

January 21, 2009 NSC Presentation

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When Peter Forsythe asked if I might give a presentation on recreation use and changes of use of forests in the Prince George Region, he raised two broad issues.

First, he noted that “forest user's have changed over the years and the traditional users must accommodate new uses. In the past hunters, fishermen and hikers, etc. were working in the industry and basically had little problem with the industrial activities.” “We are now seeing people using the forests who have nothing to do with the forest industry and who are wanting changes.” Further he noted that “...The general public would like to have greater participation in the planning of the resource.”

Secondly, he mentioned that in recent years he had observed some changes in the use of recreation sites in the area where his company (Winton Global) operates. More families seem to just out camping and otherwise having family holidays and partaking in a variety of activities. The Rec sites were full every nice weekend. He also mentioned that he felt more people were taking advantage of the forest. Is that really the case?

I will attempt to address both points.

I will examine changes that have occurred in recreational use of our forests over the past 40 years of so and provide some reasons why that may have occurred.

In attempting to address trends I soon found that there is an almost total lack of good data on most recreational uses of our forests. There is some data on hunting and fishing and park use but even that is weak if one wants to look at the changes only in this region. There is virtually no data on use of recreation sites, hiking and skiing activities in the forests, snowmobiling, ATVing, berry or mushroom picking or other activities.

Thus I have had to depend on discussions I have had with a variety of people with long term experience in the region who are active in their chosen activity.

Pre 1970

Prior to about 1970 the dominant recreation activities carried out in our forests was unquestionably fishing and hunting. There were a few who did camp for camping sake, or were berry and mushroom picking, firewood gathering, canoeing and horseback riding and birding. Hiking and backpacking was almost non-existent and it was the days before ATVs and snowmobiles.

Hunting

The level of participation in hunting has been decreasing since 1981 if one uses sale of resident hunting licences. The numbers have decrease by about 55 %. (174,000 to about 80,000)

A huge part of the provincial decrease is in the numbers of deer hunters, especially in the southern third of the province. There has also been a sharp decrease in those who buy licences primarily to hunt gamebirds (grouse, pheasants).

Here in the Omineca and Peace areas there has, in fact, been little change in the numbers of moose hunters. With the introduction of limited entry hunting of moose in the Omineca about 1980 there was a small decrease in moose hunters but since then the numbers have remained fairly constant. While many of these moose hunters are local residents, the remainder come from other parts of the province.

Because deer populations have increased dramatically in the Omineca in the past 25 years and there has been some increase in hunting of them.

The hunting of mountain caribou was stopped in the mid 1970s and populations have rebounded. (over 700 in the McGregor/hart area and 250 in the northern Cariboos)

Severe restrictions have been placed on the hunting of grizzly bears and their numbers are now likely as high as any time in the past 100 years.

Angling

As with hunting there has been a significant decline in the numbers of people buying freshwater fishing licenses on a provincial basis. The decline is about 20 % over the past 15-20 years. There is no provincial system for collecting such data annually so one has to rely on a federal survey that is carried out every 5 years; the next is in 2010. The data is not broken down to the regional level but the local provincial fisheries staff tell me that there has definitely been a decline in the numbers of anglers locally although they do not know if it is more or less than indicated by the provincial stats.

They did make the comment that our local fisheries is under utilized....many lakes get little or no fishing.

A study done locally by Steven Stussi and Patrick Maher on angler preferences. Among the findings it indicated that most anglers prefer small lakes and places with few other people...they are out there in part for the quiet and solitude. The study also found most anglers took part in other recreational activities when out in the bush. While 60 % of those surveyed regularly used designated Rec sites, almost as many were happy to use other locations if there was road access.

Reasons for the decreases:

(Primarily from 2007 report "A Strategy for Resident Hunter Recruitment and Retention in British Columbia)

- changing demographics – an aging population, influx of other ethnic groups less inclined to hunt
- urbanization

- time obligations – both parents often working

- increase in alternate recreational opportunities

- doubling of licence costs in 1982 and further increases since then

- fuel prices and increased costs of hunting accessories

- Fed. firearms laws and Hunter Education requirements – time commitments and costs

- restrictions or closures on hunting of some species (grizzly bear, caribou)

- hunting regulations –complicated

- opportunities –many more restrictions on access in most areas

- for most meat is much less expensive at the supermarket

- lack of mentors on how to hunt

- hunting has not been promoted

- public perception of hunters is often negative and reinforced by many TV shows*

I am not aware of any study looking at reasons for the decline in numbers of anglers but it is easy to suppose it is for many of the same reasons as the decline in numbers of hunters.

An additional reason that has been mentioned is lack of maps showing forest roads, the location of lakes and the access to the lakes. Recreation maps are no longer produced by either the forest districts or forest companies; or by the Min of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. There are recreational atlases and backroad map books for sale but they are far from up-to-date and contain many inaccuracies. One can use Google but not everyone has a computer and large printer; further one gets no information on condition or state of any road so observed.

Forest Rec Sites

There is no good data available on use Forest Recreation Sites. With government cutbacks to forest recreation programs over the past dozen years, the numbers of maintained sites has been reduced by about 30 % in this region. As everyone is aware these Rec sites are now the responsibility of the Min of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. However, maintenance of roads to access Rec. sites (and for other forest recreation pursuits) remains a Forest Service function.

Local MoTCA staff say overall use of Rec. sites has not changed dramatically over the past 10 years although it fluctuates significantly with the weather. They say day users and weekend users tend to be local residents but those that stay for longer periods tend to be from other parts of BC. Regardless of where users come from, most spring and summer visitors are there primarily to fish. In the fall most users are hunters. Both groups will engage in other activities to fill in time, especially family members not engaged in fishing or hunting.

The MoTCA said they have no evidence to support the idea that Rec. site users are just out there enjoying an inexpensive family holidays.

Provincial Parks

I considered provincial park use as it not possible to fully separate recreational use of parks from surrounding forestlands managed for timber and other uses. In this region many of our parks are accessed via roads built for timber harvesting. Also many of the new parks established in the first part of this decade were on areas of forest land with already well-established recreational activities. A couple examples are Kakwa that is heavily used by snowmobilers, and Sugarbowl-Grizzly Den used by hikers, backpackers and backcountry skiers. The uses have continued and probably increased and are part of the overall recreational forest land experience.

Provincial statistics indicate a steady increase in the use of BC Parks through the 1980s and 1990s. Since 9/11, however, attendance has flattened out although with large variations between years. While the data is not very reliable if broken down to the regional level, it suggests there has been a small decline in park use in the Omineca over the past 8-10 years. The decline has been most noticeable in day users. Camping (including use of RVs) in front country sites (those accessible by vehicle) has held fairly steady, But a parks staff person noted there has been a decline in backcountry campers.

Hiking, Backpacking, Backcountry Skiing, Snowshoeing

There is no local data on self-propelled activities on forest lands. Thus I am largely giving my own observations and impressions as to what has occurred.

Significant levels of recreational hiking, backpacking and backcountry skiing all began in the early 1970s. Significant amounts of recreational snowshoeing on forest lands has only developed in the past 5 years.

Many new trails were established through the 70s and 80s that facilitated hiking and backpacking. The improved access to forest lands from the spreading network of forest roads contributed significantly to the growth in hiking and backpacking.

The access also contributed to increasing numbers of skiers venturing into the backcountry although the availability of improved ski equipment also helped.

It is my view that growth slowed in the 1990s. Since about 2000, perhaps because of the establishment of UNBC and influx of students and staff, the numbers of participants and users days has shown a slow but steady increase. However, the increase has been mainly by day users. Areas close to communities are heavily used in summer and winter.

It has been my observation that backpacking and tenting in the backcountry has decreased (significantly) over the past 15-20 years. This is supported by Parks staff observations. Further, more of those that do venture into the backcountry on overnight trips are going to cabins.

Reasons for changes:

- urbanization - fewer raised in an outdoor environment or working in an outdoor occupation including the forest industry
- fear factor –because of TV and other stories a fear of bears, hazards, diseases (e.g. giardia)
- time demands on families
- increase in alternate recreational opportunities – Otway ski trails has drawn a huge number of X-C skiers (time factor, cost, etc.)
- costs of equipment
- fuel costs
- access issues - a few areas have become inaccessible as forest roads have been neglected or deactivated. This is partly related to the pine beetle outbreak but other policy and economic issues also play a role. That roads into the mountainous areas are not being plowed in winter has really affected where backcountry and skiers can go. A few are even resorting to snowmobiles to access their favorite trailheads.
- demographics –less of an issue than with hunting

Snowmobiling, ATVing

Recreational snowmobiling really began to grow in the mid 1970s with the arrival of better sleds. Locally growth in the activity was especially rapid in the 1980s as folk ventured farther into the mountains and other remote places. As with hiking and skiing, it was facilitated by the expanding network of roads open to desirable areas. In the late 1900s much improved and more powerful machines came on the market and made it possible for almost anyone to go wherever they wished if they had the skill. Local retailers say sales have increased almost every year for the past 2 decades (although a significant drop in sales this winter).

The development of the Upper Torpy with the construction of a warming cabin has made it one of the most important destinations in the Prince George area. But sledders are venturing in all directions as unplowed roads are, unlike for skiers and snowshoers, almost a blessing. Activity is particularly intense close to communities. And, as with hiking and backcountry skiing, there is no good data on participation levels but every indication is that growth in users days and number of participants continues.

I was unable to get any real sense of what the level of recreational activity is among ATV users, or whether there are any particular trends. The dealers say sales have been growing for several years. It certainly is not uncommon to see users travelling along forest roads and trails. Some are used to access fishing destinations and many more are used in hunting where that is permitted. As with snowmobiling there is a zone of higher use around communities.

Other activities

There are a variety of other commonly pursued activities on forest lands that come under the recreation banner. These include picking various berries, fiddleheads and mushrooms; bird watching, picnicking, swimming, horseback riding, off-roading, boating, canoeing and kayaking. Some are disperse activities and others very site specific; some are very seasonal and others are pursued throughout the year. A few of these activities have many participants and others very few. But there is a real lack of information on trends for any of these recreational activities, and others not mentioned.

The Ancient Forest Trail and to a lesser degree others areas such as the Forests for the World trails, the Cottonwood Park trails, the Esker Park trails and Huble Farm, attract people for their natural values. By natural values I refer to the scenery, beauty, spiritual, unique features, old trees, historical features, etc.

Last (2008) summer the Ancient Forest Trail had more than 6500 visitors and most (70+%) came from Prince George and surrounding communities. People are clearly putting a value on the forests for values other than standard timber products or recreational activities.

Resource Concerns

Managing the province's natural resources has certainly grown in complexity over the years. As far back as the 1940s a few people have been expressing concern on how these resources (fish, water, wildlife, forests, agriculture lands, recreational opportunities, cultural values) were being managed and exploited, and the politics of these decisions. The prevailing attitude was that many of our resources were almost unlimited. Profit and (I would say) greed prevailed. (Haig- Brown, father).

With regard to forest lands, concern for values other than timber increased sharply in the early 1970s. It came with the consolidation of the industry, a spreading network of roads and the introduction of clearcutting. Concern about ecosystem sustainability and biodiversity were also gaining momentum.

To address public demands and concerns Resource Folios introduced (Torpy -Bill Young/Roger Goodlad) in 1972. They were a government and forest industry driven process that had opportunities for public input but that input was mainly by affected stakeholders. Range plans and Crown Land plans were also initiated in the 70s.

By the 1980s large parts of the Omineca forest lands were covered by these Resource folios.

In the late 1980s Land and Resource Use Plans (LRUPs) were introduced and they were the first opportunity for the public to take real ownership and drive the final product. But few were initiated and only one or two ever completed in this region. The LRUPs were labour intensive, time consuming and covered relatively small areas –Upper Herrick Plan.

In 1992 the Government introduced Land and Resource Management Plans, a consensus seeking process, which would cover entire forest districts. Government directed them but they allowed for a high level of public involvement and ownership. They established broad land use objectives. Concurrently the Protected Area Strategy to double our parkland was initiated. The PAS recommendations were to be vented by the LRMP tables.

The Forest Practice Code (FPC) was introduced.

By the late 1990s LRMPs were completed for all forest districts in this region. However, the government had got increasingly nervous about them as the government would lose some land use options and also options for development of resources. Industry, especially mining and gas and oil, were objecting strongly to the restraints the public was asking for. They argued their resources hidden, i.e. did not know where they may be found. Objections also came from commercial recreation operators, the forest industry in some areas, municipalities and then there were expanding First Nation land claims. Many resource developers wanted no constraints on their activities.

Climatic change issues were beginning to catch the attention of the public.

More formal Environmental Review processes were introduced at the Federal and Provincial levels in the 1970s for larger site specific projects such as mines, hydro dams and new highways and pipelines.... initially there was limited public input. These environmental reviews were later extended to wide variety of smaller projects as well. However, these did not address the public demands for more comprehensive resource and land use planning. Beginning in the late 1990s, Government slowly eliminated the need for environmental reviews of most smaller projects.

For many years Forest Development Plans, Silviculture Plans, Silviculture Prescriptions and Pest Management Plans all provided the public and stakeholders with opportunities to review and have meaningful input.

The 2004 move from the FPC to the Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) and professional accountability severely restricted that public input. Coincidentally FDPs, SPs, SMPs, etc where the public could have meaningful input were either eliminated or largely removed from the public review process.

FSPs (Forest Stewardship Plans) were introduced where in licences had to specify strategies and results consistent with objectives set by government, esp in the FRPA. They did not involve the public. Also they do not include the site-specific detail most public can relate to and wish to see/review.

In the past few years more attention and value is being placed of the role of forests in climate control including carbon sequestration.

Today probably the main public involvement in forestry in this area is through the industry-run certification Sustainable Forest Management Plan (SFMP) PAGs. While PAGs (Public Advisory Groups) serve a valuable purpose in so far as setting objectives and measures of forestry activities, they are not (as Mike Nash has noted) a government or publicly owned processes. The associated Certification processes and their audits are good checks, as is the role played by the Forest Practices Board. However, the SFMPs are not the tools for addressing the broader public interests on the landscape.

Broader public interests were covered to some degree in the regional and district strategic plans such as the LRMPs and associated landscape plans.

However, the local LRMPs are all several years old although there are annual reviews.

A year ago the province introduced “A New Direction for Strategic Land Use Planning” and it essentially ended provincial scale comprehensive strategic land use plans based on a consensus-seeking model.

Personally I am dismayed at this direction and believe it is a huge mistake.

In light of changing public interests, climatic change impacts, MPB, changing provincial and national economics, bio-energy initiatives, and other issues, I believe the Province should be re-opened the LRMPs for a full public review.

The January 14th announcement by the Premier that Forest Reserves are again being considered adds more weight to this need (It should be noted that Pat Bell did not suggest forest reserves during his presentation to the NSC although he did say changes to the existing tenure system are being considered.).

It is my view that if the Forest Reserve concept gets off the ground then areas identified for such status should be vented through the LRMPs just like the Protected Area proposals were in the 1990s. If not vented through the LRMP process then the proposed reserves should be reviewed through something similar that allows full public involvement. All other values and interests on forest lands should also on the table during the discussions and review of the proposed reserves.

Currently one can only go through political channels to address broader issues. Or one can get involved with an advocacy group and hope there is enough public concern to attract political notice.

I do not believe the general public is at all happy with land and resource management in BC and would like to have far more say on the boarder issues. They also wish to have far more say on local or site specific proposals (IPPs, mines, forest plans, etc.) than has been possible for the past few years.

In summary:

-Recreational pursuits have become more diverse over the years. However, most recreational use of forest land likely has decreased over the past couple decades. Exceptions are activities such as hiking, snowshoeing and snow-mobiling where there has been small increases, and the pursuit of what I call natural values where I believe there has been a large increase.

-demands on the landscape, whether it is the forest lands or other lands, has become far more complex.

-there are more competing interests, including recreational interests

-the public is recognizing that resource and environmental decisions we make today may determine the future health of our society and indeed the very survival of the human species.

-opportunities for effective public input into resource and land use decisions and management have been greatly reduced and, in many ways, rendered ineffective.

- it is a great concern that many smaller projects and land use developments are not going through an effective federal or provincial environmental review process open to public input.