

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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PRESS RELEASE

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FOUNDERS OF SPIRIT BEAR PROPOSAL APPLAUD PROTECTION

Today's announcement that the Province and First Nations have agreed to significantly increase protection on the BC north and central coast is very good news. This includes tripling the size of the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Sanctuary and creating a new Spirit Bear Conservancy. These are two of the protection initiatives that the Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS) spearheaded nearly two decades ago.

"The government's scientific panel recommended that 44-50% of the mid- and north-coasts must be fully protected or grizzly bears will disappear over the long term," says VWS Wildlife Biologist Wayne McCrory. "The BC government has made a major first step in that direction. We especially commend the Kitsoo and Gitga'at for meeting the panel's recommendations in their own territories, including the Spirit Bear Proposal and the tripling of the Khutzeymateen Sanctuary."

The new Spirit Bear Conservancy represents about 80% of Valhalla's original proposal area of 262,000 hectares. The new conservancy will be a protected mosaic of both mainland and island bear habitats comprising over half a million acres (208,000 hectares), about half the size of Yellowstone National Park. It includes over 50 salmon streams, pristine inlets, and rare coastal estuaries. "Once protected, this remote rainforest archipelago will be cherished by generations to come as a world-class natural treasure," says McCrory.

Eighteen years ago McCrory and a few of his colleagues were awe-struck by their first sighting of a white bear on Princess Royal Island. "We saw bears and salmon in every big and little valley, cathedral groves of giant Sitka spruce, and wolves on the beaches," says McCrory. "It was UNLOGGED and about as close to a wild bear heaven you could ever find on this earth." That night they sat down and drew the first rough lines of the sanctuary on a map. What followed was 18 years of scientific studies, mapping, and presentations, starting with the Kitsoo and the Gitga'at. VWS biologists participated and guided in over 20 film documentaries.

“Protection would not have happened at all without the First Nations,” says McCrory. “And when the planning tables negotiated an inadequate deal, the Kitsoo and the Gitga’at increased the percentage of fully protected lands to a level VWS could accept.”

VWS also sought expanded protection for the world-famous Khutzeymateen Grizzly Sanctuary. When it was created in 1993, after a 10-year battle with timber companies, it was too small to contain the home ranges of the 60 or so Khutzeymateen grizzlies. Now the new land-use plan will expand their sanctuary by about three times.

The current 32% of the mid- and north-coast that is to be protected has left a number of large gaps on the map where there are only small amounts of new parks. VWS would like to continue dialogue with First Nations and government on these areas. Most of the trees that will be logged in the agreement outside of protected areas will be ancient rainforests up to 1,000 years old. Maintaining the bears over the long term will require the most stringent guidelines possible for Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM) in the areas where logging will occur. We understand this will be negotiated over the next four months. There should also be emphasis on stopping all raw log exports and having those logs stay in First Nations communities to help create the many potential jobs needed through small value-added processing of rainforest products.

The Valhalla Wilderness Society would like to thank the Raincoast Conservation Society, the David Suzuki Foundation, the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, and all the groups allied under the Rainforest Solutions Project for their support in helping this to happen.

Contact: Valhalla Wilderness Society at 250-358-2333.

Photographs of coastal grizzlies and spirit bears available on request.