

CONSERVATION EDUCATION FOR BC PARKS' COMMERCIAL RECREATION OPERATORS: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

BC Parks' mandate is to maintain a balance between the conservation of the natural environment and the provision of quality outdoor recreation. BC Parks is committed to conservation and all employees are required to have conservation education experiences. However, there is no requirement for commercial recreation operators working in BC Parks to have similar educational backgrounds or proof experience as a requirement for their operating permit. The primary purpose of this research project was to determine if there is a need for conservation education for these operators. The secondary purpose was to provide recommendations for implementation of programs if deemed necessary. Using qualitative research methodology, data was collected from interviews with representatives from BC Parks, commercial recreation operators, and BC environmental conservation organizations. The results clearly support the need for conservation education for commercial recreation operators and my recommendations provide BC Parks' management with strategies for the implementation of conservation education programs.

Background

British Columbia [BC] is a province of incredible natural diversity, scenery, and wilderness; it has an abundance of wildlife and a legacy of fascinating history and heritage places, providing endless opportunities for outdoor exploration, adventure, and travel (British Columbia Magazine). BC is also home to one of the most diverse and extensive parks systems in the world, consisting of 893 provincial parks, ecological reserves, conservation areas, conservancies, and recreation areas providing tourism opportunities for over 19 million visitors a year (BC Ministry of Environment, a).

Parks and protected areas are imperative to the conservation and protection of the natural environment. In BC, protected areas and the BC Parks' system are important to the people of the province who regard protected areas as places for protection and recreational pursuits and "for the individual, parks offer solitude, physical challenge, and spiritual renewal" (BC Ministry of Environment, b). Literature indicates that with growing human use people are placing an increased demand on these protected areas, which has potential for detrimental impacts on the conservation values that the protected areas are there to ensure. People may not be aware of the negative impacts their recreational activities may have on these protected areas. Literature also reveals that educated park visitors are more likely to support and protect the parks system and its conservation values; something BC Parks' management is aware of however does not have the resources to provide.

Ecotourism, a type of tourism that connects visitors to nature, which is flourishing in protected areas, could possibly supplement the education gap within BC Parks. Many BC Parks visitors seek commercial recreation operators to enhance their visits. Commercial recreation operators, such as Guides who provide activities like nature and wildlife viewing, river rafting, sea kayaking, canoe touring, hiking, horse pack trips, heli-hiking and skiing, scuba diving, and mountaineering, working in BC Parks are required to obtain and maintain a Park Use Permit. However, there are no mandatory requirements for commercial recreation operators and their employees to obtain education on the BC Parks' system, BC Parks' Conservation Principles, BC

Parks' Mission Statement, ecological integrity, environmental stewardship or the Park Act and Regulations. This education is a requirement of other parks agencies in countries such as New Zealand, Ecuador, the USA, and Australia where their National Park service has recently launched an online certification program, which is mandatory for all park tour guides (Government of Australia).

Commercial recreation operators and their clients are important visitors to BC Parks. If operators were educated on the BC Parks' system, BC Parks' Conservation Principles, and BC Parks' Mission Statement and then in turn educated their clients on conservation, they would be valuable in assisting BC Parks' management with its mission to maintain a balance between conservation and protection of the natural environments while providing quality and safe outdoor recreational pursuits.

This paper highlights research completed to determine if there is a need for conservation education-training programs for commercial recreation operators seeking to gain and maintain a Park Use Permit in BC Parks and, if so, to provide recommendations for implementation of these programs.

Research Method and Results

Qualitative research methodologies were used for this project. Three representatives from each of the three key stakeholder groups, the government, the user group, and the public, were interviewed in person, using a semi-structured interview approach. The stakeholder groups included BC Parks' management, commercial recreation operators with Park Use Permits, and BC environmental conservation organizations. Each participant was asked 12 different questions, the responses to which provided the basis of the data. Once the data went through several steps of analysis and synthesizing, combined results were sent to participants for their review. After the participants had completed the summary reviews and revisions for each interview question, which they agreed with, the emergent themes were reduced and re-evaluated to determine that six key themes supported the answer to the research question:

According to (a) BC Parks' management, (b) commercial recreation operators with Park Use Permits and (c) BC environmental conservation organizations, is there a need for conservation education and training in the permitting of commercial recreation operators in BC Parks?

The final data summaries and the important themes identified in the analysis provide support for the project results and recommendations. Presented in this section are synopses of the six themes from the data analysis and a description of challenges identified by the participants.

Theme 1: Provides benefit to BC Parks' management

The BC Parks' system is one of the most outstanding park systems in the world, representing some of BC's most spectacular natural and cultural values. It is the responsibility of BC Parks' management to ensure the conservation of these values while allowing for recreational pursuits. In setting high standards for land use through permitting, BC Parks' management should ensure commercial recreation operators understand the role of the BC Parks' system, the rules that govern the system, and its conservation principles. BC Parks' conservation education would thus provide value to BC Parks by increasing the standard in the industry, educating the commercial recreation operators on the BC Parks' system and its conservation values, reducing the need for costly monitoring programs, and assisting BC Parks' staff in educating park visitors.

Theme 2: Adds value to clients

With an increasing number of visitors to BC's natural environment, more and more tourists will seek the use of a commercial recreation operator to guide them into these natural places. Many of these tourists are looking for educational trips with reputable operators who are educated about the area and are environmentally ethical. BC Parks' conservation education

certification would provide added value to clients by ensuring operators are familiar with the BC Parks' system, knowledgeable on its conservation principles, and qualified to educate them on these. Commercial recreation operators and their employees must "walk the talk" and lead by example.

Theme 3: Offers value to the industry

Training is an important part of any operation as it increases quality of the product and provides safety instruction for commercial operators. The protection of park values is one of the prime mandates of BC Parks' management, and operators need to prove they have the knowledge and training to contribute to these mandates. BC Parks' conservation education certification would provide value to commercial operators through the gaining of knowledge and understanding of the BC Parks' system and conservation principles, a requirement of BC Parks' management. BC Parks' conservation education would enhance the quality of commercial operators' product, raise the standards in the industry – a marketable item worldwide – and would help in the protection of the protected areas and their values.

Theme 4: Communicates standard and consistent information

BC is a vast and diverse province with over 300 commercial recreation operators doing business with Park Use Permits in its protected areas. A BC Parks' conservation education program would communicate standard, consistent, and accurate information about the BC Parks' system and its conservation principles from all permit holders. This information is important for commercial recreation operators to ensure they have a standard level of training to protect BC Parks' values, practice conservation ethics, demonstrate environmental stewardship, and prevent damaging impacts.

Theme 5: Encourages conversation and education on conservation

Commercial recreation operators and their employees have their clients' undivided attention during trips and opportunities to educate them on both the area they are in and conservation more broadly. Education on the BC Parks' system and its conservation principles will encourage clients to respect nature and become responsible park visitors.

Theme 6: Highlighting the impact of activities

BC is a diverse province with a vast assortment of landscapes, and each of the over 900 BC Parks is protected for its special landscape along with its natural and cultural values. Protected areas with their varying ecosystems and sensitive areas are vulnerable to human recreational impact. In addition, the variety of recreation activities that occur in BC Parks can cause different types and degrees of impact. Minimizing the impact of recreational activity on protected areas is an important consideration in the management and conservation of BC Parks. To assist BC Parks' management in conserving protected areas, it is imperative that commercial recreation operators be familiar with the special values and characteristics of each of the protected areas they operate in and recognize how their activities impact these and how negative impact can be minimized. BC Parks' conservation education would teach commercial recreation operators to recognize and minimize negative impacts from their recreational activities in BC Parks.

Challenges identified by participants

As with any great idea or intention, there are always challenges that present themselves and the concept of conservation education for commercial recreation operators in BC Parks is no exception. During the interviews, participants expressed several challenges that require consideration by program developers and administrators.

The challenges identified by participants include:

Delivery

Developing a user-friendly program – affordable, accessible and flexible

Considering technological skills – computers are not for everyone
Delivering courses electronically – conservation education is not just knowledge

Development

Considering operator differences – variety of activities and people
Developing a relevant program – respecting operators experience and knowledge
Building the program – depth of content and frequency of training
Developing public relations skills – presentation of information is imperative

Implementation

Ensuring benefits and cost-effectiveness – for both government and operators
Creating buy in – ensure operators see value in this training
Reducing government red tape – streamlining the Park Use Permit system

Monitoring

Monitoring for success – focus on operators that are not following the rules
Increased pressure – BC Parks staff resources to monitor
Keeping up with certification requirements – operators and staff turnover
Staying current – staff and information is ever changing

Other considerations

Considering unique conditions – geographical and seasonal conditions may vary

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research project was to conduct an assessment to determine if there was a need for conservation education in the permitting of BC Parks' commercial recreation operators. The research results supported the need for a conservation education-training program as part of the permitting process. All participants agreed that increasing the conservation knowledge of commercial recreation operators would provide benefits to the overall management and protection of the BC Parks' system. Participants also unanimously agreed and felt strongly that operators' employees and guides needed conservation education.

Participants provided the researcher with excellent information, which after analysis offered the six key themes outlined above, and provides a solid justification for conservation education for commercial recreation operators. This analysis established that a conservation education program would benefit BC Parks' management, operators' clients, and the commercial recreation industry. In addition, conservation education would allow for the distribution of standard and consistent information, encourage guides to engage in conservation conversation and education, and address impact of recreational activities in protected areas.

BC Parks' conservation education programs would communicate standard and consistent information to commercial recreation operators, ensuring that they all have the same accurate information about the BC Parks' system and its conservation principles. These programs could encourage conservation conversations and education along trips in parks, and would create an education model much like a pyramid, where BC Parks' staff teaches a few hundred operators and guides who then teach thousands of park visitors. Such a model would be an excellent tool for getting conservation messages to more and more people.

Conservation Education Implementation Strategies

The secondary purpose of this research project was to recommend education programs and provide an implementation strategy that would achieve BC Parks' conservation education needs for commercial recreation operators.

Research participants recommended several methods and types of programs and strategies to fulfill BC Parks' conservation education needs. Participants felt that the implementation of this type of program presented many challenges because of the size of the province, the variety of commercial recreation activities, as well as the diverse group of operators and guides involved. Consideration is required in developing a program that respects operators' existing knowledge and is straightforward, inexpensive, easily accessible, and flexible enough to meet a majority of needs for operators and their employees as well as BC Parks' management objectives. Furthermore, all participants indicated that it was most important that BC Parks' management set the minimum standards required, assist in the development of the curriculum, and oversee the delivery of the conservation education-training program.

Participants provided several different methods to be considered for potential training programs and strategies for BC Parks' conservation education. These included a web-based online certification program, a workshop certification program, a short course developed and delivered by a BC post-secondary institution, a module-training program that fits into already existing industry certification programs, and a program modelled after the Leave No Trace initiative in the United States where volunteers present the program.

Several other countries require certification for commercial operators doing business in their protected areas, and their methods and delivery of education programs are all different. For example, in Ecuador, guides must take up to three levels of in-class courses to work on the Galapagos Islands (Parque Nacional Galapagos). In Canada, Parks Canada requires operators in the Rocky Mountain National Parks to take up to three levels of courses, offered in classrooms; the basic is offered online as well (Mountain Parks Heritage Interpretation Association). In Australia, the National Park service recently launched an online certification program, which is mandatory for park tour guides. This online course was developed and implemented in collaboration with traditional landowners, parks management, the tourism industry, and Charles Darwin University. It provides opportunity for all guides to obtain certification wherever they live (Government of Australia). Each of these programs fulfills that country's requirements for education for operators doing business in their protected areas.

Recommendations for BC Parks

Taking into account the size of BC, the diversity of commercial recreation activities, the variety of operators and guides, participants' suggestions, literature reviewed, and the researcher's perspective, I recommended the implementation and development of a web-based online certification education program. This program, tentatively called "BC Parks Conserving it Right," would fulfill BC Parks' conservation education needs for commercial recreation operators. A web-based online program similar to the Australian model would take into consideration the challenges and concerns presented by participants; an online program would be straightforward, simple to develop, easy to implement, accessible 24/7, and cost-effective. It would provide the necessary flexibility for the commercial recreation industry. I recommended that "BC Parks Conserving it Right" certification become a mandatory requirement in the commercial recreation Park Use Permit application and renewal process.

Conclusion

With the world's population increasing and the demand for natural resources on a steady rise, conservation of the earth's natural resources is imperative to the survival of all living creature including humans (Freedman 2004). Parks and protected areas are fundamental in the conservation of these natural resources (Onysko 1995) as they play a key role in conservation of the natural environment while also provide recreation for tourists. Moreover, as populations grow, there is an increase in tourism and tourism in parks and protected areas, which can have detrimental effects on the conservation of these areas (Edwards 1998, Lynn 2000, & Rollins and

Robinson 2002). There is a strong relationship between conservation and education in relation to the protection of parks and protected areas, as education is one of the oldest and most effective tools for conservation in these areas (Onysko 1995). With increasing numbers of tourists visiting parks and protected areas, education programs are important in the preservation, conservation, and support for these areas (Butler and Hvenegaard 2002).

In BC, the provincial government no longer funds educational programs in its parks and protected areas, leaving this important role to contractors, volunteers, commercial recreation operators, and ecotourism guides with no formal guidance, goals, or objectives. Conservation education would provide operators with standard and current information on the BC Parks' system, BC Parks' Conservation Principles, and the BC Parks' Mission Statement. It would encourage operators to practice environmental stewardship and communicate conservation ethics to their staff and clients. Knowledgeable commercial recreation operators would assist BC Parks with its mandate to maintain a balance between the conservation and protection of the natural environment and the provision of quality and safe outdoor recreational pursuits. Knowledgeable park visitors who understand the importance of these special places in the protection of the natural environment will only encourage protection and support for the natural environment. "Parks are a heritage, a way to share the finest natural environments today, and then pass them on for posterity" (BC Ministry of Environment, b).

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