

THE MYTH OF THE NON-CONSUMPTIVE USER

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It is easy to understand why recreational hunting and fishing are considered consumptive. Living organisms are physically removed from the scene, and consequences are apparent when populations of game decline. Certain conservation groups or individuals in them often rail against consumptive forms of recreation. Other groups recognize and accept the consumptive nature of their activity, arguing that they merely chop off some sort of "harvestable surplus." Rod and gun clubs, rifle associations and other groups are in this category. No matter what one's particular attitude toward hunting and fishing is, there is general agreement that these are consumptive activities. They are closely regulated in terms of bag limits or in the number of licensed participants. These controls derive from the recognition of the consumptive nature of the activity and are constant with conventional management techniques.

By contrast, hiking or back-packing, sightseeing, general tourism and camping in parks, nature study, nature photography, and picnicking are nearly regarded as *non-consumptive* of the resource base. These activities do not seem to remove living organisms from the scene. They are regarded as healthful pursuits that are benign in terms of the surrounding landscape. Participants in these activities are regarded as non-consumptive users of outdoor recreation resources, and con-

sequently there are few controls governing their numbers or behavior.

No one can possibly guess the total number of people who visit unorganized facilities. The point is that non-consumptive users are present in far greater numbers than consumptive users. For example, in 1975, the number of hunters and anglers in British Columbia was about 512,000. No figures are available for the numbers of hunter or angler days for that year, but they could not possibly approach the 8.7 million day and overnight visits to provincial parks in British Columbia for the same year. In addition, the British Columbia Forest Service provides unsupervised camping facilities throughout the province, and cannot estimate the number of people who use them. Both Crown Zellerbach and MacMillan Bloedel who provide limited facilities in their timber limits estimate the yearly visitation to be in the tens of thousands.

These are estimates for British Columbia alone, with a population of 2.5 million. We would surmise that the total number of "non-consumers" ranging across the landscape of all provinces and territories is staggering. They have become big business, and a big problem.

The concept of the non-consumptive user of outdoor recreation resources is false. Because the notion of the non-consumptive user has been so widely accepted, many serious errors have been made in land-use planning and in the philosophy of the conservation movement. Here is a case in which a comfortable myth has been applied as a principle of land use, and as a result

some of the major objectives of the conservation movement are in jeopardy.

If so-called non-consumptive activities are not so benign, then we had better acknowledge this and get down to the serious business of reassessing our priorities. One of the major objectives of the conservation movement is the preservation of natural landscapes and habitats. We have focused on gaining legislative protection for them without very seriously addressing the question of what happens to them next. In fact, the chief argument used in support of natural area preservation, except ecological reserves, is the benefit that supposedly accrues to the public in terms of recreation.

Non-consumptive users do consume recreation resources along spatial, visual, and physical dimensions. They trample and rearrange vegetation patterns, disturb wildlife, and are the chief distributors of refuse across the land.

Spatial consumption simply means recreation consumes space. In a small park like Ivy Green Provincial Park, south of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island (62 acres), the act of providing for the accommodation of non-consumptive users has succeeded in directly consuming three-quarters of the habitat, and this in a park which has statutory protection from impairment. In this example, the visitors do not directly remove organisms from the scene. The government does it for them, with our blessings.

Visual consumption means that large numbers of people consume solitude. Crowds in any particular area can build to the point where the scenic amenities of the site are completely lost by the presence of too many people.

Another aspect of visual consumption is the visual impact humans have on wildlife. There are a number

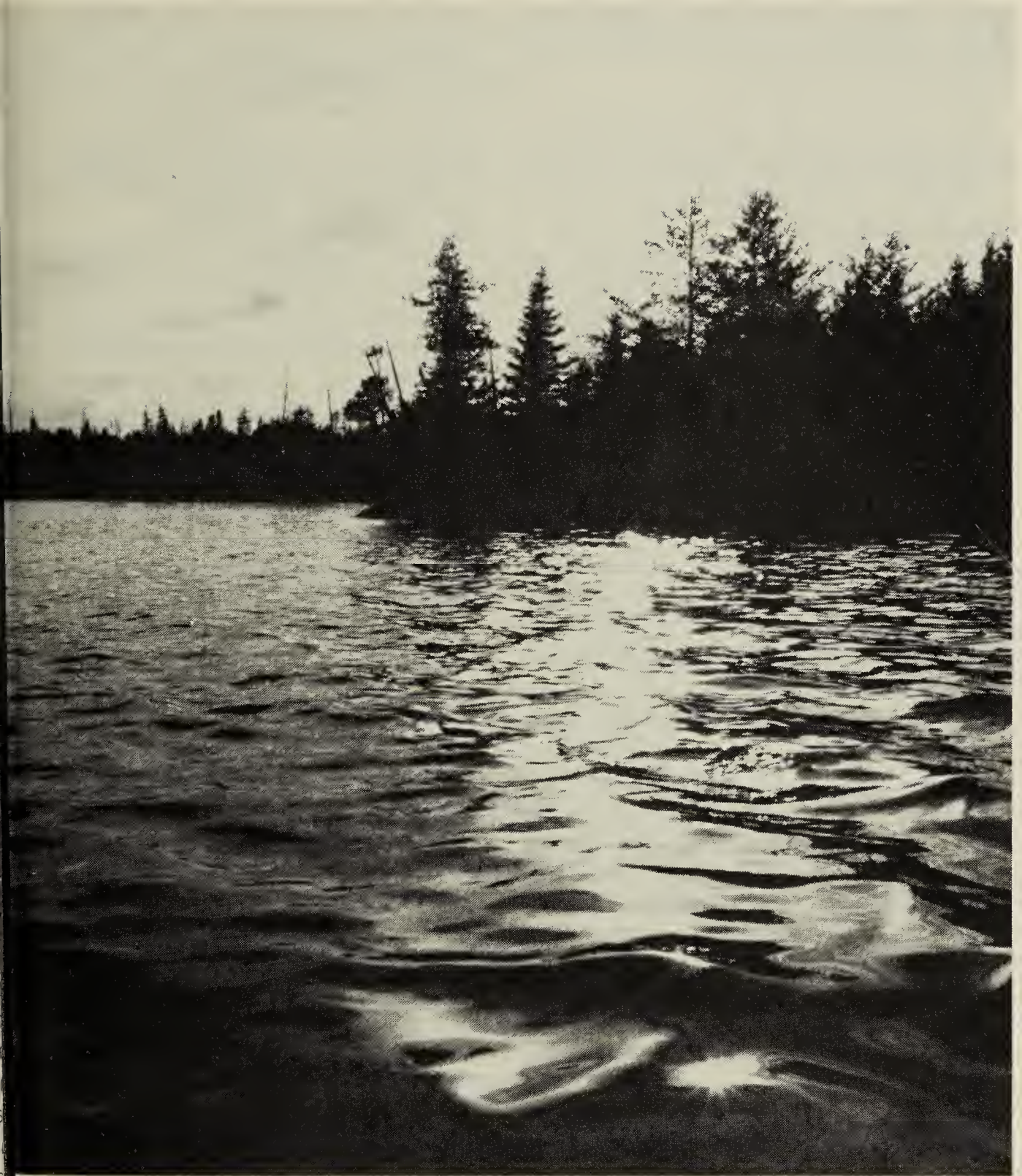
of wildlife species that seem to require privacy from human intrusion in order to thrive in their respective ecosystems. In these cases the presence of people may not be directly consumptive, but in the long run the result is the same.

Beyond requirements for access and accommodation on recreational landscapes lies the problem of direct physical impact. Studies have shown that in certain environments, such as forested area with a well-developed ground cover, very severe impacts occur with the lightest use, and that physical impact is cumulative over a period of time. Even light and occasional use of an area for hiking or nature study can have its effect in time.

The direct crushing of vegetation by trampling is one factor that favors the replacement of natural vegetation by non-native basal rosette-type plants such as plantain or hawkweed. Soil compaction caused by human treading retards the growth of trees, perhaps killing them. Forest duff can be pulverized, the soil denuded, the ground can become puddled and down-slope erosion can occur. The long-term effects of these impacts are visibly and seriously to alter the original vegetation patterns and associations in a manner that normal plant succession would not. Furthermore, wildlife that requires special vegetational habits will be affected.

Members of naturalist clubs are often the worst offenders in unique or highly sensitive habitats. These are areas we actively seek because of their high interest value. We tramp around in bogs, marshes, alpine meadows, and gull colonies, content in our non-consumptive status. Increasing numbers of natural food buffs are systematically harvesting edible wild nature.

The accumulation of garbage and



remote northern lake

Wayne Lynch

Water in remote places is a very serious problem. Tons and tons of it are hauled out of our remote and accessible recreation areas every year. Imagine the garbage that piles up in these well known and easily reached areas. Garbage is not only unsightly, its presence can alter natural behavior patterns in some species of wildlife.

Not only is it necessary to remove portions of the original countryside

initially to accommodate the non-consumers, but the impact that these users have on the remainder continues year after year to erode the landscape more. The massive numbers of such users, doing their collective "thing" on our natural landscapes, makes them (i.e., us!) the most destructive of all groups of recreationists. So we are faced with an interesting irony: the "non-consumers" are shown to be the

most serious consumers, simply by virtue of their numbers, by what they do, and where they do it.

We must accept that the notion of non-consumptive use is a myth. There is simply no such thing as a non-consumptive user.

At least three implications come to mind if we are to reject the idea of non-consumptive users. We must construct strict rules guiding our behavior when visiting natural landscapes. We must adopt a new attitude and approach to land-use planning as it applies to recreational landscapes.

We would recommend that clubs make an effort to travel to special spots only very occasionally; and when they do, they should travel in small groups. Choose places to go at a time of year when you'll do the least damage, and then stay on established pathways in small groups. Identify plants where they are without picking bits off to check at home. We know a few "naturalists" who crash around looking for bird nests, and photographers who tear away the foliage for the proper camera angle.

Controls on behavior extend from the voluntary action of clubs to the mandatory restrictions of government agencies. Strict visitor controls appropriate in large parks include party size limits, the use of burnable containers only, and the use of stoves rather than fires where natural wood is at a premium. The ideal situation would entail licensing all back-country users and regulating their numbers through a permit system. The licensing procedure has a double benefit. It allows agencies to know how many users there are, and it could mean a skills test prior to licensing. A skills test is very important because ignorant and unskilled people are using natural landscapes more and more, and they do the most damage.

If we reject the idea of the non-consumptive user, and yet recognize the importance of landscape preservation, we can hardly endorse parks as the appropriate vehicle for preservation, because parks are justified and developed for their recreation potential.

This does not mean we should reject the idea of parks, but rather encourage governments to become serious about their stated purpose of preserving unimpaired landscapes. Neither should we reject the idea of people in parks, because there are regulatory mechanisms available to limit resource consumption by tourists and others. But we must dismiss the idea that landscapes, and the communities of life on them, can only be preserved in parks, and that the rationale for preservation is recreation.

We should hold that the landscape and their internal dynamics should be preserved solely because they are there, for their own sake, and because they have a right to exist. If we recognize the consumptive nature of all recreational land uses, and are really concerned about landscape preservation, then we should reject conventional land-use planning in favor of *non-use* planning.

A new theory of non-use planning can be generated from a thorough understanding of the nature of resource consumption by recreationists. It would involve the identification of physical carrying capacities on natural landscapes. It would centre around strict controls of the numbers and behavior of participants in supposedly non-consumptive pursuits. It would place preservation as the top priority instead of use. Finally, it would emphasize that non-human nature exists for its own sake, and that the accommodation of people in it is not a matter of compromise but rather one of integration.