

The Solution for Cathedral Grove is to Just Leave the Trees Alone

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I stopped at Cathedral Grove the other day, pulled on my gumboots and took a quick stroll through the woods where the province plans a "park safety enhancement."

Translated from the same feel-good bureaucratese by which bombed hospitals morph into collateral damage, "park safety enhancement" means plunking a 195-stall parking lot in the middle of highly sensitive wild fish habitat.

In fairness, I've mentioned the largest of 11 options proposed for MacMillan Provincial Park. Eight accommodate 98 or more vehicles. Seven accommodate 140 vehicles or more.

The government's map locates seven possible sites within the original 136 hectares set aside to preserve this remnant of the rapidly vanishing climax Douglas fir ecosystem.

Less than 0.5 per cent of this primeval forest type, characterized by giant firs, hemlocks and cedars, survives across the Georgia Basin landscape it once dominated.

In other words, more than 99.5 per cent has been extirpated by loggers, developers, road builders, housing contractors, shopping malls and, of course, parking lots for the more than two million vehicles registered on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland.

Yet 72 per cent of the parking options proposed for this picturesque postage stamp of a park -- it is already bisected by Highway 4 -- would have an impact on the unique forest.

It's called Cathedral Grove because a sense of the sacred is evoked by the immense old growth. These trees are up to 800 years old, towering overhead to the height of a 25-storey building.

There are those, of course, who obsess about traffic, parking convenience and the opportunity to snag a few more tourist dollars.

Maps and graphs and soothing government blurbs are one thing. I thought I'd go look at the most contentious sites. Richard Boyce of the Friends of Cathedral Grove, a local group seeking to temper the government's eventual decision, and Annette Tanner of the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, showed me around.

Surprisingly, four of the parking lots mentioned above are proposed for a flood plain. When the river comes up

-- it flows between lakes at either end of a steep-sided valley -- the whole area can be awash. Just walking around, I observed three major channels.

Professional biologist David Clough has completed a fish habitat assessment. He described for me what he saw there.

"It was just amazing," he said. "It's like a huge subsurface sprinkler system. We saw streams forming spontaneously, just coming up right out of the ground. If a tree goes over, where its root mass was becomes an instant aquifer."

Boyce provided a photograph taken last January. A logging road from Highway 4 leading to the proposed sites is under a metre of water -- it looks like a river.

I'm sure the road engineers can conquer this problem. But at what price? It doesn't take genius to realize that getting road and parking surfaces above the flood level and preventing erosion will mean a massive intrusion into the natural hydrology of this forest floor. It would occur in the middle of a rare, endangered and highly sensitive forest ecology that's irreplaceable. Once this grove is gone, you won't see anything like it again for another 10 lifetimes or so.

A parking lot road would require extensive drainage diversions -- and we already know from extensive experience that culverts are detrimental to fish. It would require the importation of huge quantities of hard fill. This promises to create dams which redirect natural water flows with consequences nobody can even guess at. We know from elsewhere that artificially channelling river flows is detrimental to riparian habitat. Then there's contaminated runoff to consider.

May I make a suggestion, unwelcome as it might be?

Leave the trees alone. Leave the fish alone. Leave the river alone. Put the parking lot well outside the boundaries in an existing clearcut above the flood plain. Provide a visitor centre with services and a shuttle bus to the existing small pullout.

Park and ride works fine at airports. Hotels provide shuttles to shopping malls. Elementary schools bus kids. Disneyland and ski resorts use shuttles.

Is this simple solution too complicated when it comes to ensuring protection for a sensitive and threatened ecosystem?

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