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COMMENTARY

The Case for Greater Funding of B.C. Provincial Parks

OLIVIA SIMMS
THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Public parks and protected areas are the backdrop of many treasured Canadian memories. Readers may fondly recall their first time pitching a tent in one of the nation's 37 national parks or catching an impressive trout in one of B.C.'s 1,000+ protected areas (BC Parks, 2025). While visitors experience the recreational and psychological benefits of these landscapes, the true net social value of protected areas is far greater. Many of the ecosystem and climate benefits they generate are intangible, and thus not necessarily reflected in market valuation. While the creation of protected areas indicates public willingness to subsidize these externalities, funding gaps persist, threatening the future of these sanctuaries. The purpose of this brief commentary is twofold. First, it outlines the economic and environmental rationale for robust and sustained public investment in these reserves. Second, it discusses the current funding environment surrounding parks and protected areas in British Columbia. Overall, I aim

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to provide a springboard for deeper discussion and future research on the full social value of public parks.

The Value of Parks

Direct economic impacts arise from explicit monetary transactions associated with park use. Visitor fees, concession revenues, and charitable donations generate immediate financial inflows to the BC Parks System. These valuations can be estimated by multiplying the number of visitors by average per-visitor spending or the number of donors by average donation size. These benefits represent the easiest measure of "value" for the parks system — that is, society values parks and protected areas to the extent that individuals will pay to visit them or support them via charitable spending. Solely considering the direct economic impact is a straightforward but shortsighted approach to capturing the social value of parks.

Indirect economic impacts also exist, as visitor spending stimulates demand in surrounding communities. Expenditures on accommodation, food services, transportation, and guided activities financially buoy local hotels, retailers, and tour operators. These effects can be quantified using regional input–output models to estimate multiplier effects, capturing how initial spending propagates through supply chains and household consumption. Employment generated through these channels, often seasonal and concentrated in only a few sectors, can be economically significant, though it may also raise concerns about job stability and regional vulnerability.

These direct and indirect effects provide valuable evidence of parks' contributions to local and regional economies, which is of note to taxpayers and policymakers. However, they serve only as the beginning of the conversation when capturing the true value of parks.

From an economic perspective, public parks function as classic examples of public goods and common-pool resources. Many of their benefits, particularly the climate regulation benefits accrued through ecosystem services, are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Thus, the market generally does a poor job of capturing the true valuation of parks. Cost-benefit analyses

based solely on park costs and revenues (campsite fees, entrance passes, etc.) do not capture non-pecuniary or implicit benefits.

Table 1: *Cultural, Recreational, and Ecosystem Benefits Provided by Public Parks, Broken Down by Dimension and Potential Valuation Approach*

Dimension	Examples	Valuation Approach
Cultural	Land-based reconnection and healing, territorial significance, knowledge sharing, and preservation	Community consultation
Recreational	Physical and mental benefits of exercise and nature, opportunities to connect with community, learn new skills, and build resilience	Demand (willingness to pay), Value of Travel Time (VTT), survey-based valuation
Provisioning Services	Freshwater supply from protected watersheds, wild food supply, and raw materials	Market pricing, replacement cost, or cost of the next-best alternative
Regulating Services	Carbon sequestration, climate regulation, flood mitigation, and erosion protection	Social Cost of Carbon (SCC), avoided damage cost
Support & Maintenance Services	Habitat provision and biodiversity conservation	Valued indirectly through their contribution to the future value of other benefits

Given that climate change is an increasingly pressing issue, I recommend that the ecological dimension (which includes provisioning, regulating, and maintenance services) in particular receives greater academic and public attention. Parks deliver a wide range of ecosystem services, including biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration. These services are highly valued by society, with ecological improvement and habitat protection consistently rated as top benefits (Wang et al., 2022; Hosseini et al., 2020; Ge et al., 2024).

Parks and protected areas are often deliberately selected to capture high concentrations of species and critical habitats, allowing them to function as havens of biodiversity within increasingly industrialized landscapes. Evidence from national park systems shows that a substantial share of key species may be concentrated within a relatively small number of protected areas. For example, approximately 30% of China's key terrestrial plants and animals are found within five of its national parks (Zhu et al., 2024). Globally, protected areas, particularly in tropical regions, are associated with higher bird and mammal diversity and can

generate positive “spillover” effects into adjacent unprotected lands (Brodie et al., 2023). As the most biodiverse province in Canada, B.C. has a heightened responsibility to protect ecosystems that are nationally and globally significant.

Public parks also serve as terrestrial carbon sinks, storing carbon in vegetation and soils while continuously removing CO_2 from the atmosphere. For example, protected forests reduce roughly 9.6 gigatonnes of additional above-ground carbon compared with similar unprotected forests (Duncanson et al., 2023). U.S. national parks alone sequester approximately 17.5 million metric tonnes of CO_2 per year, a service valued at roughly $707 million annually when priced using the social cost of carbon, though projections suggest this capacity may decline under climate change without improved management (Banasiak et al., 2015). While parks alone cannot offset national emissions, these findings demonstrate that they deliver measurable, economically valuable climate-regulation services that strengthen the case for treating conservation funding not as a discretionary expense but as an investment in long-term climate mitigation and natural capital preservation.

Current Funding Environment

BC Parks, operating within the B.C. Ministry of Environment and Parks, manages the third-largest park system in North America, encompassing more than 14% of the province’s land base (BC Parks, 2015). Its three main funding sources are provincial government transfers, user fees, and philanthropy. Each of these arms presents its own unique benefits and challenges to the continued funding of BC Parks.

The province’s 2023 Budget committed $101 million to parks and protected areas over three years, with $70 million intended for operations, and the remaining $31 million reserved for capital funding (BC Budget, 2023). While this investment reflects the growing demand for funding, conservation groups, including the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, argue that this amount still falls short of what is needed to maintain BC’s expansive park system and protect nature (CPAWS, n.d., para 3). The Elders Council for Parks in BC has recommended an budget of “at least $100 million dollars per year” and identified the need for greater oversight and financial accountability (Wilkins, 2018, p 2). They suggest a “BC Parks Financing Authority”, akin to the BC Transportation Financing Authority, a Crown corporation responsible for fiscal management. The Elders Council argues that the current model sees valuable provincial

funding being applied to amortization of capital projects, rather than the strengthening of the system's labour and capital capacity.

In 2024/25, BC Parks reported over $29 million in recreation user fee revenue, composed of fees collected for camping, day use, and boating. Unlike Ontario Parks, which prices user fees using a cost-recovery business model, the BC Parks fee schedule is strictly regulated and "not subject to the forces of inflation, increase in labour cost, climate change, minimum wage, increase in usage – demand and supply, etc…" (Omotor, 2023, para 5). While this model increases user accessibility by keeping fees low, it may limit the financial sustainability of the parks system in an uncertain provincial funding environment.

Finally, the BC Park system is financially buoyed by ongoing philanthropic efforts. Notably, the BC Parks Foundation is the official charitable arm of the parks system. The Foundation reported over $14 million in revenue in 2023 (Blumberg & Pasha, 2025). Their numerous campaigns include PaRx (Canada's first nature prescription program, where doctors prescribe time in nature to patients), the Parks Bank (purchasing and protecting private land of ecological and cultural significance), and 30x30, which aims to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030. The BC Parks license plate system (operated by BC Parks itself and earmarked for the Park Enhancement Fund) reported over $11 million in net revenue for 2023/24 (BC Parks, 2024). While BC Parks' philanthropic funding is significant, overreliance on charitable funding can create funding uncertainty and inequity. Consider if a major funder, e.g., Lululemon founder Chip Wilson, suddenly decides to allocate their philanthropy elsewhere. This uncertainty makes long-term conservation efforts near impossible. It also creates an incentive for free-riding and reduced public funding.

Despite the scale of the BC Parks system, funding and capacity have historically lagged behind rising visitation pressures. In 2010, the Auditor General of British Columbia warned that while ecological integrity was formally identified as the core objective of BC Parks, the province lacked the financial capacity, monitoring systems, and long-term planning tools needed to achieve this goal consistently (Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia). Many parks operated without up-to-date management plans, baseline ecological data, or stable funding streams dedicated to conservation outcomes. The report emphasized that expanding protected areas without proportional increases in operating and capital funding risked eroding parks' ecological value.

Table 2: *Funding Sources, Amounts, Main Advantage and Core Limitations*

Funding Source	Recent Amount	Main Advantage	Core Limitation
Provincial Transfers	$101M over 3 years (2023 Budget)	Stable public funding	Below recommended levels; capital-heavy, weak operational capacity
User Fees	~$29M (2024/25)	Accessible, predictable	Not indexed to costs or demand; poor cost recovery
Philanthropy & Earmarked Funds	~$25M+ (2023)	Flexible, supports innovation	Volatile; donor dependence; equity concerns

Conclusion

In summary, this evidence suggests that public parks should be understood not merely as leisure hubs, but as multi-dimensional assets that generate substantial ecological, social, and economic value. Because many of these benefits are non-market and long-term, they remain undervalued in the current funding system. Reframing public parks as essential natural infrastructure, particularly in a biodiverse and climate-vulnerable province like British Columbia, provides a stronger justification for sustained and strategic public funding. Public parks and protected areas should also be understood as key economic linkages that support many Canadian communities. Increased funding is an investment in local economies, while helping to protect the ecosystems services upon which future well-being depends.

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Author

Olivia Simms is a fourth-year Economics student at Thompson Rivers University. Her previous research interests include income inequality, SME development, and space pollution. An avid language learner, Olivia also works as a journalist and tutor. In her free time, she enjoys hiking, reading, and board games.