

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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PRESS RELEASE

NDP MLAs "OVERWHELMED" BY ANCIENT FOREST OF THE UPPER INCOMAPPLEUX VALLEY – CALL FOR PROTECTION

WEST KOOTENAYS, BC – Two NDP MLAs, Michael Sather and Guy Gentner, are calling upon the provincial government to take the initiative to protect BC's rarest inland temperate rainforests. They are making the call after a tour of the Incomappleux River valley in southeastern BC hosted by the Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS) on Friday, October 16.

The VWS, in consultation with several other environmental groups, has proposed a new provincial park with its Selkirk Mountain Caribou Park proposal to link Glacier National Park in the north to Goat Range Provincial Park in the south. The VWS proposal provides the last chance to protect a wilderness large enough for the 90 mountain caribou still found in the area and the Kokanee salmon-eating Selkirk grizzlies. Although the BC government this year set aside about 50% of the park proposal as no-logging zones for mountain caribou, ancient lowland forests like the Incomappleux Valley and parts of the Westfall and other critical areas were not in the caribou recovery zones and have planned new roads and clearcuts.

Gentner agreed that logging is a threat to the area and says the first step should be to suspend logging within the proposed park boundaries. He recommends that the second step should be to implement an "independent" environmental assessment by outside experts without political interference.

Toby Spribille, a lichenologist at the University of Graz, Austria, was on hand to show the MLAs some of the globally rare lichen species. Lichens have been used worldwide as indicators of forest health. Several species previously unknown to science, have grabbed headlines in the past for the Incomappleux valley. Spribille showed the MLAs several of the species, including some that still are unnamed. "We're seeing a situation where lowland old-growth cedar-hemlock forests, to which these species are confined, are probably down more than 90% from pre-European settlement levels," says Spribille. "There may have been species that disappeared before scientists ever saw them. And nobody knows how low populations of the present old-growth-dependent species can go before they become unviable."

Craig Pettitt, guide and VWS director, showed the legislators impressive ancient cedar trees up to 1,800 years old and how the ages of the trees were estimated. "Most of our largest, most accessible ancient cedars in the inland rainforest are gone," Pettitt told the group. "The ones that remain are in serious danger. Two-thirds of the Incomappleux has been heavily clearcut, and the small area remaining has approved cutblocks in it."

Bear biologist and VWS director Wayne McCrory pointed out the need for more wilderness protection to conserve the Selkirk grizzlies and that parks like Glacier National Park are too small by themselves to protect a viable grizzly population. The MLAs were shown several grizzly bear rubbing trees along the hiking trail that demonstrate active use. Large, hollow cedars are also used by denning black bears.

Sather, a biologist and Deputy Environment Critic, said: "I've been to many special and unique places in BC but I've never experienced anything so spectacular. Like old-growth cedar forests on the coast, this rare inland temperate rainforest has massive and ancient cedars, but it had a very special feel to it, allowing a spectacular variety of plant species." Gentner, Government Relations Critic, concurred, saying he's never seen anything like this before.

"I think where we go from here is for the government to open the tool box and find the appropriate means to protect the "caribou rainforest," stated Gentner. "I first thought extending Glacier National Park from the Incomappleux was the way to go but after studying the VWS's proposal I think a provincial park makes the most sense because it's practical and encompasses a solution that highlights integral aspects of the ecosystems."

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Photographs available at <http://community.netidea.com/wildernesswatch>