

# Wilderness Tourism Association



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## **Master Plan amended to allow more horse use in Strathcona Park**

(August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Cumberland, BC) News of the BC Government's decision to amend Strathcona Park's Master Plan, and allow more horse use in the park, was greeted positively by BC's nature based tourism industry. "We supported the idea of managed horse use in the park and the process used to determine that," said Brian Gunn, President of the BC Wilderness Tourism Association (WTA).

"The current Park Master Plan was not entirely clear about exactly where horse use would or would not be permitted causing some confusion and strong differing opinions by stakeholder groups," said Gunn. "Following extensive public and stakeholder consultations including First Nations, and analysis by environmental consultants, the Environment Minister decided to amend the Master Plan to allow restricted horse use on old road beds and their associated corridors. Many of these were old mining/logging roads before they were incorporated into the park boundary." According to the ministry, if all such road beds were to be used for horse trails, the horse trails would occupy about eight hectares, or less than .004 per cent of the 264,000 hectare park. Traveling on foot will continue to be the only way one can experience the wilderness in the vast majority of Strathcona Provincial Park, as envisioned in the Master Plan.

This decision has raised the ire of local environmental groups and some park advocates who are opposed to the perceived privatization or commercialism in parks, and potential impacts from horse use. "Clearly some recreational activities are acceptable in protected areas, whereas others are not" said Gunn. "It is critical that management policies are developed, which outline the criteria used to evaluate the acceptability of activities. This decision will allow Parks staff to do exactly that." The master plan will be updated to provide greater clarity regarding areas in the park where horse use will be considered. Park use permits will still be required before using horses in Strathcona Park and applications would have to be consistent with the Master Plan direction, and meet or exceed BC Parks standards and expectations for minimizing impacts to the environment.

On the issue of the perceived 'privatizing' of our parks, Evan Loveless, Executive Director of the WTA, said, "such opponents don't understand the role of commercial tourism operators in our parks. Commercial operators act as park stewards and facilitators for public use of parks and consequently are engaged in activities to conserve resources, enhance ecosystem integrity and health, improve trails and access, educate visitors and manage visitor activities, and generally help people experience parks in an environmentally friendly way that otherwise can't or choose not to on their own."

"Travel to experience protected areas has been an integral part of park operations for a very long time," said Loveless. "Often, a high quality natural or cultural environment is the main attraction that draws the visitors to the area and to select tourism products. Thus the tourism industry is intimately connected to the protection of natural and cultural areas as depicted in BC Parks. Tourism companies fully understand the importance of maintaining a high quality environment to their economic success, and are continually developing environmental policies and stewardship practices and funding conservation programs so that both can be sustained. Tourism can be a crucial element for the long-term survival of the environmental and cultural resources upon which our parks system depends."

The WTA has sent a letter to the Environment Minister commending him for this tough, but prudent decision.

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