit the number of people coming to see the whales. Additionally there would be two other ecological reserves over largely subalpine areas adjacent to the proposed park.

In March 1981, in response to a public proposal (refer to Figure 5) for a provincial park, the Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division undertook an examination of the feasibility of a provincial park in the Lower Tsitika-Robson Bight area.

C. RESOURCE INFORMATION (photos on page 8 to 10)

1. Natural Attributes

Robson Bight has been identified by scientists as probably the world's most significant core area for killer whales. In addition the Lower Tsitika Valley and estuary, lacking any industrial development, are of scenic and conservation value.

Robson Bight is a major north-facing bay located along Johnstone Strait between Beaver Cove and Sayward. The Tsitika River, draining a watershed that is 42 km long and 39,490 hectares in area, empties into Robson Bight.

The Robson Bight-Tsitika area is located within a northeastern portion of the Vancouver Island Mountains. The main valley is U-shaped and relatively narrow, with numerous short, steep tributary streams. The major summits range between 1432 metres and 1646 m. above sea level (Mt. Sir John, Tsitika Mountain, Mount Derby). The mountains are largely forested, but there are minor, rounded peaks that display barren rock.

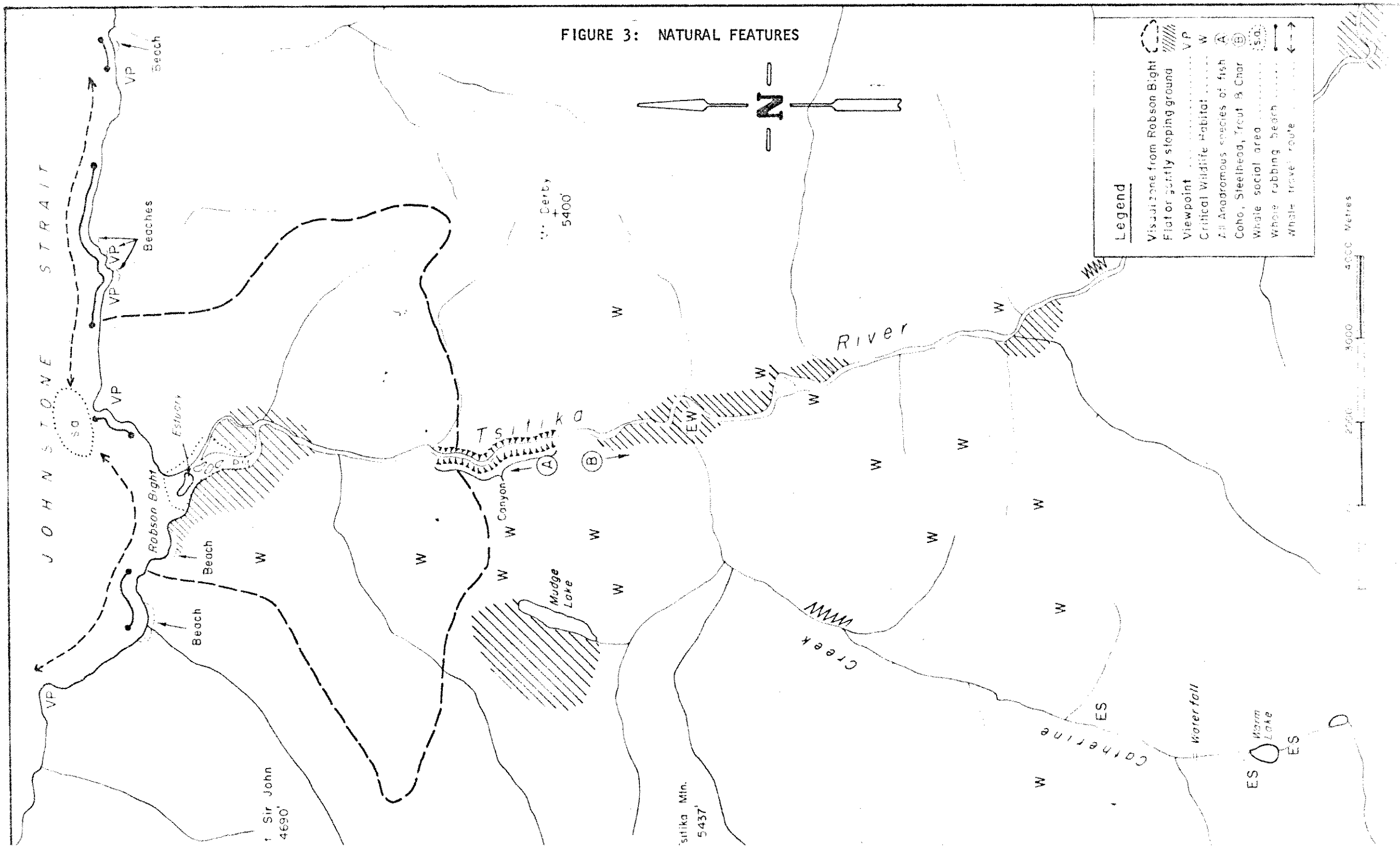
The Tsitika Valley possesses a wet, mild climate. Approximately 250 cm of precipitation (predominately rain) falls each year in the lower elevations.

Biogeoclimatic zones present include: Coastal Western Hemlock (lower elevations) and Subalpine Mountain Hemlock. Much of the forest consists of mature and over-mature timber.

The Tsitika is a small, pleasant river. There is a small delta and estuary area consisting of three main channels. Upstream, the river channel varies in width from a narrow canyon 10 metres wide up to a meandering, generally shallow channel 30-50 metres wide. The lower length of the river displays some interesting features including a small canyon, a small waterfall, numerous pools, and an undisturbed estuary. The shoreline of the bay consists of two cobble and pebble beaches on the west side and otherwise is steep and rocky. East of the Bight, small pocket beaches are separated by stretches of steep, rocky slopes.

Biotic features include Blacktail deer and Roosevelt elk both of which have summer and winter range areas in the valley. The river supports runs of five species of salmon, summer and winter runs of steelhead, as well as cutthroat trout and Dolley Varden char.

Most significantly, the Robson Bight area has the distinction of being the world's most important known core habitat area for killer whales. The coasts of British Columbia and Washington support the largest known concentrations of killer whales in the world. There are three populations or "communities" of whales within this region. The largest of these, a group of about 150 individuals, utilizes the Robson Bight area as its "central" or "core area." In this core, the killer whales engage in various social behaviours and they utilize some of the beaches for rubbing. From this area they roam broadly on a daily and a seasonal basis. Little is known of the population dynamics, life cycle, social behaviour, or feeding habits of killer whales. There is keen scientific interest in conducting observational research in the Robson Bight area.



2. Recreational Demand and Benefits

The primary value is the unique opportunity for public viewing at close quarters of killer whales in their natural habitat. The Tsitika River offers fishing opportunities. Shoreland walking opportunities and general enjoyment of the natural environment are also available.

The Vancouver Island Regional Tourism Plan (Preliminary Draft) estimates the 1979 regional market at 2.9 million people, with ready access to international transportation capability at Vancouver and Seattle. Tourist growth in the 1979-1983 period is estimated at between 1.1 and 3.6 percent. Use in 1979 was estimated at 2.5 million visitor nights.

The region can expect tourist spillover from such attractions as Whistler, San Juan Islands and Olympic National Park. The region is part of a British Columbia circle tour via Port Hardy and Prince Rupert.

It is estimated that in 1979 17,000 out-of-province and 17,700 resident tourist parties passed nearby the Robson Bight area along Highway 19. The 1980 total is estimated at 39,000 tourist parties, a growth of 2,200. It is probable that 80 percent of the parties passed through the area between late June and late October.

There is a high latent demand for access to the north end of Vancouver Island indicated by the 15 percent growth in summer traffic volume between 1979 and 1980. A continuation of this trend would bring approximately 61,000 visitor parties into the area in the next 3 to 5 years. This figure appears realistic but could be secured or increased by development and promotion of existing attractions such as Cape Scott Park and Schoen

Lake Park, a British Columbia circle tour and further development of private attractions such as at Telegraph Cove.

The attraction for people to observe whales, particularly killer whales, is strong. Sealand of Victoria estimates that 70% of their visitation is attracted by the whales. Their charter vessel, the Canadian Princess at Ucluelet, booked 240 people this spring for a grey whale cruise on short notice with minimal advertising. This vessel's "nature" charters comprise 40% of its total business, greatly exceeding the expected 10%. Pacific Rim National Park has experienced greatly increased early season (March to June) visitation after promoting the grey whales and have since curtailed promotion because they were unable to handle the demand. Staff at this park expressed the opinion that killer whales at a location such as Robson Bight, where whale predictability and proximity are good, could be even more popular. The grey whale mating/calving areas in the Baja area of California have become extremely popular during the times whales are present.

Based on these facts and experiences, a whale-oriented park (assuming proper management, development, services and information) at Robson Bight should attract about 70-75,000 visitors-days per year.

-Total available tourist parties for 1984/86:	61,000 parties
-Whale season parties = 80% x total:	49,000 parties
-Park attraction capability = 50%	24,500 parties
-Average party size = 3 persons:	73,500 visitors

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Tourism currently estimates that each tourist-day is worth \$29. Using this conservative figure, with the assumption that a park would add one day to a visitor's length of stay, a park at Robson Bight would generate \$2.1 million of economic activity annually. Capital development operations would further add to the local economy.

D. LAND STATUS, ENCUMBRANCES AND JURISDICTIONS

Upland:

- L.223, which occupies the Tsitika estuary and adjacent ground, is a private holding (MacMillan Bloedel Ltd.).
- The entire corridor of the Tsitika River, as well as much of the upland surrounding the shoreline of Robson Bight and Johnstone Strait, is under timber licences. These licences, 7448P, 7449P, 7450P, 11916P, 11924P, and L221, are in favour of MacMillan Bloedel Ltd. and are part of T.F.L.39.
- The remainder of the watershed of the Tsitika, as defined by the height of land, is Crown land (provincial) within Tree Farm Licence #39.
- The land east of Tree Farm License 39 is Crown land (provincial) within Western Forest Products Tree Farm License 25.

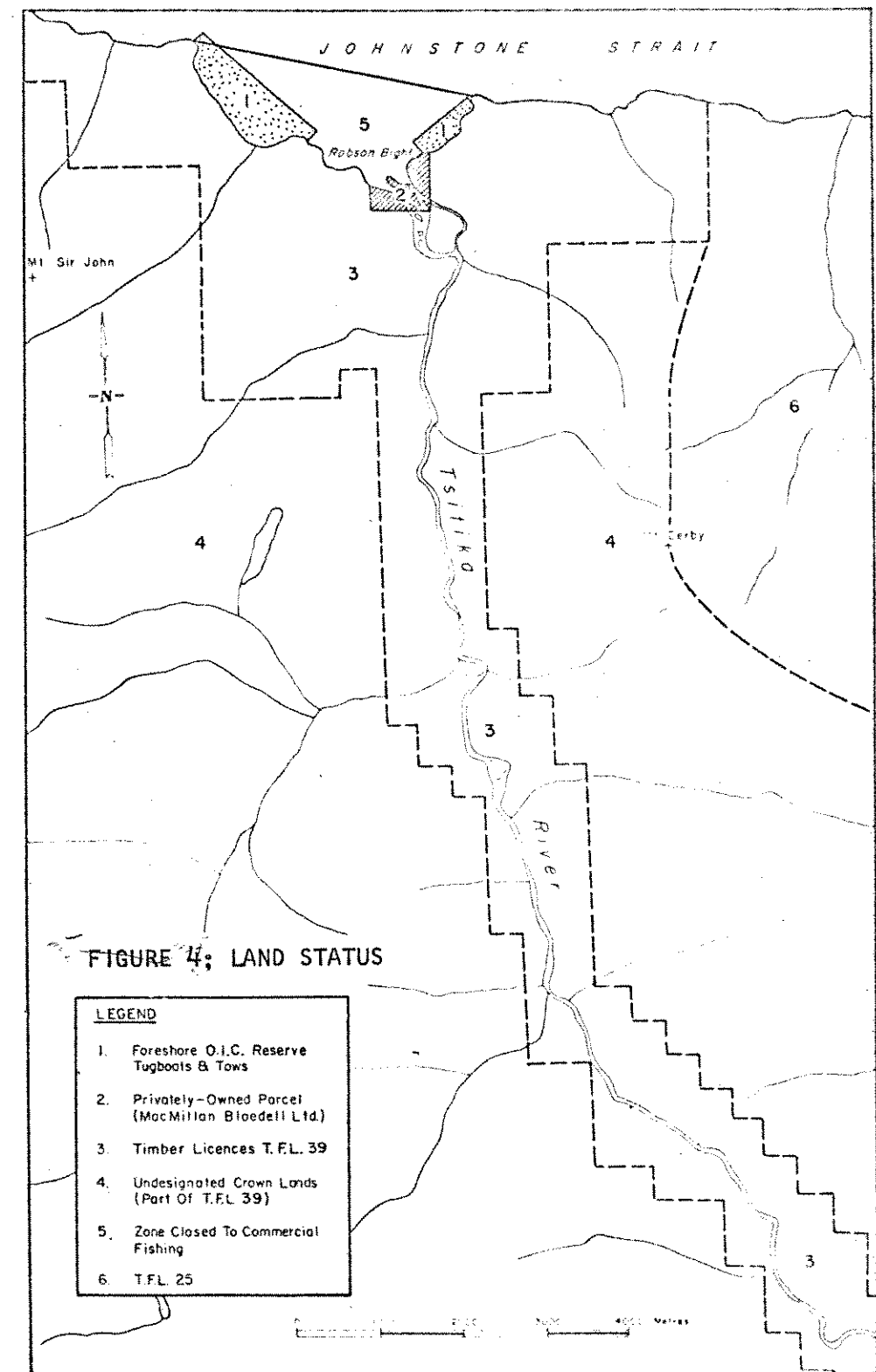
Foreshore:

- The accepted definition of foreshore is the shoreline strip of land that is situated between the lowest and the highest water levels. Normally, foreshore is Crown land under the jurisdiction of the provincial government. However, the creatures dwelling in the foreshore (except if they are cultured stocks on a foreshore lease) are under federal jurisdiction.
- In addition, there are two foreshore areas within Robson Bight that are reserved under the Land Act (1968) for the use of towboats and their tows during stress of weather or adverse tides.

Marine:

1. Substrate: A 1976 B.C. Court of Appeal ruled that the waters between Vancouver Island and the mainland are "Inland Waters," and hence the land and the mineral resources beneath Johnstone Strait and Robson Bight are under provincial jurisdiction. (The federal government has appealed this ruling to the Supreme Court of Canada.)

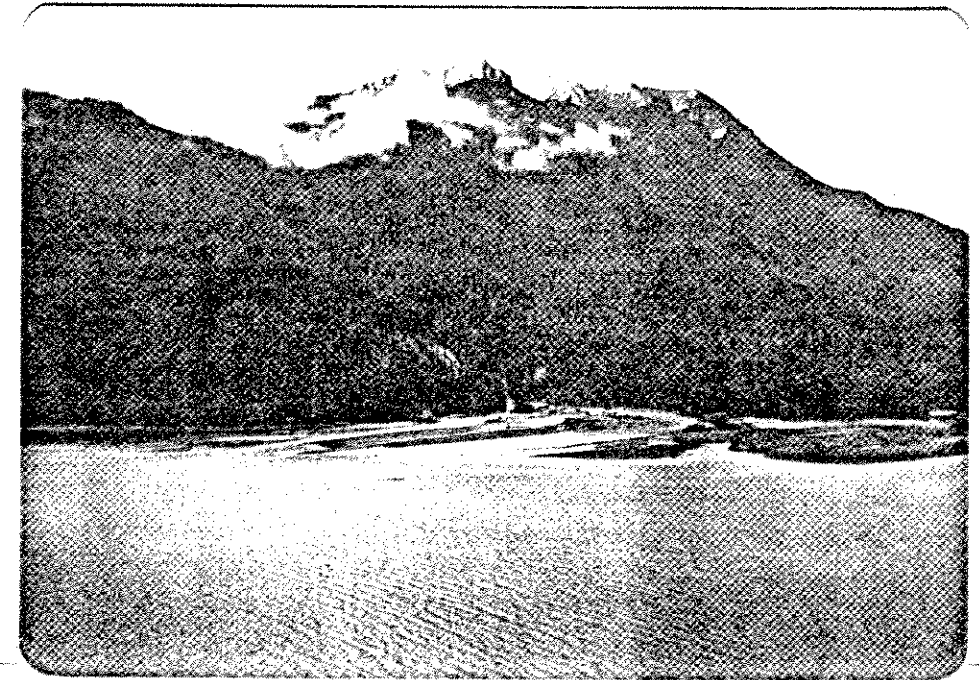
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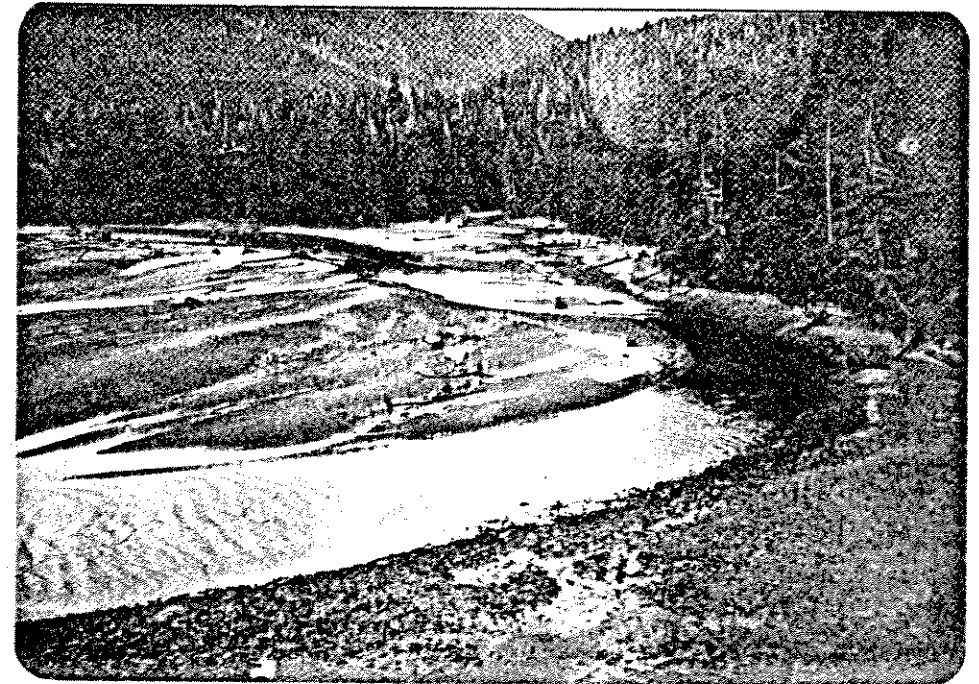
2. Water column: Same as "substrate."
3. Water surface: Provincial territory, according to the same ruling as noted above, but the Federal government is responsible for navigation and therefore plays the major jurisdictional role.
4. Fish and sea mammals: These are under the authority of the Federal Fisheries Act. This includes killer whales, which are protected from harm or killing by Section 10 of the B.C. Fishery General Regulations. All animals dwelling in the marine environment as well as salmonid species and others of the fresh water environment are also within the jurisdiction of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. A "No commercial fishing" zone exists between the headlands of Robson Bight.
5. Marine plants: Both provincial and federal governments claim jurisdiction.



View from one of the western beaches across Robson Bight.



View of the inner portion of Robson Bight, the Tsitika estuary, and Mount Derby.



The western portion of the Tsitika estuary

E. ALTERNATIVES

1. NO INVOLVEMENT BY THE PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION DIVISION

- a) No Special Designation: of any kind; logging and log dumping plans could be adjusted; Federal Fisheries may impose special regulations. Whales and fish habitat are already protected under Fisheries Act. Ministry of Forests or the timber company would be responsible for managing public use in the area.
- b) An Ecological Reserve: could be designated over the bay, estuary, and some shoreline upland. While this would block any industrial use of the shoreline and upland within the reserve, it may not significantly affect the bay. In the bay, both the province and the federal government claim jurisdiction. Most significantly, the federal Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans have strong regulatory mandates in this marine area. Furthermore, the Ecological Reserves Act does not provide for visitor management, which may be necessary due to the high media profile Robson Bight has received.

2. PUBLIC PROPOSAL:

This combination of an ecological reserve over the bay and shoreline and a provincial park over the adjacent upland. The park would serve as a buffer zone of controlled use protecting the ecological reserve from direct use. While there are minor natural features of interest in the area proposed as a park, the main attraction, the whales and their habitat would not be included.

Advantages:

- . None are apparent for conservation of the whale habitat; it is possible to buffer the proposed ecological reserve without designating a provincial park.
- . Compared to Alternative 3, this proposal has, in principle, lower development and management costs.

Disadvantages:

- . A park adjacent to an ecological reserve would attract people to a feature that is not designated for public use.
- . The Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division would, in all probability, ultimately become responsible for managing the ecological reserve under Section 6.1 of the Park Act.
- . As the timber in the lower Tsitika Valley is committed to a harvesting plan, compensation in cash or kind would be necessary. Areas suitable for exchange may exist in Strathcona Park.

3. ESTABLISH A PROVINCIAL PARK OVER ROBSON BIGHT AND THE LOWER TSITIKA VALLEY:

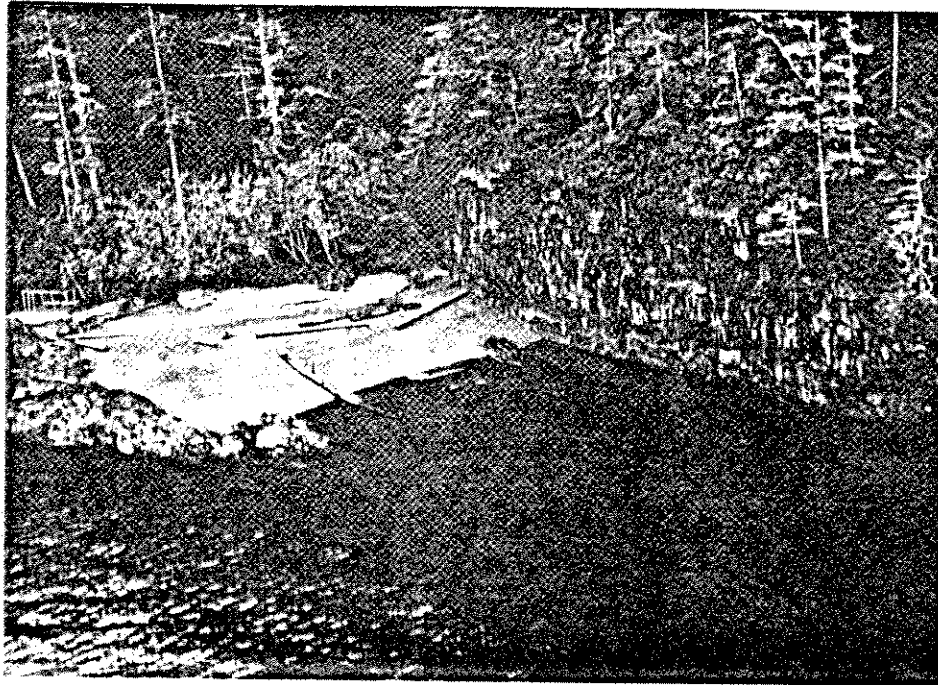
This proposed park would encompass both the Bight and the lower Tsitika Valley, but would occupy less upland than proposed by the public. The boundaries are determined by 1) headland to headland, 2) whale habitat area, 3) concentration of upland features, 4) height of land, and 5) visual zone from bay. Estimated land area: 3400 hectares. Estimated marine and foreshore area: 1200 hectares.

Advantages:

- . One provincial agency with on-site management capability would be responsible for the entire area.
- . The park would preserve and protect the whale habitat while permitting public and scientific access and observation.
- . The Park would also contain minor upland features.
- . Robson Bight could be designated as a Nature Conservancy Area within the park and special regulations could be adopted.
- . The size and boundaries of the proposed park would protect and preserve the visual aesthetics and the long run public value of the area.
- . The size and boundaries of the proposed park would allow the park system to display and meet conservation objectives of international standards.
- . Provincial park status, having a strong management capability, can protect the resource while at the same time providing economic values to the local community.

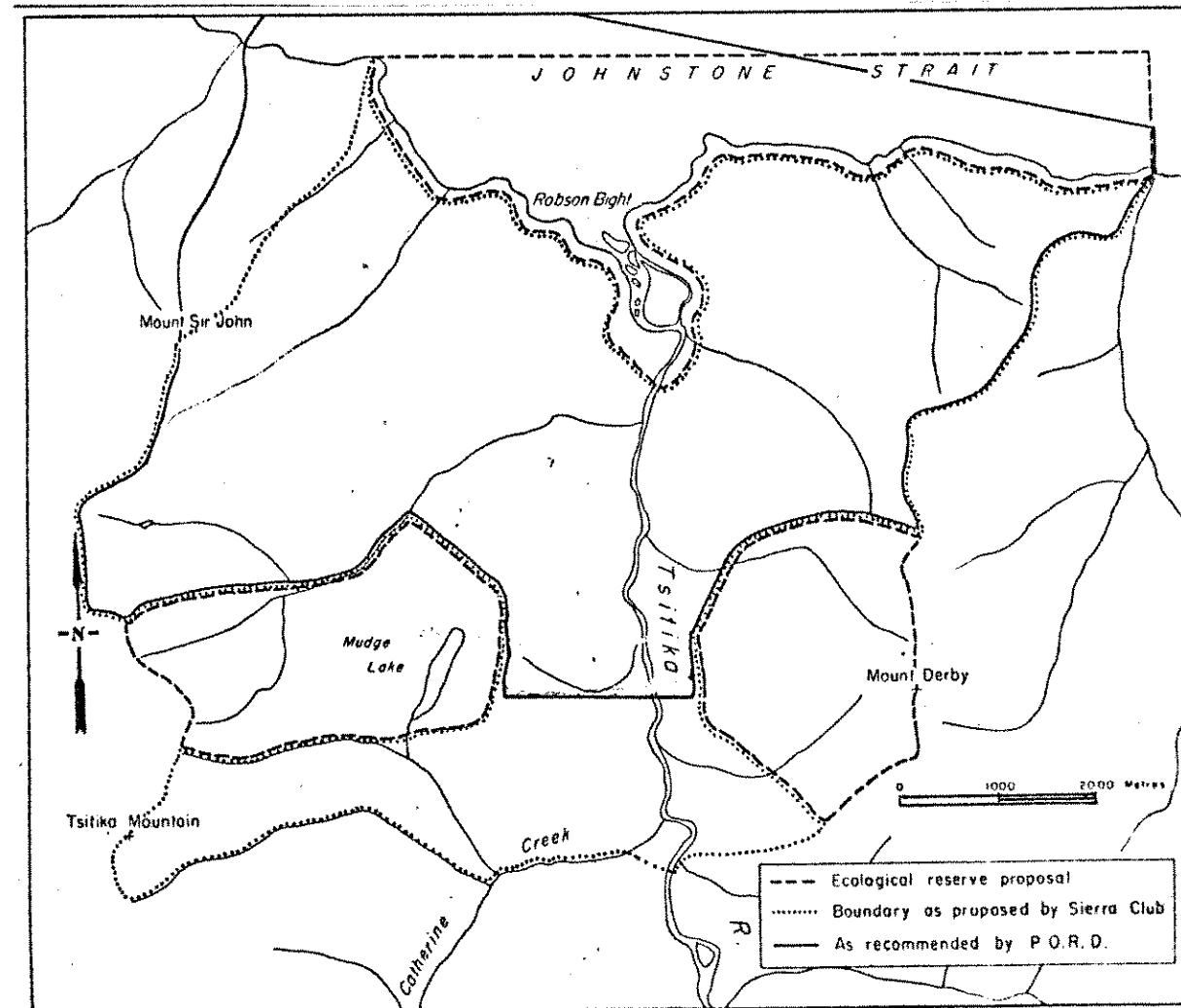
Disadvantages:

- A park will attract people to the area and these will require supervisory management to ensure continued protection of the whales and their habitat.
- Access will not be restricted to special interest groups.
- Government and public interest groups may already be convinced of the value of an ecological reserve.
- Because of the value and commitment of the timber of the Lower Tsitika Valley, compensation in cash or kind will be necessary. Areas suitable for exchange may exist in Strathcona Park.



East of Robson Bight, there are a number of whale rubbing beaches, such as this one.

FIGURE 5: ALTERNATIVES



G. DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT CONCEPT

If a provincial park is established over the Robson Bight/Lower Tsitika, it should:

- 1) protect the specialized killer whales habitat in the Robson Bight area of Johnstone Strait; and
- 2) allow public viewing and appreciation of killer whales natural activities in the Robson Bight area, within the capability of the whales to withstand such use.

If such a park was established it should be under a Class A, Category 2 designation:

Class A means:

- the park is dedicated to the preservation of its natural environment for the inspiration, use and enjoyment of the public.

Category 2 means:

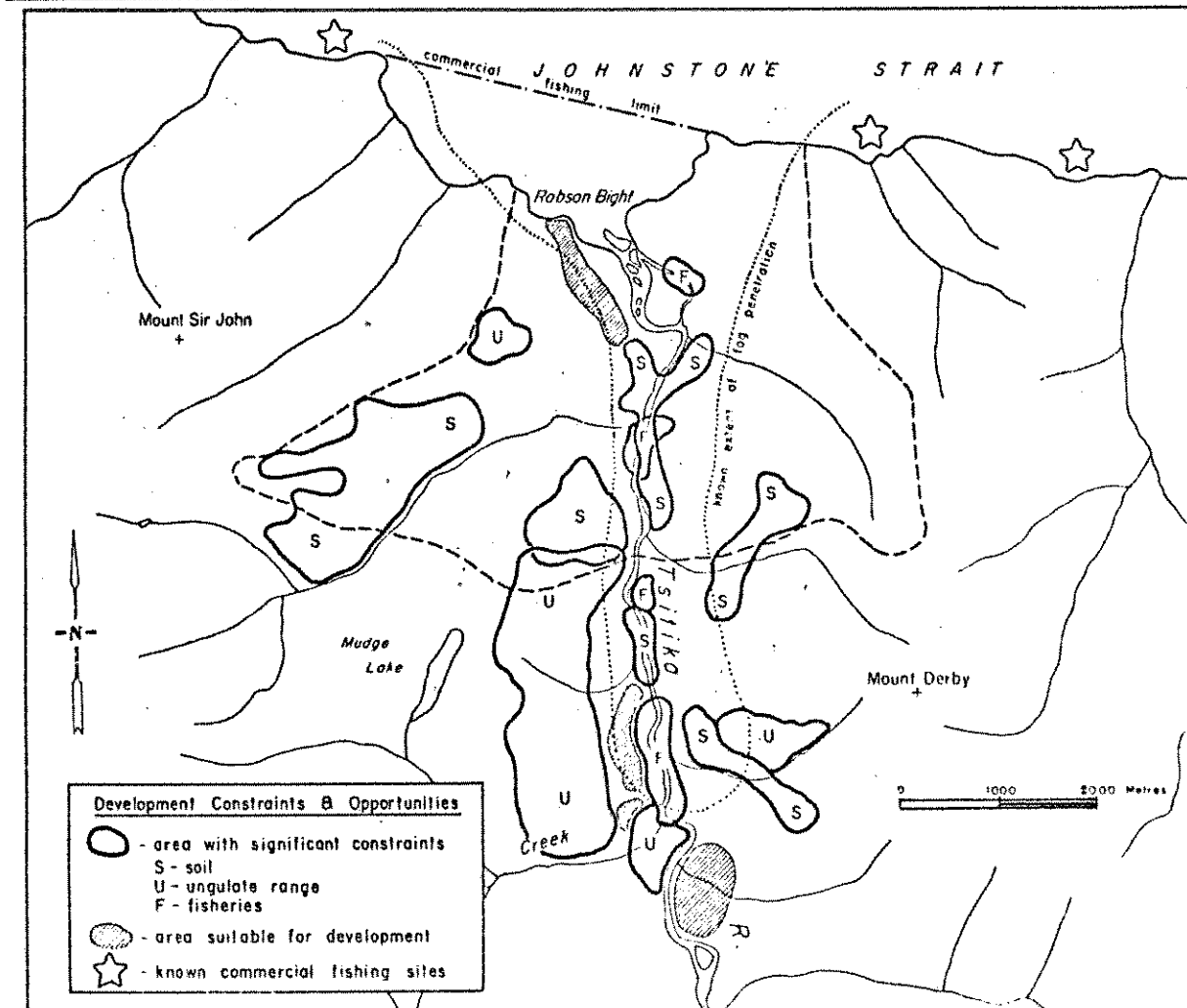
- the main purpose of its establishment is the preservation and presentation to the public of specific features of scientific or aesthetic value.

From preliminary investigations it appears that one of two development approaches could be used:

- 1) land and auto access; or
- 2) marine and boat access.

In either case boating restrictions are considered essential to the preservation of whales in the area. Whale viewing appears to be best handled via coastal trails and view-points, regardless of how visitors arrive. The essential difference between the two development approaches is in the nature of the base facility - ie: a road/parking/accommodation complex for land/auto access or a breakwater/wharf complex for water access. The Parks and Outdoor Recreation

FIGURE 6: DEVELOPMENT CONSTRAINTS & OPPORTUNITIES



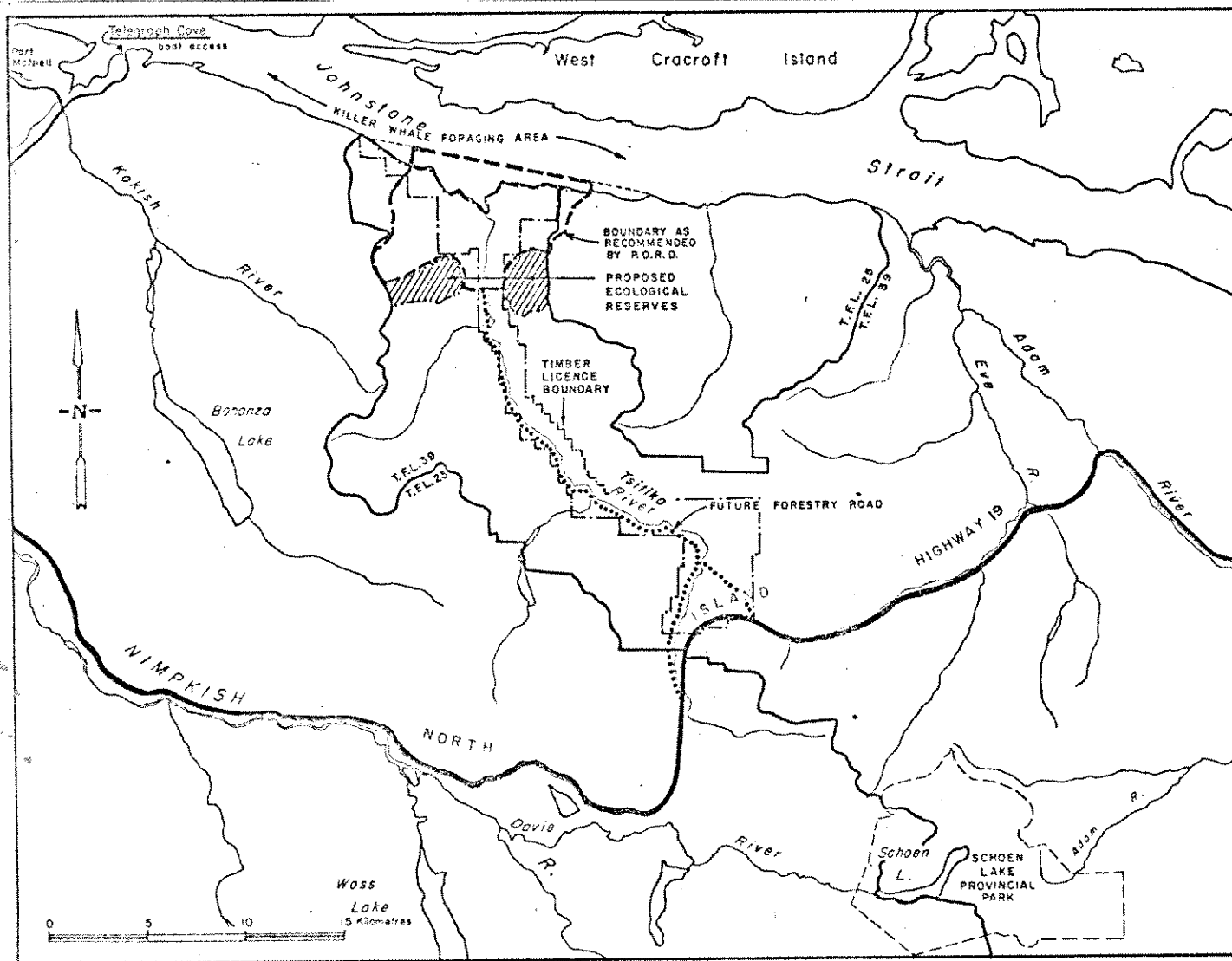
Division is not proposing to create overland access at this time, however, it is assumed that such access will in the future exist through forest company activities. The major access will be by boat, which will require foreshore development.

The park would be managed and developed in a manner which protects the whales and their habitat while encouraging public access for viewing and interpretation. Additional research would be required to develop the necessary management and development plan.

From preliminary analysis, it appears essential to immediately manage boating in the Robson Bight area. It also appears that a combination of coastal trails with viewing areas and guided boat touring may be feasible public use options.

To manage this park, without any development, the annual operating costs are anticipated to be approximately \$60,000 (1981 dollars).

FIGURE 7: PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

H. RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the high natural significance of Robson Bight and the Lower Tsitika Valley, and due to the need to effectively manage public use in this area, it is recommended that:

A PROVINCIAL PARK OF CLASS A STATUS, CONSISTING OF APPROXIMATELY 3400 HA. OF UPLAND AND 1200 HA. OF FORESHORE, BE DESIGNATED.

This recommendation is subject to:

- 1) Submission of this document and its recommendation to the Tsitika Follow-Up Committee for review.
- 2) Submission of this document and its recommendation to the Ministry Executive Committee.
- 3) Preparation of a public park proposal document.

Provincial park status over the Robson Bight area would provide a high level of legislative protection and visitor management capability, and therefore would be of considerable benefit to the conservation of the killer whales and their habitat. The significance of this area would also be of great value to the park system of British Columbia. It is considered that the Park Act is the most practical and logical legislative mechanism to provide a high degree of protection for this unique natural feature and to allow effective visitor management.