

Robson Bight (Michael Bigg)

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ECOLOGICAL RESERVES COLLECTION  
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VICTORIA, B.C.  
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THE TSITIKA - ROBSON BIGHT WILDERNESS ISSUE  
A submission to the Wilderness Advisory Committee

at Nanaimo, B.C.  
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- As a preamble to our submission we would like to make three points very clear to the Wilderness Advisory Committee:
1. My wife and I are members of the Sierra Club, but we are making this presentation as private citizens. However, as we have been a committee of two working on this issue for the Club over a five year period, we will probably in any discussion lapse into some references to the Club which is officially boycotting this process.
  2. As environmentalists deeply concerned with wilderness issues in this province, we strongly object to the entire process in which we are participating. Our presence here is because we feel we have no other option. In our view this committee with its industrial bias is unfit and incompetent to give advice to the government on these issues. The magnitude of the task and the ridiculous time limit are further elements that in our eyes make this process a travesty.
  3. We wish to register an objection in regard to the naming and definition of the wilderness issue in front of us. Number 6 on your list should not be "Robson Bight"; it should be "Tsitika - Robson Bight", which has much broader implications. Your research director told me that I should address the proposal for an ecological reserve at Robson Bight as there would not be time to deal with other issues. After five years of campaigning for the preservation of the lower Tsitika watershed, finally we are able to participate in a public hearing - but we are not to deal with the whole issue? This submission will deal with the whole issue.

By a strange turn of events it is not the environmentalists but the native people who are the shock troops in some of the key wilderness issues of this province. It is they who are willing to lay their own freedom on the line through peaceful acts of civil disobedience at Lyell Island, Meares Island and possibly in the Stein Valley. They may be motivated more by an economic interest in the trees than by an ethical consideration, but the effect is the same - they are for the present opposed to logging. We owe the Indians a debt of gratitude.

Unfortunately, no shock troops are involved in the wilderness issue at Robson Bight, the killer whale "core area" on the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. No dramatic confrontations appear on the TV screens in our living rooms. Very few people are well informed about these far away issues. Even the concerned public has been

lulled by assurances that the Tsitika River watershed which lies behind Robson Bight is governed by a well thought out Integrated Resource Plan which provides for logging, but which leaves intact forest cover for wild-life (particularly deer and elk wintering areas), for recreation, ecological reserves and streamside protection of the fishery.

In fact to some extent the plan does represent a model for coastal logging. Erosional damage through road building has been minimized by special practices. The choking of even very small watercourses with logging debris has been avoided by careful felling and yarding. Relatively small blocks of forest have been designated for clear-cutting, but it is on this level that the plan has gone awry.

Unforeseen, extensive blowdown has occurred in the upper Tsitika where logging has commenced and is proceeding down valley. Once patches of forest were removed, high velocity winds have had a disastrous effect on the "leave" blocks. To remove the blowdown, further road building and salvage logging have been necessary. There have been negative impacts on the special purpose areas and the net effect has been the coalescing of the clear-cuts into an extensive tract.

The Plan is considered experimental, but no trials have been made of selective logging. Although there are,

undoubtedly, technical and economic difficulties in changing to this method, it would have the advantage of leaving a continuous forest cover which would probably prevent most of the blowdown effect.

The Tsitika watershed has heavy precipitation, steep terrain and it lacks significant lake storage. The natural tendency toward flash flooding and very low summer flows can only be exacerbated by the extensive clear-cutting which is likely to have harmful effects on the fishery.

What has happened in the upper watershed adds cogency to the already strong case to leave the lower watershed below Catherine Creek in an unlogged condition. This area is a prime candidate for wilderness preservation in British Columbia. It offers at Robson Bight a wildlife feature unique in the world - the "core area" for 150-175 magnificent orcas\* who frequent it on almost a regular daily basis in summer. The pristine lower valley rising to snow peaks is the last unlogged one on the east coast of Vancouver Island. All five species of salmon spawn in the Tsitika River which is also home to cutthroat trout, steelhead and Dolly Varden. Abundant and varied wildlife includes deer, elk, bear, wolves, cougar, otter and many species of birds. This fascinating and beautiful part of

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\*Note: The key points and arguments in this submission are underlined.

Vancouver Island offers many forms of recreation including whale-watching, hiking, mountaineering, fishing and camping.

The Government of British Columbia has recognized at least in part some of the high wilderness values of Robson Bight. In a praiseworthy decision, because of the whale "core area", the government ordered the amendment of the Plan so that the Bight will not be used as a log port. Instead, the Macmillan Bloedel Company (which holds Tree Farm Licence No.39 covering the area) is required to backhaul logs out of the valley. A further protective measure, but a mostly cosmetic one, has been the establishment of an ecological reserve over the waters of Robson Bight. The government is also negotiating with the company for three ecological reserves including one over the frontage and extending eastward to cover the whale rubbing beaches. These negotiations include D.L.223, approximately thirty-seven hectares of Macmillan Bloedel privately owned land at the mouth of the Tsitika River.

Why, in the face of these protective measures, are the Sierra Club and other supporting environmental organizations still very much dissatisfied? The answer is that, if the plans to log the lower valley go ahead, the people of this province and for that matter all Canadians are being terribly short-changed. It is mixing metaphors, but one can truly say that it will be far less than half a loaf.

point  
The important/ to recognize is that the lower valley  
is the essential backdrop to retaining the primeval  
character of the orca "core area". If logging is allowed  
 this special environment will be gone forever. The  
 expensive backhauling requirement and the proposed  
 frontage ecological reserve will only partly mitigate the  
 industrial intrusion. There will be the sights and sounds  
 of logging in Robson Bight.

In this matter the provincial government has turned a  
 deaf ear to its own Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division.  
 In its 13 page report entitled "Robson Bight - Tsitika *document*  
 River Park Feasibility Study", this agency recommended  
 that "...a Class A provincial park should be established  
over the lower Tsitika Valley."<sup>1</sup> Similarly but without  
 defining an area the government's Robson Bight Study Team  
 recommended the continuation of an interim reserve  
 ..."until a suitable and permanent reserve or reserve/park  
combination can be established."<sup>2</sup>

Further evidence for the preservation of the lower  
 Tsitika come from what is known as the "Old Growth Report"<sup>3 *document*</sup>  
 produced jointly by B.C.'s Ministry of the Environment and  
 the Ministry of Forests. This report makes no reference  
 to the preservation of the lower Tsitika but it presents  
 evidence for it nevertheless. The message is that on  
 Northern Vancouver Island low level old growth forests are  
 critical to the survival of deer and elk during severe

winters. However, due to clear-cutting there is now only a remnant of these winter ranges left. For instance in the Adams River watershed adjacent to the Tsitika they are entirely lost through clear-cutting.

The Integrated Resource Plan does provide for deer and elk wintering ranges in the Tsitika, but these ranges are only temporarily deferred from cutting. Nor are they the best ranges, only the best that could be had in a planning process which the chief participant on the biological side, Dr. D. Hebert, described as "inadequate". This was because of the extensive commitment of the Tree Farm Licence Agreement between the Forest Service and the company at the time the plan was drawn up.<sup>4</sup>

One of the main opportunities to counteract the threatened drastic declines of deer and elk populations is to leave unlogged the substantial area of old growth forest in the lower valley. The necessity for this decision has become even more pressing because of the aforementioned unplanned extensive clear-cutting due to blowdown in the headwaters.

On the federal side there has been a clearly demonstrated strong interest in Robson Bight for park purposes. In Parks Canada's very comprehensive and detailed report entitled "National Significance of Robson Bight British Columbia" it was "...recommended that the Robson Bight area including all of the killer whale core habitat be designated as a Natural Site of Canadian Significance".



A further recommendation was that "...the Robson Bight area should be considered as a possible future Canadian Landmark".<sup>5</sup> This is a new initiative of Parks Canada for which the enabling legislation is still pending. Landmarks are sites containing one or more unique, rare or exceptional natural features or phenomena of Canadian significance. Mr. Tom McMillan, Minister of the Environment, has recently stated that "Robson Bight has been identified as one of the candidates for early incorporation into any future landmarks system."<sup>6</sup>

The Parks Canada assessment makes the extremely important point that if Robson Bight is designated a Natural Site of Canadian Significance, "...consideration be given to the size of the terrestrial component which would be required to buffer the core whale habitat from the effects of logging activities."<sup>5</sup>

Parks Canada has also indicated an interest in examining the Robson Bight area as a possible candidate for a national marine park, another new initiative for which the enabling legislation is pending. It is expected that appraisal of the area will be completed in 1986.<sup>6</sup>

With both governments sincerely concerned with wilderness values at Robson Bight, why have they not acted jointly to fully safeguard those values? After five years of attempting to influence the Government of British Columbia on this issue, we are firmly of the opinion that it

is playing the dog-in-the-manger role. Its opposition to preservation of the lower Tsitika is based mainly on the difficulty of compensating the Macmillan Bloedel Company for timber losses. As explained by Mr. Brummet, Minister of Lands, Parks and Housing, "The reason is essentially one based on costs...To establish a park... would be a cost that is beyond the capability of this Government."<sup>7</sup>

Yet there would be the very real possibility of federal contributions towards that compensation. And, as suggested in the Parks Division Feasibility Study, there is also the possibility of exchange for timber in Strathcona Park. It is recognized that the straight-line boundaries of this park do include some non-park land. A rationalization of the park's boundaries is under consideration and would be more acceptable to the public if balanced by a highly valuable gain to the park system in the Tsitika. Moreover, there are assurances from the Nature Trust (a charitable, non-profit corporation which acquires key areas of ecological significance through gifts or purchase) that it "...would consider the purchase of D.L.223 if and when it became available and providing action is taken by the government to set aside associated lands in the watershed as park or ecological reserve."<sup>8</sup>

According to the Integrated Resource Plan a large

proportion of the lower Tsitika will be preserved or will have long-term deferrals from logging. These areas include deer and elk wintering ranges and corridors along the river for recreational purposes and for fisheries protection. Overlapping on them is a 1,640 hectares "area of visual importance" where, presumably, there will be special constraints on logging to preserve scenic aspects. The three intended ecological reserves amount to 1,631 hectares. From a land-use point of view, it would make very good sense to consolidate these areas into a single protected wilderness covering the lower valley. The Parks Division proposal covers an area of about 3,400 hectares and the Sierra Club proposal about 4,500 hectares.

There is no doubt that the fishery would be better served by an unlogged valley than by a few leave strips along parts of the river. Even if logging does not take place in the lower watershed, the river will be adversely affected by the extensive clear-cutting in the headwaters. In a province where salmon stocks have declined drastically in large part through habitat destruction as well as through over-fishing, it would be advantageous to leave undisturbed the lower Tsitika where the most important spawning and rearing reaches are located.

In the forefront of the new philosophy regarding forest land is the idea that its appropriate use includes much more than timber. The public has a right to such uses and

should not be deprived of them through mismanagement. The lower Tsitika is a clear example of an area where park values of the forest greatly exceed timber values. Patently, a park use is in fact a higher use than an industrial one.

Of course, we applaud the provincial government for taking steps to establish an ecological reserve along the frontage at Robson Bight. The Sierra Club proposed this to the government in its brief submitted in January, 1981,<sup>9</sup> but the Club also advocated that the ecological reserve should be backed by a park.

Ecological reserves are basically for scientific purposes and are neither staffed nor developed. The proposed Robson Bight ecological reserve by itself will have no mechanism to handle the delicate people-whale interface. However, the whales are already famous and the number of whale-watching boats is growing every year. Whale-watching is now a commercially operated activity out of Telegraph Cove. As logging roads are extended down the Tsitika Valley there will be visitation from the land and in no sense will Robson Bight remain sequestered. There has already been serious harassment including the shooting of a whale. The people-whale interface can be properly managed only by provincial and/or federal park authorities.

It is a specious argument that a park is an inappropriate

designation as it will attract people and therefore have an adverse effect on the whales. However, if the government is convinced of this argument the area could be given another designation such as Nature Conservancy or Ecological Reserve. The point is that the trees should be left standing.

A park covering the lower Tsitika Valley would be a tremendously valuable addition to the park system of British Columbia. It should be noted that the north end of Vancouver Island has only two provincial parks, Cape Scott and Schoen Lake. Yet northern Vancouver Island is a rapidly developing part of the province where population and tourism are growing. The park would have a positive impact on the tourist industry and the evidence is clearly in front of us that tourism must fill the void left by a flagging forest industry.

There is a strong case for the establishment of the park even if killer whales played no part in it. With the adjacent killer whale "core area", the case is unassailable. It would be a high-profile park that would draw nature-oriented visitors from all over the world. The Government of British Columbia has stated that it cannot afford to create a park over the lower Tsitika. As we see it, the government cannot afford not to create a park. Unlogged, the Tsitika-Robson Bight area will be a superlative wilderness heritage for all Canadians. We ask this committee

to make a strong recommendation to government that the Tsitika - Robson Bight area be set aside for wilderness purposes.

## References

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# PROPOSED ROBSON BIGHT CANADIAN LANDMARK TSITIKA PROVINCIAL PARK

