

Green Scene: Enhancing Golden Ears Provincial Park

by Elaine Golds

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With Edge Peak and Golden Ears in the background, a group of Burke Mountain Naturalists enjoy lunch at Viewpoint Beach along the East Canyon Trail in Golden Ears Park. *Ian McArthur photo.*

Golden Ears, the fourth most popular of BC's provincial parks is having its Management Plan updated and BC Parks is seeking feedback from the public regarding proposals for improvements. If you grew up in the lower mainland, Golden Ears Park may have been your first experience of the great outdoors. With a beautiful beach, a number of interpretive trails, boating opportunities, camping sites and a chance to hike into more remote areas, Golden Ears has much to offer as a park. Even better, its convenient location in Maple Ridge means that it's not far from where most people live in the lower mainland.

At 62,539 hectares, Golden Ears is the second largest provincial park in our region after Garibaldi Park. First protected in 1933 when the land was simply added to Garibaldi Park, Golden Ears was finally given its own name in 1967 and augmented by the addition of the Mount Judge Howay Recreation Area in 2000. As magnificent as parts of Golden Ears are, I must admit to being disappointed when I first visited it. That's because there is virtually no old growth forest in Golden Ears Park, a consequence of massive logging

operations in the 1920s followed by fires that swept through the area in early 1930s. As a newcomer to BC in 1989, I had hoped to be able to experience majestic low-elevation old growth forests along the trails of Golden Ears. I later learned there are small areas of old growth untouched by logging and fires but little has been done to develop trails into these areas with the exception of the last part of the trail to Hector Ferguson Lake. As its forests mature, Golden Ears, in a few decades, will once again develop into a more complex mix of forest habitat but it will take centuries for all the old-growth characteristics to return.

Alouette Lake, which provides a beach and boating area, is not actually within Golden Ears Park but is instead a reservoir managed by BC Hydro. Since 1928, water has been diverted through a tunnel to Stave Lake and fed into turbines downstream at Stave Falls and the Ruskin Dam on Hayward Lake. Prior to a dam being built at the south end of Alouette Lake, the water levels were lower and Alouette Lake was actually two lakes, called the Lillooet Lakes.

Like Coquitlam Lake before they were both dammed, Alouette Lake once supported a unique population of sockeye salmon. Because sockeye need to rear in a lake for at least a year before they swim to the ocean, dam construction impeded their migration and the population was thought to have been driven into extinction. However, Alouette Lake was discovered to support a healthy population of kokanee (i.e., landlocked sockeye) salmon so when an opportunity was provided for these salmon to swim downstream a few years ago, some of them miraculously swam into the lower Alouette River just as their ancestors had done about 15 generations earlier. Since then, every spring some kokanee are released from the Lake and in the summer, a few sockeye now return to the face of the dam where they are trucked up and released into the Lake by Katzie First Nation. Although spawning success has yet to be verified, hopes are high that this sockeye population can be restored.

The proposed management plan for Golden Ears Park includes eight pages of a lengthy list of mostly laudable projects to enhance recreation and protect the wildlife values of the park. Unfortunately, these projects come with no estimated costs or priorities so the list has more the appearance of being simply a wish list. The projects include conducting invasive species monitoring as well as inventory work, working with First Nations to support traditional activities within the park, improving the South Beach boat launch area, expanding trail networks including a footbridge across Gold Creek, developing a day use area on the east side of Alouette Lake, installing interpretive signage, improving viewpoints and protecting fragile areas along trails that are subject to damage from overuse. However, BC Parks is vastly under-funded and this long list of management objectives is unlikely to be achieved anytime soon. Present funds are so limited that park staff sometimes require permission from head office before they can put gasoline in their trucks.

I am a big fan of the BC Park system and it bothers me to see funding levels fall so low. BC Parks has now been starved of funds for over a decade. If funding is not increased soon to more reasonable levels, park facilities will fall into disrepair. We will lose an important aspect of provincial pride and tourism dollars could be negatively impacted. People can show their support for BC Parks by commenting on the draft Golden Ears Plan online (http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/mgmtplns/golden_ears/golden_ears_mp.html); comments are requested by February 15.