

WHAT ARE WE CONSERVING? AN ANALYSIS OF CONSERVATION GOALS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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British Columbia is home to dozens of charitable conservation organizations that acquire land and protect biodiversity. The goals of these groups vary widely in transparency and intent. The language of conservation goals is increasingly subject to scrutiny (e.g., Ridder 2007), and it is instructive to review the clarity and apparent consequences of the goals articulated by regional conservation groups.

I examined the language of the stated goal, plan, policy, purpose, or mission of a sample of 31 British Columbia conservancy organizations (Table 1) as of September 2007. The following discussion categorizes these goals and assesses their implications.

A goal expressed by four groups is maintenance of ecosystem “health.” This goal is open to interpretation, yet gives the illusion of being an objective scientific benchmark. Lackey (2007) emphasizes that “a healthy ecosystem can be either a malaria-infested swamp or the same land converted to an intensively managed rice paddy. Neither condition can be seen as healthy except through the lens of an individual’s values and policy preferences.”

Eleven groups target preservation or restoration of the “natural” environment. “Natural” commonly refers to the state of an ecosystem in the pre-industrial era (Angermeier 2000), but it is unlikely that many groups are preserving pristine environments. Significant obstacles to naturalization include costly removal of exotic species, recomposition of native species, and uncertainty regarding historic conditions. For example, Maslovat (2002) attempted to reconstruct the species composition of Garry oak understory in British Columbia and concluded that historical data are “sketchy at best.”

Protection of wilderness or wildness is mentioned by three groups. Wildness means lack of significant human intervention and may be incompatible

Table 1. Alphabetical list of 31 sampled conservation organizations in British Columbia.

Organization / Society
British Columbia Conservation Foundation
Burrowing Owl Conservation Society
Central Okanagan Parks & Wildlife Trust
Comox Valley Land Trust
Coquitlam Land Trust Fund
Cowichan Community Land Trust
Delta Farmland & Wildlife Trust
Denman Conservancy Association
First Nations Land Trust
Fraser Headwaters Alliance
Gambier Island Conservancy
Grasslands Conservation Council
Greenways Land Trust
Ducks Unlimited
Fraser Valley Conservancy
Gabriola Land and Trails Trust
Galiano Conservancy Association
Habitat Acquisition Trust
Islands Trust Fund
Mayne Island Conservancy
Naramata Conservation Initiative
Peace Habitat and Conservation Endowment Trust
Ruby Lake Lagoon Nature Reserve Society
Salt Spring Island Conservancy
Savary Island Land Trust Society
Sea Change Marine Conservation Society
Silva Forest Foundation
Sunshine Coast Conservation Association
The Land Conservancy
The Living by Water Project
The Nature Trust

with preservation of naturalness including native biodiversity (Landres et al. 2000). A natural ecosystem may require ongoing interventions that undermine wildness. Ridder (2007) characterizes the use of the naturalness-wildness terminology as “divisively ambiguous” and suggests reframing naturalness as protecting biodiversity, and wildness

as respect for nature's autonomy.

Six groups target conservation of biodiversity or species at risk, and seven groups embrace the term "sustainability", or imply it ("in perpetuity", "forever", "permanently", "for future generations"). Ecosystem fidelity may be unpredictable, especially in an era of climate change, and a choice may be required between preserving species diversity and sustaining natural ecosystem processes. Oppel (2005) describes local extinctions on an island due to natural succession and suggests that human intervention (to conserve species composition) would "compromise ecosystem resilience and create new problems in the long run." This issue must be confronted when goal-setting.

Eleven groups mention conservation of habitat and eight groups refer to protection of topographic features or particular ecosystems: wetland, grassland, forest, greenway, watercourse, shoreline, or environmentally sensitive area. Habitat is the conditions and resources supporting survival (Hall et al. 1997), but habitat may be unoccupied, and conservation of target species is not a corollary of habitat protection.

This brief sampling of conservation goals illuminates some ambiguity of language. It is questionable how many conservation organizations appreciate the implications of their goals, which may be unattainable as stated. Miller and Hobbs (2007) advocate identifying a focal species or suite of species when goal-setting, and prioritizing management options with consideration for ecological, financial, and social constraints. Modest but explicit goals such as acquisition of land and conservation of selected species are likely to be best understood by the public, may be achievable, and offer measurable outcomes.

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About the Author

Peter Ommundsen studied wildlife biology at the University of British Columbia and was employed by the wildlife and environmental science programs at Selkirk College for 32 years.