

# Wilderness Tourism Association



BRITISH COLUMBIA | CANADA

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Wilderness Tourism Association, PO Box 423, Cumberland BC, V0R 1S0, 250-336-2862, [www.bcwta.ca](http://www.bcwta.ca)

## **WTA Fact Sheet - Tourism and Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) in forested landscapes**

This fact sheet relates to the management Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) in forested landscapes in BC. As an industry sector that relies on views as part of the product that we sell to the world, VQOs are very significant for BC's nature based tourism sector.

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. Visually sensitive landscapes must be protected throughout the province.

### **VQOs in BC**

- 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).
- Landscapes under VQOs have actually decreased across the province since 2004 by approximately 500,000 hectares, contrary to the perception of politicians and forest industry officials (MFLNRO 2011)
- Only 61% of all VQOs across the province are found to be compliant and only 33% of Retention VQOs are found to be compliant (MFLNRO 2010)

### **Importance of Visual Quality to BC Tourism Industry**

- Visually sensitive landscapes are integral to the BC tourism experience and are key to both present and future tourism use opportunities.
- Surveys indicate that landscapes with low levels of logging disturbance are preferred over landscapes with higher levels of logging disturbance (Ministry of Forests and Range, 2006).
- Scenic quality consistently rated among the top three forest management priorities (State of the Forest Report 2010).
- Strong correlation between the defined Visual Quality Classes and public acceptance of forest viewscape alteration. The threshold between what the public likes and dislikes most often occurs between the Partial Retention and Modification visual quality classes. 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).
- Green landscapes are preferred, but people also prefer grey or dead trees to harvesting.

### **Implementing or updating VQOs where needed**

- There are areas throughout the province where the visual landscape inventory needs to be updated and the associated VQOs implemented. In some areas around the province a lack of VQOs exists (e.g. the Nadina, Cariboo).

- In high value tourism areas (i.e. in existing Adventure Tourism and Angling tenures), VQOs should be implemented where they currently do not exist to help safeguard the tourism experience.
- On the North and Central Coast an enhanced Visual Management System (VMS) was proposed to replace the existing VQO regime during the LRMP process. This VMS never came to fruition, partly due to the technical aspect of developing a new system. However, regardless of the type of management system used, there remains some gaps between the existing VQO and a level of agreed visual quality needed to protect tourism interests. These gaps need to be addressed.

#### **Impacts of relaxing or removing VQO standards**

- Removing, reducing or relaxing VQOs would be a devastating blow to tourism that would take decades, even generations to recover.
- Tourists are less likely to return to BC when they experience significantly altered landscapes. Tourists see the grey trees as part of a natural process, which they accept quite readily.
- Lack of VQOs will place increasing pressure on the tourism industries ability to deliver quality tourism experiences. Such developments will constrain business' ability to operate, make most businesses reluctant to expand, and discourage investment and entry by new operators.
- Timber Supply Analysis undertaken by MFLNRO show that removing VQOs makes very little difference to Timber Supply projections and ineffective at improving the mid-term timber supply situation.
- Reducing VQOs will have little impact on Annual Allowable Cut
- In many MBP impacted areas forest licensees have only been harvesting a little over half of their AAC in 2010, nor have they come close to their AAC in the past couple years.
- The forest industry doesn't gain or lose jobs by changing the VQOs since they have plenty of wood available in the AAC. Economically, removing VQOs doesn't make sense.
- With changes to VQOs, forest companies will be able to access a very short-term supply of more profitable timber in the VQO areas (i.e. better quality pine trees and spruce trees, closer to mills).
- There are questions about implications these changes to VQOs and other land use objectives might have on the long-run sustainable yield?
- Forest industry claims about forest fire hazard from leaving dead stands of pine trees are unfounded. MOF studies show that forest fires can start just as easily in green stands as in red or grey stands.

#### **Process to change VQO standards**

- VQOs realized after years of deliberation, review, analysis and planning with strong participation from volunteer stakeholders and the public.
- Concern over significant changes to the LRMPs and visual landscape inventories through GAR Order proposals or political decisions.
- Most often with changes to VQOs, only one option based on a narrow objective is proposed. Need multiple options with cost benefit analysis. Same as other land decisions.
- We are also concerned that these proposals to change specific VQOs may set a precedent or expectation for other legal and non-legal objectives in LRMPs to be changed.

#### **Recommendations for VQOs**

- Ensuring government and industry places priority on protecting existing visual quality objectives.
- Use VQO issues to demonstrate alternative or improved harvesting methods in beetle impacted areas while protecting other values (e.g. partial cutting which is proven to increase yield).
- If changes or alternatives are sought, sufficient evidence is required as to why it is impracticable to meet the existing objective and what the alternative result will be. Alternate results must be measureable and verifiable.

For more information please contact Evan Loveless, WTA Executive Director at: [evan@wilderness-tourism.bc.ca](mailto:evan@wilderness-tourism.bc.ca) or 250-336-2862.