

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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Submission on the Draft Master Plan for Valhalla Provincial Park

On February 20, VWS reviewed a stack of government documents leaked by the BC Public Service Employees for the Environment. This shocking material concerned the BC Parks Lodge Strategy that has been developed behind closed doors for the last year. In view of the information in these documents, the Valhalla Wilderness Society must reverse the approval it gave to the proposed zoning of the park at the planning meetings.

MISUSE OF PUBLIC PROCESS

VWS plan reviewers were shocked to discover that a \$4,000 expense for the Valhalla Park Master Plan process is itemized in the budget of the BC Park Lodge Strategy. It appears under the heading "Identification of New Lodge Sites Opportunities." Valhalla Park is on a list of lodge sites identified by the government, and is also on a list of 10 parks that already have private lodge proposals.

VWS directors and members of our community believed the purpose of reviewing the master plan was to assess the conservation needs and goals of the park, so that any potential changes in park development or activities could be balanced with ecological protection. VWS contributed its time to attend the planning meetings, and urged local residents to attend, in the belief that we would have effective input into the process.

Little did we know that, for the last year, the government has been carrying on an internal process that has decided on a huge increase in hut, lodge and resort development in BC. The government has identified potential sites without any study of the ecological impacts at all.

The leaked documents show that the plan was to complete the site identification by early winter, market these sites to investment corporations in Europe, Japan and the US as well as Canada, and have the leases in the bag by early winter of this year. This makes the provisions in our draft master plan to do environmental impact assessment on proposed roofed accommodations just so much spin doctoring.

The purpose of the planning process was to change the master plan to facilitate the development and make it legally unchallengeable. Despite two stakeholder's meetings and two Open Houses on this draft plan, at no time were the participants told about the lodge proposal in Valhalla Park.

Those present at the stakeholders meetings in our community were literally unanimous in wanting the park to stay as wilderness. Most wanted no structures in the park. It was pointed out that Valhalla Park doesn't need a lodge because there are already four lodges surrounding the park, a good hut in the Wee Sandy drainage, and numerous accommodations in the lake villages. A lodge in or on the boundary of the park would actually draw away visitors that might have stayed in the accommodations provided in our villages.

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE PROPOSED ZONING

Fifteen percent of the park was proposed for a "Nature Recreation Zone", which allows lodges. The Nature Recreation Zone includes the entire lakeshore of the park, the lower end of Nemo Creek, the Beatrice/Evans trail corridor up to Evans Lake, and the area around Drinnon Lake.

No one reviewing the draft plan had any idea that a "lodge" is defined as a facility with up to 80 beds and all the amenities of home. This would mean electricity, hot showers, flush toilets, and sewage treatment plant.

Forty percent of the backcountry of the park was proposed for a "Wilderness Recreation Zone", which is open to hut development. No one knew that the back room process had defined huts as having up to 30 beds, also with all the amenities of home.

An example of a "hut" is the new Kokanee Glacier Chalet that was built in Kokanee Glacier Park two years ago. It sits smack in the middle of the park's backcountry — and a grizzly bear travel route — with its electric lights, hot showers, flush toilets, hydroelectric plant and outbuilding, and sewage treatment plant. The sewage treatment plant hasn't worked. During its first year it poured inadequately treated sewage into a domestic watershed. There are rumours this is still going on.

Forty-five percent of the park was proposed for a "Wilderness Conservation", which forbids any structures at all. VWS and others were so impressed with this that they thought they were getting a large improvement in the zoning. No one objected to the 40% for Wilderness Recreation (huts) because we thought we would be getting the best we could get for conservation.

However, the leaked government documents say that the Wilderness Conservation zone will be no hindrance to lodge building. If an investor proposes a lodge or hut in this zone, the government will amend the zoning of the site where the facility will sit. The government has put out one set of zoning rules to the public, and quite another behind closed doors.

It is apparent that the new Wilderness Conservation zone is a trick, a plum to lure environmental groups like VWS to concede the large area of the park identified for lodges and huts. Even the planning consultants knew nothing about it.

MARKETING

The government is using our tax money to go to the US, Europe and Japan to recruit the investors to build these lodges. The budget for the marketing strategy is \$174,000. With this money, a number of government agencies, including WLAP, will collaborate to film the most superb sites in our provincial parks, put the films on CDs, and send them out to wealthy investment corporations.

Just as timber corporations have leases of public forest called Tree Farm Licenses, development corporations will have leases of land in parks. The *Park Act* has been altered to allow this. Feeding on the wealth of the public forests, the timber corporations have gained control, and the forests belong to the people in name only.

This same thing has happened with commercial recreation development in Canada's National Parks, which leased land to private investors from the beginning. There has been much media attention given to the ecological crisis in Canada's National Parks, which are losing their grizzly bears, wolves and other sensitive species. The Auditor General has said that development and marketing are bringing excessive crowds of people, which has serious impacts on ecological integrity. The Ecological Integrity Panel for Canada's National Parks has agreed.

The draft plan for Valhalla Park proposes a public-private partnership for marketing the park. This will put government money behind private business's marketing programs. It is just such a partnership that has been doing the marketing that the Auditor General and the Ecological Integrity Panel have criticized. We say NO.

LODGES AND FIRE HAZARD

Valhalla Park has powerful interface fire issues, including the fact that the Village of Slocan is contiguous to the park. A park fire could also send fire brands all the way across the lake and engulf our communities in flames.

Since 2002, the Valhalla Wilderness Society has pleaded with the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection to fund fire planning studies and possibly carry out prescription burning to reduce fire hazard. The Ministry has continuously told us there were no funds for that.

We are dismayed to learn that the government has \$174,000 to serve international investors by connecting them up with the park landscape they would most like to have for their own. These private interests will be getting to build fabulously lucrative developments on public land they don't have to buy. Yet our government has no money to do fire studies to protect the park and our homes.

A 2001 Auditor General's report said that BC is not doing enough to stop the spread of development into wildlands. This forces the Ministry of Forests into suppressing wildfires to protect human lives and property. Fire suppression allows dangerous levels of fuel to build up that eventually makes a conflagration that firefighters cannot stop.

The BC Parks Lodge Strategy flouts everything the Auditor General was saying. The summer of 2003 showed that all BC residents share the same pool of firefighters, equipment and firefighting budget. Firefighters will not be able to protect homes well if they are spread out all over the bush protecting numerous lodges.

CO-OPTING SENIORS AND FAMILIES

The draft Valhalla Park plan states at page 50: "trends show that the older and aging 'baby boomer' generation may need a higher degree of services and facilities in order to enjoy the recreational opportunities in parks." The government, in defending the Lodge Strategy, has said that the lodges will make parks more accessible to "seniors and families."

Seniors no doubt fall on both sides of this issue, and no one should stereotype them or co-opt their support. But we can tell you that a large part of the membership of the Valhalla Wilderness Society, which is notorious for its battles for uncompromised wilderness, has always been seniors. In our experience, the seniors are the ones most concerned about passing on a legacy to future generations. Just because there will be a greater proportion of seniors in the years to come does not mean they will be less concerned about the world their children will inherit.

In terms of a magnificent *wilderness* park, we know of none that are more gracious to seniors and families than Valhalla Park. They can go direct from our lakeside villages to the wilderness shore by boat in about 10 minutes time. Families living or visiting in our area do this all the time. Even if they are not stopping in the park, they can enjoy a totally natural shoreline unbroken by roads or other development. Then they can come back to all the comforts of home if they want to, leaving no impacts on the park itself. If the proposed paddle-wheeler comes to pass, it will make this easier and more delightful for some.

But don't think there aren't seniors and families out backpacking and rock climbing in the backcountry of Valhalla Park. And every year, the school takes our kids on a multi-day canoe trip along the shore of the park. The Wilderness School in Winlaw has enriched the lives of our youths by introducing them to the backcountry.

We can expect lakeshore development, including the marinas and boat houses that are provided for in the draft master plan; hugely increased motor boat traffic; powerful visual impact around any lodge, that will require extensive logging for fire safety measures. The park's grizzly bear population will most likely be toast. And for what? Jobs? Any investor that can build a lodge in our park could just as easily build one in our communities, where all the infrastructure is available, where the visitors would be drawn to the businesses in our towns, and where the lodge would contribute to our tax base.

The government is using seniors and children to claim that, without a lodge not everyone can visit our parks. But guess what? Not everyone can stay in lodges. Lodges leave the low- and middle-income people out. Already some local people who used the old, rustic Kokanee Glacier Cabin tell us they cannot afford to use the new Chalet that has replaced it.

People who want lodges have many from which to choose. Seventy-three parks have some kind of roofed accommodations, such as at Manning and Mt. Robson. There are one hundred, twenty-nine roofed accommodations either in or near parks. And this obviously doesn't count all the hotels, motels and B&Bs in park communities.

Eighty-eight percent of the BC land base is open to lodge construction. There are a great many existing ones, and Land and Water BC is handing out permits for new ones right and left. This includes the massive development of mega-resorts like Jumbo, many purposely located on the boundaries of parks. But: When the corporate lodge and resort empire has been established, how many of our BC seniors and families will be able to afford them?

In closing, we would like to thank the Public Service Employees for the Environment for having the courage to tell the truth when no one else would. We have no idea who these people are or where they work. Inasmuch as any of these unknown people may be present or past employees of WLAP, we recognize they may represent many others.

The Valhalla Wilderness Society asks you to listen to the input you have been receiving from the public, tell the political arm of government that the lodge strategy is unacceptable in Valhalla Park, turn down the proposed lodge(s), and change the draft plan accordingly.

Anne Sherrod
Plan Reviewer