

Environment

SFU report 'impetus' for province to meet Great Bear commitments

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By Colleen Kimmett December 4, 2008 11:13 am

British Columbia is a biological ark: the last refuge for most of the biodiversity in North America, according to a report on climate change released yesterday.

But the government decision-making process about how we use the land and water -- and ultimately impact that biodiversity -- is a "recipe for disaster" said Jon O'Riordan, a former provincial deputy minister and the lead policy author for the report.

That's because natural resources are managed independently of one another.

"Three different levels of government are working in the same ecosystems according to different principles," said O'Riordan. "Decisions on land and water are made by 67 different provincial agencies."

A better approach, concluded this report, is ecosystem-based management. Essentially, this means identifying all the values of an ecosystem -- which might be providing clean water, wildlife habitat or carbon storage -- and making sure no activity within the ecosystem impairs those functions.

O'Riordan, a former deputy ministry in the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management (now the Integrated Land Management Bureau) said the province is moving towards ecosystem management, but government structure needs to change to reflect this more holistic approach.

For example, the Forest and Range Practices Act identifies biodiversity conservation areas, but these don't necessarily apply to mining or hydroelectric development.

The ecosystem approach is currently being tested on the central coast of the province, home to the Great Bear Rainforest. The B.C. government, First Nations, loggers and environmental groups are working on a management plan that would protect two million hectares of land there.

The director of Forest Ethics, Valerie Langer, told the CBC a week ago she was worried the provincial government was "getting jitters" about making firm decisions and meeting the March, 2009 deadline for a plan.

Langer wasn't available to comment, but Forest Ethics' director of climate change Merran Smith told The Tyee this report should give the provincial government even more impetus to meet their commitment.

"The report is really saying the [ecosystem management] approach is the best approach from a climate change perspective as well as an ecosystem perspective," said Smith.

"So let's get on with it."

Liz Bicknell, communications director for the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands said the province is "absolutely committed" to meeting the March deadline.

Bicknell wouldn't say whether such an ecosystem-based management plan was being considered for other areas, but said the province would review the report's recommendations.

O'Riordan's report is the first of ten that will be produced by the Adaptation to Climate Change Team at Simon Fraser University.