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Protecting the 'Serengeti of the North': The Campaign for the Muskwa-Kechika



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1. Introduction

In 1992, George Smith from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and Wayne Sawchuk of the Chetwynd Environmental Society began an ambitious campaign to protect the extensive and still wild expanse of British Columbia's Northern Rockies and Cassiar Mountain range. Known as the Muskwa-Kechika, after two principal watersheds in the area, this region is the largest contiguous wildlife habitat in South-western Canada and vital to the continued health of existing large carnivore populations. Using a combination of science and persuasion, Wayne and George were able to unite a network of over twenty diverse organizations, including First Nation tribal organisations, wildlife outfitters and duck shooters, to rally successfully for the protection and sustainable development of this region.

In this paper I examine the development of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, its principal objectives, strategies, participants and the key turning points that led to its significant victories. One of the more interesting aspects of this campaign, aside from the support drawn from stakeholders outside of the traditional environmental movement, is that it was not precipitated by an immediate development threat. Concerned about the rapid and relentless northern progress of oil, gas and timber companies, George Smith and Wayne Sawchuk sought to proactively control and direct the future encroachment of resource companies into the Muskwa-Kechika region. They recognised that without strategic action to create designated protection of the Muskwa-Kechika, the potential to maintain a contiguous habitat for the region's large carnivore populations and migratory herd species would be lost.

Another unusual aspect of the campaign was that it did not focus on a single species as a symbol of threatened wilderness but instead highlighted a broader ecological goal. This decision was made despite the existence of the only known population of majestic big-horned Stone Mountain sheep, a charismatic creature sure to attract public attention and concern. Instead the campaign presented a vision based on the decidedly unsexy concept of conservation biology and the protection of predator-prey interactions. Although this scientific approach presented a public relations risk there were also advantages for the campaign. By broadening the ecological argument for the protection of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, organisers could effectively argue their interest in preserving a broad range of ecosystems over the landscape rather than be limited to specific habitat.

The lack of a definitive image and campaign focus may have reflected the fact that the Muskwa-Kechika was fought, less on a traditional public front, than as a series of negotiated duels in the civic and political arena. During the initial stages of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, the British Columbian provincial government initiated a community planning process, based on the creation of Land & Resource Management Plans (LRMP) for identified regions. The LRMP process represented the potential to open areas to development or to create the environment for long-term protection. Decisions were negotiated by a steering committee comprised of diverse stakeholders, including mining, timber and conservation interests as well as government and community representatives. A number of LRMP processes were designated and initiated within the Muskwa-Kechika and provided a vital platform for Wayne and George to elucidate their vision for the region.

Working through the LRMP process was a slow and at many times a frustrating process. The challenge was to identify an outcome acceptable to a broad range of stakeholders, including development interests, and yet still met the conservation goals of

the campaign. George and Wayne had agreed that these goals were not to be substantially compromised regardless of the pressure exerted by other parties.

Reaching a negotiated agreement however was only half the battle. The second and perhaps harder task was convincing the Government that an approach based on sustainable development and the protection of the Muskwa-Kechika core wilderness values would have broad public support and be politically advantageous. Given the history of Federal Government support for development interests, in particular mineral exploration and oil and gas ventures, any restriction of development potential would be an extremely difficult sell.

In order to deal with the civic and political challenges to the preservation of the Muskwa-Kechika it was necessary to create a campaign on two fronts. Locally, campaign directors worked to establish multi-stakeholder support for the design of the LRMPs based on conservation biology tenets. Simultaneously campaigners worked in the provincial capital, Victoria, to convince politicians to support and ratify the outcome of the planning process, an outcome that would significantly limit resource exploitation in the Muskwa-Kechika region.

The Muskwa-Kechika Management Area represents a significant achievement in achieving a consensus-driven and conservation biology approach to land-use decision-making. It is a uniquely successful example of large-scale conservation based on the principles of sustainable development and driven by local community knowledge in concert with professional scientific expertise. There is significant interest in whether the outcomes achieved by the Muskwa-Kechika campaign can be replicated. Is the evolution and implementation of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign unique to its political environment and protagonists or are there key elements that can be used by other campaigners to drive alternative, sustainable land management decisions?

2. Genesis

Wayne Sawchuk, director of the Chetwynd Environmental Society, explains his interest in the Muskwa-Kechika as a simple case of applying the principle of economy of scale.

Already fully committed to an environmental campaign to save the last forested valley in Dawson Creek, Wayne was looking at a 1992 map of undeveloped watersheds in British Columbia produced by the BC Ministry of Forests¹. He noticed an unprotected expanse of wilderness just north of the region he was trying to conserve - the Northern Rockies.

The Northern Rockies was a region that Wayne knew well from frequent visits to run his trap lines and to guide visitors on horse tours. Wayne reasoned that if he was going to spend the next three years fighting for the protection of a small forested valley, he might as well attempt to achieve the protection of the greater Muskwa-Kechika region. In his words he saw the Muskwa-Kechika as “a biodiversity anchor for Northern America. Within its borders are the largest range of large mammals on the continent, including healthy populations of grizzlies, wolves, moose, elk and many more. Wayne’s first steps were to see what sort of alliance he could pull together to support his vision for the region.

Coincidentally, George Smith, the national campaign director of the Canadian Parks and Wildlife Society (CPAWS) was looking at a similar map and reaching much the same conclusion. Immediate action was required to protect the Northern Rockies, one of the most ecologically significant and intact regions in British Columbia, from rapidly encroaching timber and resource interests. In contrast to Wayne’s focus on building a community to protect the Muskwa-Kechika, George gathered funds to initiate a mapping exercise to outline the ecological and resource values of the area. He saw the Muskwa-Kechika as a

¹ Created by Terjevold

golden opportunity to implement the principles of conservation biology. Here was a large undisturbed area within which could be identified pockets of core wildlife habitat, connective corridors and special management buffer zones.

Wayne and George's initial, and very different, approaches to protecting the Muskwa-Kechika can be seen as a reflection of their personal backgrounds. Wayne Sawchuk as a logger and skidder operator witnessed and was an active part of the timber industry that was destructively harvesting the Northern British Columbian forest. In addition, as a part-time hunter, tracker and hunting guide in the Muskwa-Kechika, Wayne was also directly aware of the impact that habitat loss had on the local wildlife. His environmental concerns emerged from a lifetime of reliance on the surrounding natural resources. They reflected an understanding that conservation goals must also support local economic interests and engage with resident communities.

A scientist by training, George Smith became a professional conservationist after a career working within political and legal circles, focused largely on environmental and social justice issues. Although a passionate outdoorsman, George's base in suburban Vancouver meant that he was close to high-level policy and political circles. While accepting the importance of community activism, George had also experienced firsthand the difficulty in achieving and sustaining conservation goals without political or legislative support. Moreover, he viewed the new science of geographic information systems as a powerful and persuasive tool in which to lobby political elites residing many miles from the regions of conservation interest.

In 1992, George was involved in a vigorous public campaign to stop a major mining development from going ahead in the Tatshenshini wilderness of north-western BC. In November that year, he organised a campaign meeting in Lower Post, British Columbia.

Wayne Sawchuk seeing an opportunity to network with other environmental advocates, organised a Muskwa-Kechika meeting to take place immediately preceding the Tatshenshini gathering. It was an inspired decision, within a short space of time Wayne and George met and discovered their mutual interest in the Muskwa-Kechika. Over a long discussion that lasted into the night and well into the following morning, a partnership was born that lasted for the entire seven years of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign.

Factors that assisted in the longevity of Wayne and George's collaboration included agreement up front on what protection of the Muskwa-Kechika should encompass, respect and support for the approach each had taken to initiate the campaign and an agreement to pursue separate and clearly delineated roles to achieve their shared objective. Wayne would coordinate civic engagement and George would be the political organiser, connecting the local Muskwa-Kechika campaign with national environmental networks and provincial government processes.

From the outset it was determined that the Muskwa-Kechika would be a vastly different campaign from that being conducted at other sites by environmental organisations in British Columbia. After a decade of major confrontations between conservation organisations and resource developers, British Columbia was experiencing a growing wave of anti-conservation feeling by working class residents, concerned that environmental actions threatened scarce industry jobs (Haythornthwaite, 1999). Depictions by conservationists of "pristine wilderness" and heightened feelings against green activism was particularly strong in the North where Greenpeace had run an international campaign against wolf culls and had run roughshod over local sentiments (pers comm. George Smith). As George Smith commented, "just saying you were an environmentalist was enough to get you run out of some towns". Rather than create another confrontational

situation, George and Wayne decided to take the opportunity afforded by the lack of a direct target to quietly build community support for the Muskwa-Kechika and try a new tactic - campaigning by stealth!

3. Coalition

In determining on a strategy of community engagement, the Muskwa-Kechika campaign had at least one major asset: Wayne – one of its two key organizers – was locally respected and seen as “one of us”. As the public face of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, Wayne was contacting not just conservation interests but also guides, trappers, and first nation leaders. His family’s long history in the region and his own background as a logger, trapper and guide provided space for discussion, unencumbered by prejudices against urban environmentalists or a concern that the environmental agenda involved locking up forests from any human activity. As Wayne noted, in a region where the official mascot and symbol of a town (McKenzie BC) is a machine whose only use is to knock timber flat and squash it to make way for hydroelectric dams, there remains a general attitude that the landscape is to be used as people see fit. The challenge for the Muskwa-Kechika campaigners was to identify a conservation vision for the Muskwa-Kechika that could accommodate a pragmatic approach to resource exploitation while protecting its unique wilderness values.

Consequently the message promoted by the Muskwa-Kechika campaigners was that this region had the opportunity to ensure that its natural resources were sustainably developed, thereby protecting existing lifestyles as well as intrinsic wilderness values. While this entailed protecting as much of the region as possible from the impacts of industrial development, it also meant acknowledging the need for a level of economic

activity on the landscape. This acknowledgement encouraged and maintained the support of stakeholders such as professional guide-outfitters, duck hunters, the Kaska Dena First Nation and rod and gun club members. In total, the Muskwa-Kechika campaign enlisted over twenty different organisations in an informal coalition that remained solid, committed and consistent in their vision throughout the long campaign.

Much time and energy was spent negotiating between different interest groups to craft a vision that could be supported by all of the Muskwa-Kechika supporters. As Wayne states “ the mission statement was directed at the highest level possible to ensure that everybody could gain a buy in.” In addition, the coalition agreed to defer potential conflicts over issues such as predator control and fire management until the primary goal of designated protection for the Muskwa-Kechika had been achieved. Importantly, the coalition had come together and solidified their primary objectives before the local management plan process was initiated. The strength of this coalition was to be tested numerous times by corporate interests and external agents, such as the conservative ‘wise use’ movement, the latter claiming that Wayne and George represented a radical environmental agenda that sought to remove resource control from the local community. During these debates both Wayne and George deliberately kept a low profile, leaving the counter discussion to other alliance members, such as Ross Peck, a local outfitter and guider who came from a widely respected Northern BC family.

Support for the conservation goals radiated beyond the organisations that were directly involved in the Muskwa-Kechika coalition. But in keeping with the low-key nature of the campaign community engagement was deliberately local and non-confrontational. The phrase “the Serengeti of the North” was coined to promote the image of Muskwa-Kechika as the “largest intact ecosystem of large predators and prey outside of Africa”

(Wood, 1997), and to instil a sense of pride and wonder in local residents. Over the seven years of the campaign organisers produced posters, held talks, wrote local editorials and visited numerous trade shows, all espousing the benefits of creating a designated management area for the Muskwa-Kechika which would ensure future development did not diminish the region's wilderness values.

One of the more interesting alliances formed during the Muskwa-Kechika campaign was with the Kaska Dena First Nation. A loose conglomeration of tribal families the Kaska are the only BC First Nation grouping to remain without a formal treaty or land claim settlement with either the federal or provincial governments. Much of the difficulty in settling their land rights issues has been based on their historic nomadic existence, with territories stretching across other tribal claims and provincial borders. In addition, without the legacy of a colonial agreement, there has been greater understanding and therefore caution in committing to Western political processes.

Dave Porter, a charismatic and larger than life figure leads the Kaska land claims negotiation process. At over 6 feet tall, Dave is both a skilled orator and a highly sophisticated political player who has held public office in three separate provincial governments and been the first indigenous Canadian provincial cabinet minister. With his political experience, in depth involvement in resource management issues and a passion for protecting the cultural and environmental heritage of the Kaska Dena First Nation, Dave proved to be a powerful ally for the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, assisting George in convincing provincial politicians to support the local decision process and a conservation biology approach.

Environmental and First Nation interests have not always been easy bedfellows. The conservation movement's preservationist rhetoric and articulations of pristine

wilderness have often collided with the reality of an indigenous presence and their concerns for community development. Dave's support, while based on a personal belief in the importance of preserving the environmental attributes of the Muskwa-Kechika was predicated by the pragmatic rationale that taking part in the campaign would increase the Kaska's political visibility and their authority to comment on the region's resource decisions. As a leading figure in the campaign, Dave ensured that First Nation issues were core to coalition objectives. An important element of the culmination of the Muskwa-Kechika process was the signing of a letter of understanding between the Kaska Dena Council and the Provincial Government that established a government-to-government relationship between the two parties to resolve issues relating to management of protected areas, protection of Kaska cultural heritage and the promotion of economic and educational opportunities for Kaska communities.

In contrast to the cooperation between environmental interests and the Kaska Dena First Nation, the Treaty 8 First Nation governance was uninterested in becoming involved in negotiations involving the Muskwa-Kechika. According to Dennis Porter (a Kaska linguist and Muskwa-Kechika campaigner), the Treaty 8 tribes felt that with their agreement finalised with the provincial government there was little to gain from being involved in the Muskwa-Kechika planning process. Although Treaty 8 was not part of the campaign coalition they also did not ally themselves with either the government and corporate interests, remaining apolitical throughout the planning process. As a consequence, while their lack of involvement belied the campaign organisers claim that they had full community support for their Muskwa-Kechika vision, it never became a major issue.

In order to convince politicians, journalists, alliance members and even resource representatives of the significance and beauty of the Muskwa-Kechika, campaign organisers were keen to invite as many people as possible to personally experience the region. A major difficulty was access. The Muskwa-Kechika is isolated with few roads and only one major road (the Alaska highway) crossing its northeast corner (Bass 2004). But these difficulties became one of the campaign's major assets as Wayne organised horse tours every summer through the region's more spectacular scenery. Rather than a quick drive through, organisers had a captive audience for five to ten days and some of the more contentious issues surrounding the protection of the Muskwa-Kechika were literally thrashed out over late nights around the campfire.

4. Action

Fundamentally, the development of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign hinged on the initiation of Land and Resource Management Plans for the region. In 1991 the National Democratic Party swept into office with the support of Green votes and the promise of establishing a new consensus-based approach to the management of the province's natural resources. A new approach to resource management was a response to major conflicts in respect to timber, sub-surface and fishery resources that had become increasingly confrontational and in some isolated cases violent (Macritchie, et al., 1999). The new government's Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE) articulated a new vision for land use management in B.C based on direct stakeholder participation in the planning process and a promise to designate protection of 12% of the land base by the year 2000 (Roseland et al., 1998). Community input was to be garnered through various land use planning mechanism, including Land and Resource Management Plans or LRMPs.

The LRMP process was managed by the B.C. government's Land Use Co-ordination Office and was required to follow a set of established principles, including comprehensive local community participation, encouragement of First Nation inclusion, long-term resource sustainability and to consider all values, not simply economic, in making resource management decisions (BC IRPC, 1993). This was a radical departure from previous resource policy in BC, which had been drafted to facilitate development and had invested decision-making power solely in the hands of provincial, rather than regional or local authority. The problem, as Wayne Sawchuk saw it, was that the decision-making power lay solely in the hands of people external to the area affected by the development, this meant they had little accountability to the community only to outside interests. LRMPs provided, for the first time, an opportunity for local, environmental and first nation interests and values to be articulated and to challenge the accepted hegemony of industrial resource interests.

In 1993 a decision was made to initiate Land and Resource Management Plans for British-Columbia's north-western region, with Fort Nelson and Fort St. John to be the first districts to be considered. These planning processes provided a mechanism to articulate a sustainable vision for the region within an environment governed by the rules of consensus and not confrontation. Cormick et al (1996) identifies a consensus process as one in which the values and views of all participants are important and that shifts the environment from one of confrontation to one of accommodation. For Wayne Sawchuk it meant an opportunity to make mining interests answerable to local issues and concerns, and to the specific vision of the Muskwa-Kechika coalition. Legislated designation of the Muskwa-Kechika management area, creation of a number of core protected areas, corridors and

buffer zones based on the principles of conservation biology and land use provisions consistent with “the goal of maintaining wilderness and wildlife forever in the region”.

In order to achieve this vision Wayne Sawchuk, Ross Peck, Dennis Porter and other coalition members gave up 2 days every month for seven years to sit on the stakeholder committees and spent many more days arguing their case in less formal surroundings. There is general agreement that the time was well spent. The LRMP process proved effective at opening the land use planning process to local and conservation sectors, and in ensuring that all issues were on the table for discussion. In addition, the strong presence of the Muskwa-Kechika coalition was able to ensure a unified approach to management of the region despite the Muskwa-Kechika system straddling three LRMPs. With customary disregard for biophysical features, government officials had ignored the importance of watersheds as units of delineation and had established regional planning districts for the LRMPs on the basis of historic political boundaries.

The LRMP process, particularly the expansion of stakeholder participation and conservation principles, was not universally applauded. One local mayor in a dismissive response to the opportunity to use the planning process to provide additional protected areas remarked “ my idea of a park is 1 mile by 1 mile and I can drive to it” (pers comm. Sawchuk 2005). Major resource sectors were particularly resistant to the consensus approach, having been accustomed to open access and legislation that strongly supported industrial development interests over other land uses.

In negotiating designated status for the Muskwa-Kechika, Wayne identified the mining sector as the most difficult party to contend with. BC’s economy is heavily dependent on its resource sector. As a major contributor to the national accounts the mining sector was used to getting what they wanted and having the government on their side. They

had little incentive to negotiate and their initial stance was combative. Wayne remembers a member of the industry sector loudly proclaiming at the beginning of the Fort Nelson negotiations “there will be a legislated designation over my dead body” (pers. comm. 2005).

Finally Wayne achieved a breakthrough with the crusty old mining representative he had been at loggerheads with throughout the planning processes. Meeting Jack Patterson over breakfast late in 1996 they went through each individual disagreement, hammering out an accord that was then ratified at the planning table. This soon proved a false dawn. Just three months later, when Jack reported back to his constituents in Vancouver, the reception was decidedly frosty, as he reported back to Wayne, “they had me up against a wall”. Instead of supporting the accord a private letter was sent to the provincial Government from the miners pulling out of the LRMP process. In it they stated that they had not agreed to any decision and that, in any case, the planning process was biased against them. After nearly two years of negotiations there seemed little progress and the first casualty, Jack Patterson retired from the planning process having suffered a major heart attack.

In the end, surprisingly, it was the petroleum sector that ended up providing the strongest indication that the Muskwa-Kechika coalition would realise their conservation vision. Despite significant gas deposits in the Muskwa-Kechika region, oil and gas interests were prepared to make concessions to an environmental agenda. Recent protracted confrontations over major extractive developments had been costly in terms of resources and time. Perhaps petroleum representatives viewed general development restrictions as a way to appease the conservation sector and keep them off their back in respect to specific valuable deposits. Thus after yet another stalemate over the issue of legislated designation for the Muskwa-Kechika, the oil and gas representative challenged Wayne at the Fort

Nelson LRMP meeting and asked him if this was an issue that conservation interests would ever be prepared to concede. Wayne, with the strength behind him of a 20-organisation coalition, which had maintained a consistent and uniform stance on this issue for over three years, baldly stated “no”. This proved the critical turning point with oil and gas interests conceding for the first time that designation of the Muskwa-Kechika would be considered.

Once the petroleum industry had agreed to designation, government officials, despite some reluctance on their part, moved to support the recommendation. Moreover agreement at Fort Nelson hastened similar consensus in the Fort St John process, and, although the Mackenzie LRMP process took a further 2 years to finalise, the concession on political designation in the earlier agreements ensured that it was not a major roadblock in discussions.

Consistency and persistence had paid off and the unthinkable was becoming a reality. Where resource and government officials had assailed the environmental movement for being greedy in demanding the protection of 2.3 million acres of the Tatshenshini - Alsek wilderness in north-western BC, the final Muskwa-Kechika agreement approved in November 2000² gained universal support to establish close to double the size of new Protected Areas as well as an additional 4 million hectares in surrounding special management and wild land zones.

5. Outcome

Stakeholders finally signed off on the Fort Nelson and Fort St John LRMPs in 1997. They had thrashed out an agreement that recommended the establishment of three new protected parks, surrounded by special management areas (timber and extractive industries

² McKenzie Land & Resource Plan

permissible under specific restrictions), and wild land zones (no timber extraction permitted). The overriding vision proclaims that “the management intent for the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area is to ensure wilderness characteristics, wildlife and its habitat are maintained over time while allowing resource development and use, including recreation, timber harvesting, mineral exploration and mining, oil, and gas exploration and development.” (BC, 1997).

While this statement could be seen as the usual sop to conservation concerns while permitting a business as usual approach for development, there are a number of special elements to the Muskwa-Kechika Management Plan that gives it’s environmental pretensions greater credibility. These include a requirement to carry out extensive landscape and wildlife studies before development approval and perhaps, most significantly, a commitment to return all land to its natural state post-activity by only allowing state-of-the-art technology and reclaiming any access roads directly following the development cycle (Bass, 2004). In addition, the Management Plan is overseen by a public advisory body that receives a million dollars for each LRMP (\$3 million total) to carry out promotional and research activities. Wayne recalls that this latter recommendation proved a major sweetener for local government authorities and ensured their concurrence with the plan.

Wayne notes in his press release regarding the Muskwa-Kechika management plan “that the government approved the Resource Management Zone Objectives and Strategies developed by the table **without exception.**” Cabinet’s unqualified authorisation was in part because the outcome of the LRMP process had industry sign off and was publicly supported and understood as a package. The other reason was that, while Wayne and company were in the LRMP committee meetings working on the negotiated decision,

George and Dave were in Victoria convincing the politicians to abide by the local decision process. In order to bolster their arguments, the Muskwa-Kechika coalition held several meetings in Victoria, flying in supporters from the northwest, and would then schedule as many meetings as possible with cabinet Ministers. These meetings reinforced political perceptions that protection of the Northern Rockies was locally supported and ensured a consistent message was delivered.

In order to ensure that the Muskwa-Kechika Management Plan would be uniformly implemented, conservation interests insisted on the enactment of special legislation, the Muskwa-Kechika Management Order. This established the boundaries of the management areas (later to be expanded further by the Mackenzie LRMP process) and the responsibilities of the innovative stakeholder committee that would advise on the implementation of the plan. As George admitted, other CORE processes had produced special management designations that had been less than effectively implemented and Muskwa-Kechika supporters wanted to ensure that this was not the disappointing legacy of their planning process. Thus a principal element of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Plan was the recommendation to establish an Advisory Board of stakeholder interests that would advise the government on all major natural resource decisions in the region. To be appointed by the Premier, the Board would be composed of the key interests represented in the initial planning process, including First Nations, environmental, business, recreational and government representatives. In the end most of the primary drivers of the campaign became members of the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board. Not only did they see the Board as an important symbol of continuing local stakeholder involvement, but it also provided an opportunity to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the management plan.

In his address announcing the creation and protection of the Muskwa Kechika, NDP Premier Glen Clark announced: “Perhaps no single land-use decision anywhere has moved sustainability forward so dramatically through conservation, resource development and cooperative management... In turn, we challenge the rest of the world to follow our example.” (BC OP, 1997). Despite these glowing words and the regulatory and structural safeguards put in place during the development of the Muskwa-Kechika Management area there remain significant challenges to protecting and sustaining biodiversity values while also allowing for multiple natural resource uses, such as trapping, hunting, oil and gas, mineral extraction, timber extraction, and tourism (Mitchell-Banks, 2003). With a change in government from the largely sympathetic NDP to the fiscally conservative Liberal Party this challenge became all the more harder as the pendulum of decision-making power once again swung back towards industrial interests.

6. Aftermath

In 2001 the NDP, following a series of economic scandals did not only lose the provincial election but were practically wiped off the Canadian political map. The conservative Liberal party won in the largest landslide in BC electoral history (winning 77 of 79 possible seats), with their leader George Campbell, refusing the NDP (2 seats) formal opposition status. With carte blanche, Campbell’s party have spent the last 4 years systematically dismantling the NDP land use reforms, supporting oil and gas interests and reducing public stakeholder input.

One of the first steps the new government undertook was to disband the LRMP stakeholder advisory committees, with the exception of just two – the Clayoquot and the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Boards. Even the Liberals were loathe to further antagonise the

already confrontational relations between public, First Nation and timber industry interests in Clayoquot Sound, while the disbandment of the Muskwa-Kechika was complicated by the overwhelming public support for its continuance and, more pragmatically, because it was the only LRMP public body to be enshrined in legislation.

The Muskwa-Kechika Order, however, hasn't stopped the Government from incrementally reducing the more progressive elements of the Management Plan. Their actions have caused George Smith, co-architect of the campaign and long-term Advisory Board member, to resign his position in protest. In his resignation letter George Smith (2004) cites government alterations to the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Act without input from the public or even the advisory boards. These removed the requirement for multi-agency sign-off prior to planning development, reduced by two thirds the Board's annual discretionary budget of \$3 million and appear to have reduced the all-important road restrictions. In addition, the government has fast tracked oil and gas pre-tenure plans prior to the completion of baseline wildlife studies or conservation area design, signalling its intent to emphasise development interests over the biodiversity values of the management area.

George Smith's resignation is the first crack in the long and cohesive partnership that led to the successful establishment of the Muskwa-Kechika. Wayne Sawchuk, while dismayed by current events, is determinedly optimistic that the Government has turned the corner in respect to its attitude to the Muskwa-Kechika. He harks back to the industry spokesperson who adamantly opposed designated protection at the beginning of the Muskwa-Kechika LRMP process, yet was a strong supporter of the Management Plan in its conclusion. This conversion, in Wayne's view, signals how the conservation agenda can remain resilient and focused today.

Bolstering Wayne's optimism is the Government's response to an upcoming and much tighter provincial election (the Liberals are expected to win but a NDP resurgence and a Conservative Party challenge should greatly reduce their overwhelming majority). In April 2005, they promised to double the Advisory Board's funding. Wayne is also buoyed by Board discussions with the government that have revealed its intentions to promote the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area internationally as a model of community-based consensus decision-making and a region of remarkable natural beauty. It would be embarrassing politically for the Government to be seen to be aggrandising a vision that it was simultaneously dismantling and destroying.

The next few months and years will be critical to the future of the Northern Rockies. Not only is the BC election scheduled for May 16th but the government has announced plans to update the Muskwa-Kechika Management Plan legislation. In a process resourced and chaired by the government the Board is looking to establish a new governance and funding structure. Although Wayne believes the board is receiving positive support for its restructure, George remains unconvinced of the government's intentions and has removed himself from the associated task force.

It is clear that the initial battle to protect the special wilderness values of the Muskwa-Kechika was won, and won handsomely. Ongoing vigilance and public attention will be required to ensure that the victory is not made meaningless by special development interests. One of the more depressing aspects to the recent challenges to the Muskwa-Kechika management plan is the sundering of the strong partnership between Wayne Sawchuk and George Smith. This is balanced by the two men's continuing commitment to their initial vision and the strength of the coalition that they were instrumental in initiating. It may have started with two men with a single dream, but the

campaign to protect the Northern Rockies caused ripples that continue to expand the conservation community in the region.

7. Conclusion

The Muskwa-Kechika campaign was clearly a major success. From a position of zero protection George Smith and Wayne Sawchuk orchestrated a seven-year campaign that established the largest special management designation in Canadian resource history. With the designation of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area by parliament over 6 million hectares would be protected in a combination of protected reserves and special management areas. Extraordinarily, this proclamation was supported by industry as well as by environmental interests. It was a triumph not only in terms of area protected but also in convincing government and industry of the practical applicability of conservation design in the management of natural resources.

The Muskwa-Kechika LRMP planning process serves as an internationally significant case study of applying sustainable development in the civic planning process and the benefits of consensus negotiation processes. For every concession made by the conservation sector the consensus process ensured major territorial withdrawals and policy agreements by timber and mining representatives.

It is clear from the difficulties that the Muskwa-Kechika process is facing since the landslide election in 2001 of the Liberal Government headed by Gordon Campbell, that the outcome could have been vastly different under less sympathetic political leadership. George Smith is convinced that if the current BC Government had been in power during the campaign, there would have been no possibility of gaining concessions from oil and gas interests. The NDP Government of the day made it clear that they were creating a new era

of citizen involvement in resource management and that they were committed to establishing new protected areas. If nothing else, this policy position forced the industry sector to the bargaining table.

One cannot, however, discount the importance of the coalition that Wayne and George were able to establish over the seven years of the campaign. The ability to capitalise on a political window of opportunity lay in maintaining a united and consistent conservation vision, despite the diverse groups associated with the campaign. This coalition of community, recreational, First Nation and environmental interests remains active today and is instrumental in ensuring the maintenance of the spirit of the Muskwa-Kechika management agreement as well as advancing other conservation priorities in the region. In the last twelve months, the Kaska Dena First Nation Tribal Council has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Canadian Parks and Wildlife to work together towards the preservation of key cultural and natural sites in their traditional territory.

Another major element of the success of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign was the strong and complementary leadership of Wayne Sawchuk and George Smith. In general terms, Wayne provided local know-how and credibility while George had political experience and access to a network of international and national conservation and scientific expertise. George Smith calls the Muskwa-Kechika campaign the best example of why both top-down and local processes are required to achieve a successful and sustainable conservation outcome. Advancement of local interests provided long-term carriage and community support, but with major industrial players involved environmental campaigners also needed to influence primary decision-makers.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign is the value of taking the time to create a secure foundation prior to engaging with opposing

parties. There are rarely any easy conservation victories and the creation of the Muskwa-Kechika special management area was no exception. Despite the very different environmental perspectives inherent in the alliance, members never lost confidence in one another or in the leadership of the campaign. Thus a consistent vision and message was maintained and conveyed throughout the seven years of the planning process. It is the strength inherent in the foundation of the alliance that provides the greatest optimism that, whatever the political climate, the vision for the Muskwa-Kechika will be sustained.

8. Lessons

Although each environmental campaign has its own unique characteristics there are elements of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign that are pertinent to a wide range of circumstances. For example, the Muskwa-Kechika campaign, taking into consideration the public exhaustion and distrust of green politics in the region, was deliberately non-confrontational and low key in its approach. For any campaign it is essential that the operation is responsive to the prevailing social environment whether local, regional, national or international in nature.

It also demonstrated the advantage – of drawing on a wide diversity of supporters beyond traditional conservations groups. With stakeholders ranging from duck shooters to community tradespeople the Muskwa-Kechika campaign could be promoted as both popular and local, diffusing the power of opponents who sought to portray it as an artefact of elite urban environmentalists. Holding a series of meetings to ensure that all supporters of the campaign were advancing a united vision before the campaign went public further strengthened the impression of a popularly supported campaign, as the leadership felt confident in varying the spokespeople that conveyed the campaign message.

Not only was the primary objective – designation of the Muskwa-Kechika as a conservation zone – deliberately broad in scope to permit acceptance by a wide diversity of local and regional stakeholders, it was also determined at the inception of the campaign. This never deviated throughout the seven years of the campaign, providing a solid platform for the campaign and giving supporters faith in the integrity of the campaign leadership.

Leadership is an important element of any campaign and despite major differences in background and personality, George and Wayne forged a strong partnership that became the foundation for the Muskwa-Kechika campaign. From the campaign's early days respective strengths were respected and roles defined. With no one person taking sole carriage of the campaign, space was provided for strong and powerful personalities who had previously led important leadership roles for their respective communities to work effectively together.

Each of the elements that contributed to the success of the Muskwa-Kechika campaigns – social responsiveness, a consistent and clear aim, strong, flexible leadership and a wide support base – are equally applicable to other environmental conflicts. Clearly, the synergy of vision, competence and opportunity that contributed to the success of the Muskwa-Kechika campaign is difficult to replicate and takes a tremendous amount of persistence and commitment to maintain. But seven long years after that first conversation into the Canadian dawn there was no greater prize for George and Wayne than the triumphant ratification and subsequent legislated designation of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area.

Sources:

The primary research for this paper consisted of interviews with four of the major players involved in the M-K campaign. These were:

- George Smith – National Conservation Director Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and co-initiator of the M-K campaign.
- Wayne Sawchuk - founder Chetwynd Environmental Society and board member of CPAWS (BC chapter), co-initiator of the M-K campaign.
- Dave Porter - Chair of the Kaska Dena Council and the National Negotiator for the Kaska Nation, leading treaty and land claims negotiations on behalf of all Kaska First Nations in British Columbia and the Yukon.
- Dennis Porter - Kaska Linguist and one of the primary instigators of the M-K Management Plan.

All four players were or are currently on the on the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board and I have spoken to them on at least two occasions, once for my research on the intersection of indigenous and environmental interests and secondly in respect to the Muskwa-Kechika campaign.

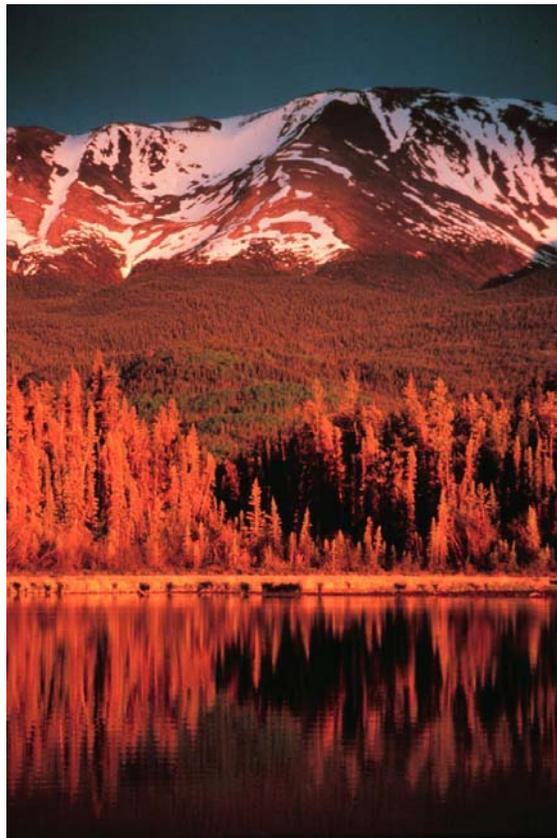
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Wayne Sawchuk