

Study Area #6: Robson Bight

Background

Robson Bight is a small bay at the outlet of the Tsitika River on the northeastern coast of Vancouver Island, near the western end of Johnstone Strait. The study area encompasses only 515 hectares, which the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing has proposed be added to the existing marine ecological reserve over the Bight itself.

Robson Bight has become famous for its unusually large numbers of killer whales which use certain shallow, foreshore areas for rubbing themselves, and exhibit other behaviour of interest. The proposed reserve also includes a small coastal estuary and associated ecosystems.

In the late 1970's, when the public became aware of the killer whales' use of Robson Bight, concerns were raised about the possible impacts of proposed logging and log handling. At the request of the Minister of Environment, a government team studied the problem. Their report, *Killer Whales and Coastal Log Management*, completed in 1981, concluded that logging and log handling should not occur near the rubbing beaches. As a result the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing examined possible protective designations and subsequently established an Ecological Reserve over the nearshore marine area frequented by the whales. The Ministry also wished to include the adjacent uplands within the Ecological Reserve, but it contained privately held timber rights and some privately owned land. So the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing began negotiations to purchase the timber and land.

Negotiations between the government and MacMillan Bloedel Ltd., the major upland tenure owner, have been underway for some time. MacMillan Bloedel will apparently accept the boundary proposed in the government's report *Robson Bight Ecological Reserve Upland Extension*, provided the provincial cabinet agrees to the compensation package negotiated by the ministries and the company.

The eastern segment of the proposed ecological reserve is situated within Western Forest Products' Tree Farm Licence. The company has expressed concern over the proposed width of the reserve. The proposed boundary is based on topographic considerations and on the desire to ensure that the whales are undisturbed on their "rubbing beach" situated below the slope in question. Western Forest Products Ltd. has suggested that the reserve be only 250 metres depth, and that the balance of land in the present proposal be left in the Tree Farm Licence, with a 10-year moratorium on harvesting to determine whether this section needs to be included in the ecological reserve.

Beyond establishing an Ecological Reserve, is the need to manage it. While recreationists and tourists are attracted by the prospect of viewing the whales, such recreation must be strictly managed to ensure that the whales are undisturbed. The purpose of the ecological reserve is to protect the whales, rather than provide additional recreational opportunities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Committee concluded that the issues requiring resolution are whether the proposed upland boundaries are suitable, whether the government should agree to the compensation package already negotiated, and what management principles are appropriate.

The Committee believes that the proposed upland boundaries are adequate to provide the whales with a buffer from the sight and sound of forestry. Whether a greater buffer would be superior is less clear. The Committee was persuaded that the designation of the area as an ecological reserve was the most appropriate category of protected area for this type of natural area.

The Committee recommends:

1. The provincial government should acquire the proposed upland area (as described in its report *Robson Bight Ecological Reserve Upland Extension*, as soon as possible, and add it to the existing Ecological Reserve. Since the ministries and the major tenure holder have reached an agreement on compensation, the government should accept this agreement and proceed.
2. Government should assign management of the area to the Parks Division.
3. The Parks Division should monitor the effect of people on the whales at the site and take appropriate measures to ensure that visitors do not harass the whales.

Robson Bight

JOHNSTONE STRAIT

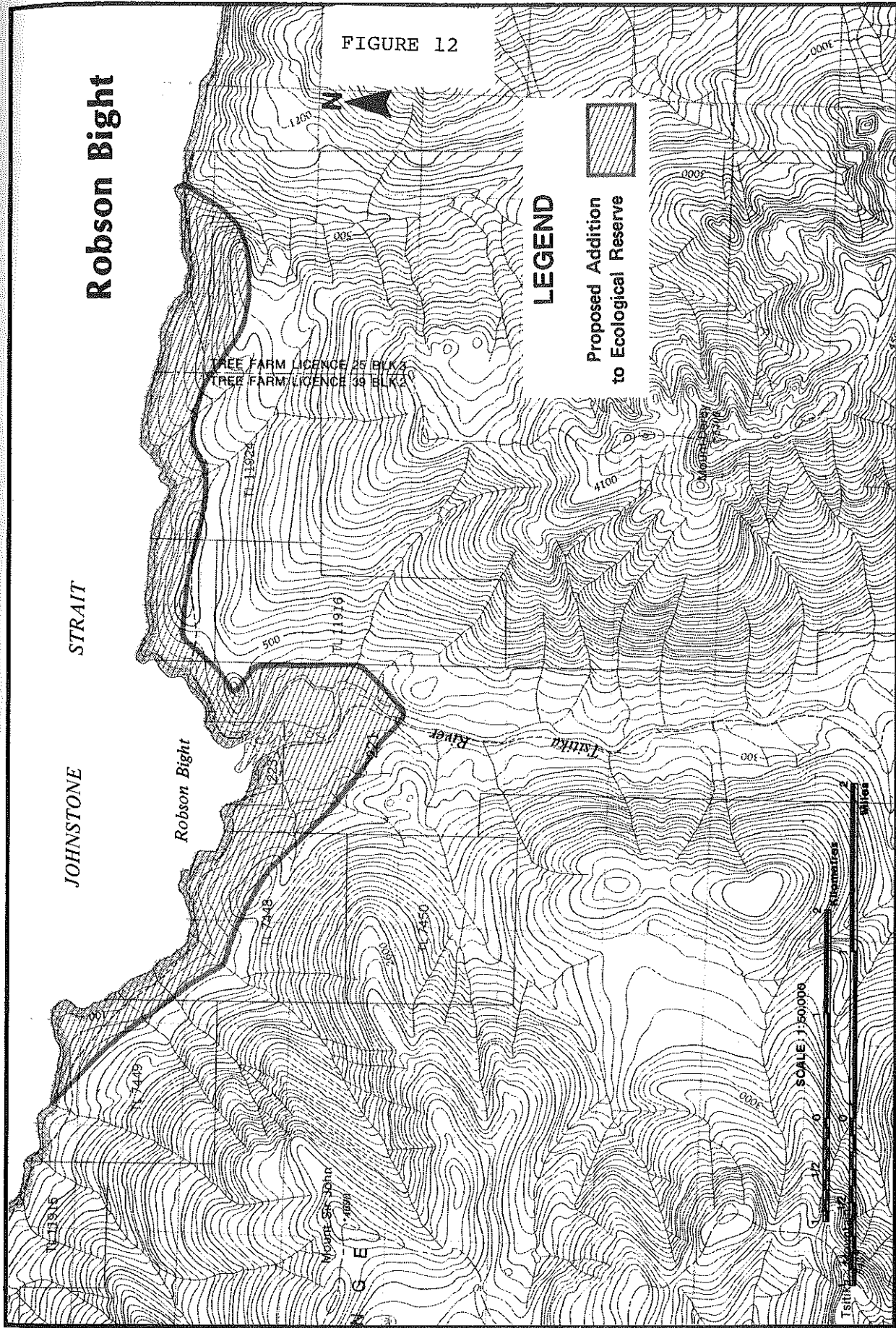
Robson Bight

FIGURE 12

LEGEND



Proposed Addition
to Ecological Reserve



TREE FARM LICENCE 25 BLK 2
TREE FARM LICENCE 39 BLK 2

SCALE 1:50,000

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100