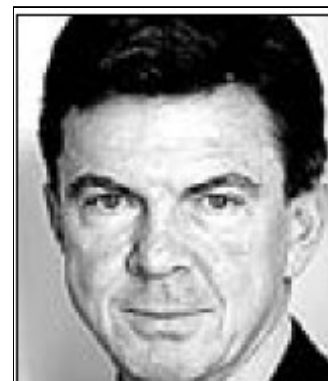


Article rank ■■■■■

Getting urbanites back into the woods

Government looks at simpler hunting and fishing rules to reverse decline

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Do you ever have the urge to go hunting or fishing in B.C.? If you do, you're in a rapidly shrinking minority. B.C. is issuing about 50,000 fewer freshwater fishing licences than it did 10 years ago. (Tidal water fishing is a federal responsibility.)

The number of annual hunting licences has declined even more sharply, down to 85,000 from 175,000 just 15 years ago.

Various aspects of modern life conspire against the old-fashioned notion of heading into the bush with your friends or children for a few days of fishing or shooting.

Urbanization means more people live further away from the wilderness.

Federal gun control legislation has made owning a gun more trouble than it's worth for many former hunters.

Killing wildlife has become a touchy political issue for some. People are getting older. The steady overall decline in participation since the peak in the early 1980s has prompted some fish and wildlife officials to take a fresh look at the government's role in supervising both pursuits.

Let's say you do have the urge to make a few casts in a lake or river.

First you need to pay \$36 for an annual licence. You'll pay another \$10 to \$25 as a conservation surcharge for specialty species, like steelhead. You'll pay some more if you want to cast on one of the prime streams designated as "classified waters."

Then you need to read the Fishing Synopsis.

It's 96 pages long. The first page warns: "All anglers of any age must comply with all regulations set out in

Freshwater this synopsis as well as any in-season changes as made public by the ministry."

If the hunting urge strikes you, read the hunting and trapping synopsis. It's also 96 pages long.

It's just as complicated as the fishing regime and it's based on the assumption you already own a gun. Getting over that hurdle is a whole separate — and complicated — bureaucratic exercise.

The first page of the hunting guide has a cheery message from Environment Minister Barry Penner saying he plans to increase the number of hunters to more than 100,000 from the current 84,000 by 2015.

He's got a long way to go. But work is under way on the initiative.

Who cares how many hunters or fishermen there are?

The government does. Hunting and fishing are considered healthy recreation and good for families. The appreciation for the wilderness that comes with the activities is another positive.

And the economics are attractive, given how much people spend once they get involved in those sports.

Which is what prompted the premier's new parliamentary secretary for rural development, Kamloops MLA Kevin Krueger, to muse over Christmas about making things easier for anglers and shooters.

"People are scared to death of running afoul of all the rules and regulations," he said in an interview this week. "They feel they're not going to get it right. It's so easy to get into trouble."

The Environment Ministry's quarterly compliance report released last month appears to support that.

It's touted by the government as a report card on pollution-control measures.

But the vast majority of the report is just a listing of hundreds of tickets issued for routine hunting and fishing violations.

Krueger says the regulations are too tough. "I've been saying within government: 'Wouldn't it be nice if it was easier and simpler for parents to take their kids fishing?'"

In a time when rural development is facing any number of hurdles, Krueger believes restoring wilderness recreation by making it easier for people to go hunting and fishing — and spend lots of money getting ready — would go a way toward filling in the economic gaps.

So work has started on making licences much easier to obtain. They're considering electronic versions you can apply for by phone or pay for and pick up online.

Another project involves simplifying all the rules and regulations to make it easier to go fishing and hunting, especially if you're taking young people along.

The changes could involve easing certain duplicate requirements involving firearms. The simplification would also whittle down the number of special rules that have built up over the years.

Dozens of lakes in B.C. have their own rules. The branch is considering dropping them, maintaining specific wildlife management objectives and setting standard regional requirements that support them.

Penner doesn't put as much weight on complexity as a reason for the decline as Krueger does.

But he also cited an overhaul of the Wildlife Act as part of the streamlining initiative.

Changes to the rules for each lake, each fish and each species of game will provoke bitter complaints from the remaining outdoors people.

Eventually they might arrive at a system that encourages people to go out into the woods.

Or the arguments might put even more people completely off that oldfashioned notion.

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