



## Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC

Accessing the backcountry one step at a time

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### **Garibaldi Provincial Park Master Plan Amendments**

Our organization, the Federation of Mountain clubs of BC (FMCBC) is a province-wide umbrella organization of approximately 24 outdoor recreation clubs with approximately 3500 individual members. For four decades we have represented the interests of non-motorized or self-propelled backcountry recreationists by maintaining or improving backcountry and wilderness experiences for our members and the public. Garibaldi Provincial Park is of particular interest to some of our older member clubs that were instrumental in having the park established many decades ago. We strongly support maintenance of the Park's ecological integrity while permitting access for low impact recreation.

Our members are regular users of Garibaldi Provincial Park (GPP), participating in hiking and climbing in the summer, and backcountry skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing in the winter. Our member clubs lead numerous trips in both the Fitzsimmons and Spearhead ranges.

The parts of the GPP master plan subject to the proposed amendments are found at the Government website:

[http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/mgmtplns/garibaldi/garibaldi\\_mp.html](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/mgmtplns/garibaldi/garibaldi_mp.html),  
and the designations below refer to numbers found on the website.

Section 5.2.1 (Land Management) and Section 5.3 (Cultural Resources) are not considered directly due to duplication in Section 6.2.1 and limited knowledge. The main areas of interest for the FMCBC are discussed briefly below.

### **Section 6.2.1 These three items are under the section on Hiking/Backpacking:**

#### ***(A) Specific direction relating to the Singing Pass access, Cheakamus (Lake) access, and securing public access to the Spearhead area.***

a) We request that priority be given to restoring year-round access to the Singing Pass trailhead. This could be done by providing a foot bridge over Fitzsimmons Creek adjacent to the intake for the independent power project (IPP) diversion. This would require year-round public access through land presently controlled by Whistler Blackcomb (WB) and other entities and which is presumably outside BC Parks' jurisdiction. We recommend that the existing road on the north side of Fitzsimmons Creek to the IPP intake is the best route, and should be maintained to a normal 2WD road vehicle standard. Ideally adequate parking would be available close to Fitzsimmons Creek for summer use. Apart from providing access to the scenic Singing Pass area and the hut at nearby Russet Lake, this hiking trail is an essential component of the Spearhead Traverse for those who wish to access the traverse from the south end without using the ski lifts at WB. We would be willing to work with BC Parks and the Resort Municipality of Whistler to plan this access route.

b) It is important to maintain the access road to the popular Cheakamus Lake and the Helm Creek trails. The Cheakamus trail is used mostly by day hikers but permits extended multi-day traverses passing through less frequented areas of the park to provide competent parties with a more “wilderness feel” to their trip.

c) Some of our members are interested in maintaining a public access route to the Blackcomb Glacier Recreation Area, just north of the existing ski area boundary. We would be interested in working with BC Parks in developing a route. In the long term it would be ideal for there to be year round public access routes available to both the Blackcomb and Whistler Mountain sides of the Spearhead Traverse. “Public access routes” would not require payment to WB, or be subject to their authority.

***(B) Direction regarding summer access in the Spearhead Range including level of facility development. Specific direction with regards to the Spearhead Hut-to-Hut (SHH) proposal.***

The Alpine Club of Canada (Whistler Section) has proposed that a summer hiking trail be constructed from Blackcomb to the proposed alpine huts. Our members are concerned about the cost of such a trail, and we think that further discussion and information is required before a decision can be made.

The comments in Section A above relating to free access to either end of the Spearhead Traverse apply to this section also, which is limited to summer access and the location of the summer route. Assuming the summer hiking route/trail will avoid glaciers, if it is to be a scenic route we assume it will be mostly in the alpine or sub-alpine. The existing terrain on the south side of the Spearhead range has extensive talus boulders making trail building difficult. In addition in some areas, protection of delicate alpine meadows should be a priority and this would require costly trail building techniques to avoid problems similar to those presently found on the Black Tusk meadows trail. Also, assuming the proposed hut system will be over-loaded during peak times, if the huts are located adjacent delicate sub-alpine areas, camping around the huts can present many problems and would require adequate facilities, for instance as found in Bugaboo Park. Another concern is that the proposed location of the huts would not be adjacent to any water sources in the summer. The SHH proposal is considered in more detail in Section 6.2.4 (Winter Recreation) see below.

***(C) Direction regarding a winter safety route to the Cheakamus Lake parking lot. Possible direction with respect to the Cheakamus Wild Spirit Place.***

Could BC Parks provide more information about the “winter safety route”? Perhaps Whistler Blackcomb wants to add route markers. Our members would not be opposed to temporary safety signs added for winter users. The Cheakamus Wild Spirit Place is a significant natural area which should be left undisturbed to preserve its ecological integrity and to which access should be discouraged.

### Section 6.2.3 Mountain Biking.

***To explore whether or not the objective should be updated to include mountain bike access in the Spearhead area, including development/designation of specific trails.***

Mountain biking is not an appropriate activity in the Spearhead or Fitzsimmons Ranges within the Provincial Park. The existing terrain is mostly talus slopes that would not permit biking unless a trail more like a road was constructed. This wilderness area should not have a mountain biking road constructed.

Mountain biking is only appropriate on wide trails with hardened surfaces, such as the existing old roads accessing Elfin Lakes and to the parking lot at Cheakamus Lake trailhead. There is no historical precedent for mountain biking on the majority of the hiking trails in the park, which are mostly narrow and have un-hardened surfaces making them unsuitable for bikes. Additionally, some of the trails are poorly drained and muddy, further diminishing suitability. The above includes in particular the Singing Pass trail, other trails related to the Spearhead area, and the Helm Creek trail. All the existing trails are used by hikers and ***mixed-use trails do not work due to user conflicts***. The high level of hiker use of these trails precludes a mixed-use solution.

If mountain bikes were taken up on the ski lifts of WB, regular patrols would be needed to reduce user conflict. Mountain bikes must not be allowed to access alpine areas from the top of the lifts and away from the ski area (e.g. in the Musical Bumps area), because it would be essentially impossible to control heavy bike use even on new specially made hardened-surface bike trails. Unfortunately, some mountain bikers prefer to leave trails. If off-trail biking occurred in delicate alpine meadows, the rapid environmental damage would take decades to be rehabilitated. Similarly, if dedicated bike trails are built in the controlled ski area it is important to ensure that their use cannot be extended to connect with existing hiking trails or to access alpine areas. In general, the high numbers of bikers associated with lift access would make ensuring responsible use impossible.

### Section 6.2.4 Winter Recreation.

***Specific direction with regards to the Spearhead Hut-to-Hut (SHH) proposal.***

Currently, there are members who support a hut system in the Spearhead, others who oppose it, and others who have mixed feelings. Many feel such a system is almost inevitable due to the area's proximity to WB. A common concern expressed by many of our members, regardless of which camp they fall into, is that there is insufficient management of people in this already popular area. This will only be exacerbated by a hut system. Because huts act as "people magnets", we can anticipate a *very large increase* in the number of persons attempting the Spearhead Traverse, many of whom will rely on the huts. Our concerns about exceeding hut carrying capacity during good conditions are discussed briefly below. In addition, many of our members are concerned about increased environmental impacts on wilderness values and wildlife in the Spearhead Range, as well as human waste on water quality. Some members also have concerns about the safety of the public who, attracted by the prospect of warm huts and "ready rescue" facilities, may not have the proper skills for wilderness backcountry skiing or snowshoeing.

Currently, winter use of this area far exceeds summer use and thus initially problems relating to the hut carrying capacities of the area and the SHH proposal are more significant in the winter than in the summer, although this may change. In addition, due to more severe weather and terrain conditions, in general winter poses more potential safety problems than summer, and the winter route location and hut facilities should be considered mainly with winter conditions and use in mind. The Spearhead Hut System Concept Plan (SHSCP) is available at the website of the Whistler Section of the Alpine Club of Canada

(<http://accwhistler.ca/index.php/spearheadhut>), but this plan is dated November 2010 and more recent information can be found on the website of the organisers, the Spearhead Hut Committee (SHC), at [www.spearheadhuts.org](http://www.spearheadhuts.org).

There are several factors relating to the maximum capacity and accommodation management procedures of the hut system that give the FMCBC concern. For example, we understand that the original plan suggested nominal hut capacities of about 30-40 persons with an overall hut design based on the classic "Gothic Arch" as found in the Elfin Lakes cabin. This hut has very basic guest facilities when compared with some backcountry huts, and can be built and maintained at a modest cost, in contrast with some backcountry huts in Canada. If all environmental and other concerns relating to this SHH proposal are satisfactorily addressed, the FMCBC is in general agreement with these original hut design factors and guest facilities. However, in view of continuing committee work, these original hut design factors may be changed ("project creep") as momentum for this project builds in view of the many supporters, both financial and conceptual. We feel the following management factors should be satisfied before the SHH proposal is approved.

1) Within reason, no matter how large the cabins, during high use periods the number of beds will be exceeded by the number of visitors requiring overnight accommodation. This is anticipated by the SHC and a reservation system will be established to try to restrict more visitors than the normally provided accommodation. We feel this reservation system must be transparent and fair, not only to provide some benefits for the original five organisations on the SHC, but also for local recreationists for whom some places should be available for "last minute" reservations. As no reservation system is perfect, the SHC is planning to provide several prepared tenting areas at each hut particularly for summer use to accommodate those who did not reserve a place for whatever reason. It is essential that unlocked cooking areas and emergency sleeping areas are adequate for a minimum number of such persons who might have been caught unawares, or who had planned to camp and bad weather forced them to take refuge inside at least a portion of the hut for cooking, drying out, sleeping etc.

2) We are also concerned that commercial guided groups would tend to dominate the hut reservation system to the detriment of non-commercial users. As in the present situation, we anticipate that local users would prefer to do the traverse at weekends, particularly during the long weekend at Easter. Thus we feel that commercial groups should be allowed to have less reservation privileges for weekends than during weekdays so that public users have easier access to accommodation.

3) Sanitation issues along the existing winter route must be addressed, regardless of whether a hut system or trail is built, otherwise the area will continue to deteriorate. Outhouses along the current winter route or some form of human waste management plan is needed.

## Section 6.2.5. Commercial Recreation Services.

### ***A) To explore whether or not BC Parks should be phasing out motorised access in the park, including heli-ski access.***

We want to stress that all motorised activities should be banned in GPP, apart from emergency and maintenance situations. The existing heli-ski tenure was recently renewed for a further five year term, and well before this term expires it is essential to reconsider whether heli-skiing is an appropriate activity in the park. In our opinion it is NOT appropriate, either on the Spearhead Range or elsewhere in the park, and should be phased out **completely** by the end of the current term. Backcountry skiers prefer to ski on untracked snow, and a heli-ski party can “track-out” a slope very quickly spoiling the experience for the backcountry users. It is much easier for a heli-ski party to relocate than for a self-propelled party. Helicopter noise and use disrupts the feeling of solitude and wilderness available in the park. In addition, heli-hiking in the summer should not be permitted due to increased trail use and disturbance to other self-propelled users.

It is added that the original boundaries of GPP have changed over the last three decades to accommodate several incremental expansions of the original ski areas. This has resulted in a large accumulated loss of non-motorised landscape in the most popular backcountry recreational areas near the largest population centre in the province. Please note that most of our traditional backcountry areas outside GPP in the Sea-to-Sky Corridor, which were originally free from motorised recreation, are now dominated by motorised recreation. Therefore our parks are more important than ever to provide a refuge from motorised activity. Non-motorised guided hiking, climbing, ski touring and snowshoeing could be permitted as long as controls limit numbers and activities so that non-guided parties will obtain an equally natural experience.

### ***B) Explore whether or not guided mountain biking should be permitted***

As stated in Section 6.2.3 above, we feel that mountain biking is not appropriate on any existing narrow and unhardened hiking trails or in areas prone to erosion, typically in the sub-alpine or alpine areas. However, commercially guided mountain bike groups would be appropriate if limited to the existing hardened roads or lift-accessed trails within the controlled area of WB as discussed above.

With respect to BC Parks requesting public input on these proposals, we would appreciate receiving more publicity of the process and adequate time for the public to respond to these requests. In addition, we feel it was not appropriate to host public meetings in only Squamish and Whistler, especially during normal work time of a weekday. As has been requested many times before, please schedule a public meeting during a weekday evening in the Metro Vancouver area to permit the majority of the users of this park to attend without having to take time off work.

We appreciate this opportunity to express the concerns of our Recreation and Conservation Committee, which are represented in this letter, and we look forward to participating in further discussions.

Yours Sincerely,



Scott Webster

President

Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC