

Wilderness Tourism Association



BRITISH COLUMBIA | CANADA

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Background Paper

Re: Tourism and Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) in forested landscapes

Introduction

This paper relates to the management Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) in forested landscapes in BC. The Wilderness Tourism Association (WTA) has prepared this paper in response to the information and statements that have been put forth by many in the Forest Industry, Local governments and the Association of BC Forest professionals. Such information and statements perpetuates some misconceptions and biases regarding visual resource management and generally fosters a diminished respect for visual quality. It also fails to adequately consider the implications on other tenured forest users (namely tourism operators).

As an industry sector that relies on visual quality as part of the product that we sell to the world, VQOs are critical for our success. Visual quality is important from all major access routes and corridors (land, water and air) as well as trails and water routes, and landscapes adjacent to tourism facilities. These visually sensitive landscapes must be protected throughout the province.

VQOs are determined through a visual landscape inventory conducted by forestry professionals. In 2009, 14,587,068 hectares were identified as visually sensitive (State of British Columbia's Forests, 2010). Less than 1% (0.75%) of that area is managed under the Preservation VQO (109,746 hectares), and 9% managed under the Retention VQO (1,326,945 hectares). It should be noted that landscapes under VQOs have actually dropped since 2004 by approximately 500,000 hectares, contrary to the perception in the forest industry and Local governments. Equally important is the disturbing compliance statistic for VQOs where only 61% of all VQOs across the province are found to be compliant and only 33% of Retention VQOs are found to be compliant.

Importance of Visual Quality to BC Tourism Industry

Visually sensitive landscapes (also known as viewsapes, visual quality, scenic quality) are integral to the BC tourism experience and are key to both present and future tourism use opportunities. As stated in the Tourism Industry Association of BC's Standing Policy on Scenic Areas: "All tourism products rely on scenic quality to support B.C.'s global reputation as a provider of a supernatural tourism experience."

Tourism and recreation associated with B.C.'s forestlands, and the scenic beauty of those landscapes, provide many benefits to British Columbians. Tourism makes a significant contribution to local economies and the overall provincial economy. Nature based tourism alone generates \$1.6 billion for BC and is a major driver of BC's \$13 billion plus tourism industry. Although only a percentage of tourists may experience BC's wilderness, they come to BC because of our wilderness reputation. Our natural endowments is a major drawing card that attracts tourists to B.C, serves as a vital 'backdrop' to many tourism activities, and validates the holiday experience of many visitors. Our wilderness and natural areas are also a major reason why many British Columbians spend their vacation dollars at home, exploring their own province.

"Ensuring a sustainable future for BC's wilderness tourism industry through leadership, advocacy, and stewardship."

The importance of VQOs and good forest stewardship to the tourism industry can be found in a recent Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Innovation industry consultation. In a question about the Top Factors Affecting the British Columbia Tourism Industry (“... how much emphasis should be placed by Government in the following areas?”), the number two answer was “Ensuring the long-term integrity of viewscales”, with 81% of respondents indicating more or much more emphasis. “Ensuring tourism’s values are incorporated in land use decisions” was ranked fourth with 80% of respondents indicating more or much more. The consultation received responses from 1322 participants in the tourism industry with the majority of respondents being accommodation businesses, followed by attractions and outdoor recreation businesses.

The actual dollar value of maintaining forested landscapes to the tourism industry is hard to quantify. However, we know from the limited studies that have been done that tourists are less likely to return to BC when they experience significantly altered landscapes. Once the visual quality drops below the tourist's acceptable level or expectation, the tourist no longer visits the area and the tourism revenue is lost. Those tourists will go elsewhere for the experience they seek. The mountain pine beetle epidemic hasn't really changed anything. Grey trees are better than logged cut blocks to the tourist. They see the pine beetle killed trees as part of a natural process, which they accept quite readily. In many cases the secondary understory growth is already rapidly swallowing up the grey trees.

Surveys of the public indicate that natural or untouched landscapes (i.e. a low level of logging disturbance) are preferred over landscapes with higher levels of logging disturbance. In fact, the trends in public preferences have not changed significantly since the first forestry public perception study was undertaken in B.C. in 1989. Public preference for low levels of landscape modification is unchanged over the last 15 years (Ministry of Forests and Range, 2006). According to the 2010 State of the Forest Report for BC, the public consistently rates scenic quality among the top three forest management priorities. It should also be noted that MOF perception studies consistently find that there is a strong correlation between the defined Visual Quality Classes used in the MOF classification system and public acceptance of forest viewscale alteration. From a tourism perspective, perhaps the most significant finding of these studies is that tourists are usually less accepting than BC residents of forest harvesting, especially those with significantly altered or modified forest landscapes (Ministry of Forests and Range, 2006).

In an interesting study of Public Perceptions of Mountain Pine Beetle Attack and Resulting Salvage Operations, it was found that people prefer Green landscapes followed by Red, then Grey landscapes (Ministry of Forests and Range, 2007). While this can be predicted, what was interesting is the trend for landscapes of all colours: where the degree of harvesting increases, the level of acceptance decreases. In other words, people prefer grey or dead pine trees over harvesting. Residents of MPB-affected communities are slightly more accepting of altered landscapes.

Impacts of relaxing or removing VQO standards

The main rationale often cited by the forest industry to remove constraints such as VQOs is to sustain the longevity and operations of local mills (i.e. jobs). It is presumed that this situation is the impetus for the recommendations in the ABCFP report. However, it should be clarified that changing or removing constraints such as VQOs will most often have little effect on a region's Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) or the over-all Timber Supply projections. For example, according to data provided by the forest licensees and Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations in the Lakes TSA, reducing VQOs as proposed, will provide only one third of one year's (AAC). Only four months of timber supply, but tourism could be irreparably damaged for 30 years. Tourism is far more important to our economies than the salvage value of four months worth of dead pine trees to a mill. Forest licensees in the Lakes Forest District were not even close to logging at the allocated AAC, harvesting a little over half of their AAC in

2010, nor have they come close to their AAC in the past couple years. The reason being is that markets have been soft for pine trees.

The forest industry doesn't gain or lose jobs by changing the VQOs since they have plenty of wood available in the AAC. What will change is that the forest companies will be able to access a very short-term supply of more profitable timber in the VQO areas (i.e. bigger and better quality pine trees, and spruce trees, and closer to mills and cheaper to access). Sacrificing the long-term viability of tourism for short-term forestry gains is neither reasonable nor desirable for the long-term benefits to our economy. We also have questions about what implications this might have on the long-run sustainable yield? Economically, removing VQOs just doesn't make sense.

Another rationale to remove or reduce VQOs is with respect to forest fire hazard, where forest licensees will claim that they need to log VQO areas to reduce fire hazard and fuel loading in the pine stands. However, we know from MOF studies that forest fires can start just as easily in green stands as in red or grey stands. Pine stands under existing VQOs played no part whatsoever in starting or fueling the largest forest fire of our generation, the Binta Lake fire, and they won't play a part in future fires either. The claim of fire protection is just a vague generalization without any reality on the ground. Suggesting that not harvesting pine stands in VQO areas increases fire hazard just isn't true, and using fire as rationale to change the VQOs is simply fear mongering by the forest industry.

The accelerated rate of forest development (road development and tree harvesting) is already placing increasing pressure on the tourism industries ability to deliver quality tourism experiences. The downgrading of existing VQOs and the associated increase in forest harvesting activity will further impact the tourism industry. Such developments will constrain business' ability to operate, makes most reluctant to expand, and discourage investment and entry by new operators.

Summary

Year round visual resources and scenic values are an essential component of a high quality natural environment and tourism experience. They are key to both present and future tourism use opportunities. Visual quality is important from all major access routes and corridors (land, water and air) as well as trails and water routes, and landscapes adjacent to tourism facilities. VQOs associated with these visually sensitive landscapes must be maintained throughout the province.

Visual Quality Objective decisions have been realized after years of deliberation, review, analysis and planning with strong participation from volunteer stakeholders and the public. We are concerned how significant changes to land use plans and visual landscape inventories can come about simply through forest industry proposals and subsequent Government Actions Regulations (GAR) orders, or through revised Forest Stewardship Plans (FSPs). The processes are disproportional at best. Intent of GAR is to fine tune land use plans and not to make wholesale changes. The intent of FSPs is to indicate how a forest Licensees will meet the stated objectives - not how they will meet some other objective. Forest Licensees cannot use a result/strategy to change or manage to an alternate VQO. We are also concerned that these proposals may set a precedent or expectation for other legal and non-legal objectives in LRMPs to be changed.

The forest industry is facing difficult times and we all acknowledge that. This situation is expected to only get worse. But changing VQOs to accommodate more logging is myopic and extremely shortsighted. In a recent Association of BC Forest Professional (ABCFFP) report entitled "*Mid-Term Timber Supply Advocacy Report*" released November 17, 2011, it is strongly recommended that land use "decisions should be based on ethical stewardship and science and not solely short-term economics" and

that the ABCFP “does not support making short-term tradeoffs now that would jeopardize non-timber forest management objectives”.

Now with the dire predictions in the forest industry, what we really need to be doing for our local economies is not removing VQOs, but rather strengthening our tourism economy by increasing VQOs and associated constraints. A stronger forestry industry that includes the tourism sector will help diversify our provincial economy. We are all dependent on the forest industry and government to help lead the way.

Recommendations

In the immediate term the specific VQOs throughout the province need to be protected. The tourism industry needs a strong voice in the local process as well as in Victoria. The tourism industry needs to ensure that government and the forest industry place a priority on protecting existing visual quality objectives classifications. In vary specific and isolated situations, changes to existing VQOs may be acceptable, but the forest licensees will need to work with the tourism industry to determine the specific changes and resulting impacts. In addition, District Managers will need evidence to know what the issue or problem is, where it occurs, why it is impracticable to meet the existing objective and what the alternative result will be. Furthermore the alternate result must be measureable and verifiable.

In the medium to long term, the tourism industry needs to advocate for the adoption of land use management models and objectives where key resource values, including tourism, establish the overall direction for management of resources in particular areas.

Objectives:

- Ensuring there is an adequate strategy in place to manage impacts of the mountain pine beetle on tourism
- Ensuring that there is adequate coverage of tourism land values and objectives (i.e. visual quality objectives) in land use plans
- Identifying viewscape needs/gaps and ensure VQOs implemented where needed
- Ensuring that there are legal and non-legal requirements for forest licensees to adequately manage tourism land values and interests (particularly adventure tourism tenure areas and lodges)
- Ensuring that there are legal and non-legal requirements for forest licensees to adequately consult with tourism stakeholders in forest planning and management
- Developing sub-regional plans (SRMPs) in appropriate and specific cases

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