

## **Park ranger staff hits an all-time low**

*by Art Joyce*

While the BC government insists there are no changes to current staffing levels in BC Parks, both the BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU) and the Wilderness Committee say the numbers are being fudged.

According to Ministry of Environment (MoE) communications officer David Karn, “there are no changes to Seasonal Park Ranger staff levels this year. 77 positions are regular and a potential 87 are seasonal.” However, Gwen Barlee of the Wilderness Committee and BCGEU communications officer Chris Bradshaw say the government regularly blurs the lines between full-time, seasonal and ‘regular’ employees in order to hide cutbacks. In fact, they say, there are now only seven full-time park rangers in BC, down from 10 two years ago, to cover 14 million hectares of parkland.

Bradshaw says the numbers of seasonal workers have been cut from 145 in 2008 to the current 87, making it indeed appear as though “there are no changes to Seasonal Park Ranger staff levels.” In addition, contracts for these workers formerly lasting several months have been cut back to as little as eight weeks, prompting some workers to seek jobs in other fields.

“They often use words that obfuscate in order to inflate the numbers,” says Bradshaw. “If they were full-time positions, they’d be on my list because they have to be union workers for those positions. They also use vacant positions that haven’t been filled, and they include management who may be qualified but aren’t field workers.”

Barlee explains that in 1993, when the parks system had a total of only 6.3 million hectares, there was 378 full-time staff in the field. The total budget for parks has been slashed from \$41 million in 2001 to \$31 million in 2015, with “nearly all” interpretive programs cut beginning in 2009. She says that works out to \$2.25 per hectare, compared to other park jurisdictions that are, on average, budgeted 20 times that amount. That leaves BC at the bottom of the funding scale compared to Alberta, Washington, Oregon and Alaska. Opening hours for provincial parks have also been scaled back, and with 20 million park visitors per year, access to campsites has proven problematic at times, potentially reducing parks income. It’s estimated that for every dollar invested in BC Parks, eight dollars in tourism revenue is returned.

“When you have seven year-round rangers to protect 14 million hectares, that’s an impossible task,” says Barlee. “In the best case scenario, you have one ranger for every four parks, and some of these parks have thousands of hectares. Wells Gray Park alone has over 500,000 hectares.” And while most people use parks responsibly, there are those who take advantage of the situation. Barlee relates a case that occurred in the Carmanah Walbran Provincial Park, where a man chainsawed an 800-year-old tree, then left. Park staff were forced to finish the job, and later the man came back and cut up the wood for shingles. “I was just in a park in the Okanagan and there were ATV tracks everywhere,” she says.

Further muddying the waters, are the use of what Barlee and Bradshaw call “weasel words” such as “up to” in this statement from MoE: “In 2016/17 there will be up to 164 people working who have the formal training and been granted the authority of a Park Ranger.” Bradshaw has yet to

see a complete list of parks employees and Barlee is filing a Freedom of Information request for this information. She adds that starting in 2012, the ministry authorized forest technicians and government science officers to be park rangers, even though these people already work full-time in their occupations.

They're imaginary park rangers," says Barlee. We call them 'ghost rangers.' It's meant to confuse the public and media to think we have more park rangers than we actually have because the numbers are so embarrassing for the government."

"I think the government needs to be fully transparent and release the full list of park employees by classification," adds Bradshaw, "as well as the number of management and vacant positions that remain unfilled. That would give us a picture of what the situation really is."

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