

B.C.'s 'Serengeti' wilderness to be preserved as parkland

Legislation aimed at protecting the spectacular region is before the legislature.

STEPHEN HUME
VANCOUVER SUN

VICTORIA — The B.C. government introduced legislation to protect a vast wilderness in the northern Rockies with legislation that environmentalists are already calling a world model for conservation biology.

Roughly the size of Nova Scotia, the Muskwa-Kechika is an area of astonishing biodiversity that has drawn world-wide attention — and concern — from ecologists.

A spectacular landscape of mountains, old-growth forests, geothermal formations, lakes, rivers and waterfalls about 800 kilometres north of Vancouver, the region has been called the Serengeti of North America.

It is home to 4,000 caribou, 7,000 stone sheep, 15,000 elk, 22,000 moose, B.C.'s only herd of Plains bison, black and grizzly bears, wolves, cougars, lynx, wolverine and dozens of rare and endangered bird species.

But it also lies in the middle of a \$500-million-a-year oil and gas play, has significant forestry values, is bisected by the Alaska Highway and is flanked to its south by large areas that have already been flooded for hydroelectric development.

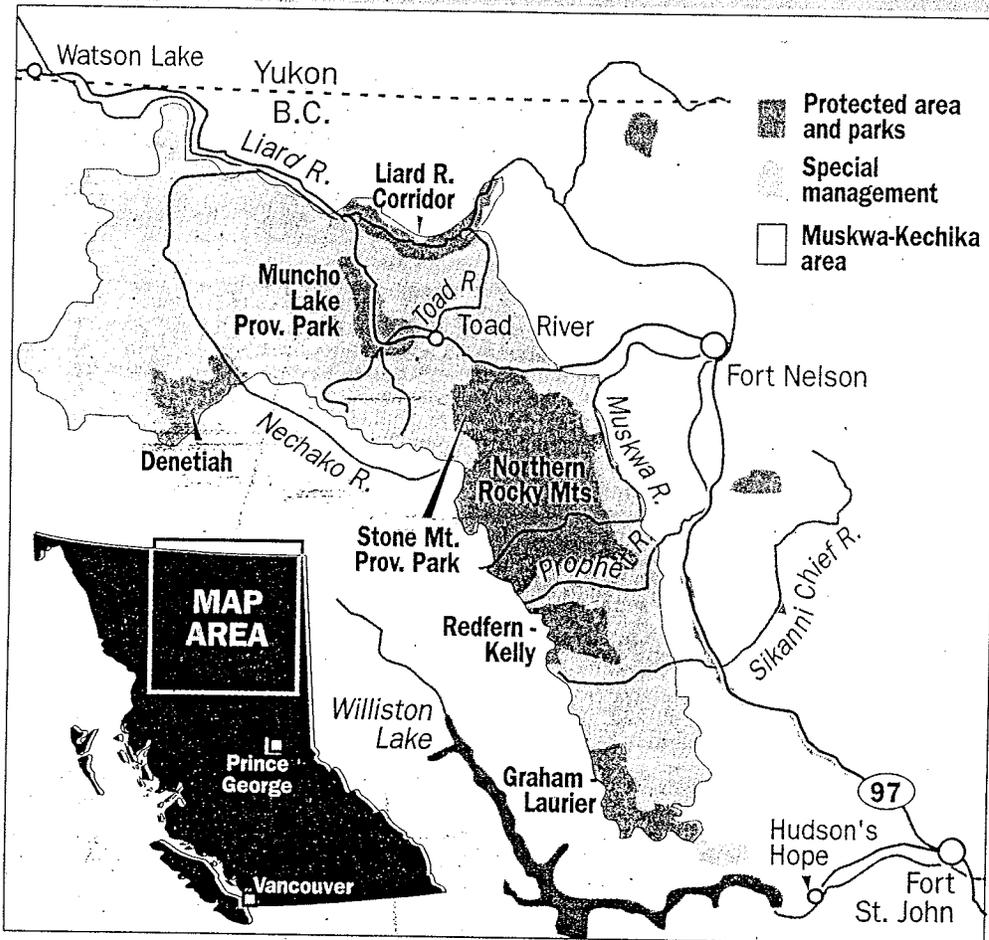
Under the plan, hammered out at a series of round table discussions involving industry, environmentalists, scientists, bureaucrats, guides, trappers, outfitters and some aboriginal groups, 1.2 million hectares will be protected as parkland.

These critical core areas will be buffered by another 3.2 million hectares of special management zones in which only limited and strictly controlled development can take place.

"The protected areas are stupendous," said George Smith of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. "But the bigger picture is the special management zones. This is the conservation biology template of the future. It's the dream."

Overseeing the process will be an advisory board chaired by

The Muskwa-Kechika region is about the size of Nova Scotia



John Cashore, a former environment and aboriginal affairs minister. Other members include representatives of regional and municipal governments, the Kaska Dena First Nation, environmentalists and representatives of the oil and gas, forestry, mining and tourism sectors.

The management process is to be funded from a statutory trust fund that will receive an appropriation of \$2 million annually, to be supplemented by up to \$800,000 a year in private sector donations and matching government grants.

The fund is to be used to enhance wildlife populations and habitats, provide research into wilderness management, wildlife biology and ecology, and the study of large predator/prey ecosystems.

It will also be used to plan sustainable and environmentally safe resource development and to produce educational material.

Not everyone was happy with the announcement.

Judy Maas, chief of the Treaty Eight Tribal Association at Fort St. John, said that while aboriginal people are generally supportive of setting aside wilderness areas because of their intense relationship with the land, they want to be consulted to ensure that their aboriginal and treaty rights are protected.

"We were not involved in this. They made a whole bunch of land use decisions but we were left on the sidelines. We have a priority right of use. Our treaty rights include hunting, fishing and trapping — if you have no

land base, how do you exercise those rights?"

She said the Treaty Eight Tribal Association did not participate in the round table discussions because a pre-condition was "that we leave our aboriginal and treaty rights at the door. But that was why we wanted to be at the table in the first place — to make certain our aboriginal and treaty rights were addressed."

But Peter Stone of the Kaska-Dena council said the plan was evidence that cooperative working relationships between First Nations and the provincial government could be achieved.

Cashore said he wants to meet with Maas to talk about ways that the Treaty Eight Tribal Association can be brought into the process.

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Philanthropists there included Gerald and Sheahan McGavin, who have given millions to the Vancouver Arts Stabiliz Gordon and J the former's h: nicely offsetting nuclear black o: Lawrence P:

tun, the aboriginal artist who was at Shimmering Sky's public opening, missed the do. This was likely as well, since donors may have bridled at being told, "You're all land," as Yuxwe ished art-trade) a recent bash ch

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DAVID BEN knows nothing studio other family members may be planning.

Bought-out in May from the third-generation

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