

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Editorial: Good neighbours talk to each other

May 8, 2015

As understanding of the interrelated structure of ecosystems grows, it becomes increasingly apparent that 19th century paradigms involving what are to the natural world entirely artificial state borders will prove insufficient in dealing with environmental issues.

Water, air and wildlife pay no heed to the politics of humankind; they move back and forth across boundaries that cut through watersheds and airsheds without heed. While we have long recognized the need for multilateral approaches to managing habitat and protections for migratory birds and fish species, we're still behind the learning curve regarding downstream liabilities for development, pollution and the like.

But these problems engage our attention with greater frequency. From Central America to Africa to North America, courts and governments are grappling with transboundary issues, whether it's Uruguay locating pulp mills upstream from Argentina, road construction in Costa Rica degrading water quality in Nicaragua or industrial output from mining and smelting activities in B.C. affecting waterways and airsheds in Idaho.

So British Columbians should welcome rather than resist overtures from our neighbours in Alaska when they express concerns about the possible effects of half a dozen mining ventures on rivers in the province's northwest they worry will affect wild salmon, water quality, sport and commercial fishing, tourism jobs and a unique way of life. Trout Unlimited is far from a radical organization and when it formed Salmon Beyond Borders and became partners with Alaska's tribes to address the issue, it wasn't out of zealotry, but from genuine pro-active concern over finding ways to ensure that development in B.C. would not be at the expense of Southeast Alaska's rich downstream resources.

This seems entirely reasonable. Both Alaskans and British Columbians have coinciding interests here. Both place a premium on the value of wild salmon. Both have concerns about First Nations rights. Both harbour deep affection for outdoor recreation and the protection of wilderness resources. Neither wants to hobble development but neither desires a deregulated free-for-all in

mineral extraction, either. Accidents such as the Exxon Valdes and at Mt. Polley are reminders that assurances are not guarantees and much is at stake.

What's the solution? Serious talk, for one thing. We are good neighbours. It's in all our best interests to remain so. Mutually agreeable solutions to current and as yet unforeseen problems are far better for everyone than appealing to adjudicatory agencies such as the International Joint Commission or, worse, resorting to litigation.

All stakeholders need to be involved in the conversation: politicians, scientists, resource developers, environmentalists and First Nations. Developing round tables such as this can be difficult and frustrating but it can also be fulfilling and rewarding. Ultimately, creating a way of reaching amicable consensus on land use with transboundary implications is a far better approach than rolling the dice on unilateral court decisions.

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun