

# **From Problem to Opportunity: Sustaining High Quality Wilderness Angling in the Babine River Corridor**

A Report Prepared

For the

Babine River Foundation

By

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## Executive Summary

High quality wilderness angling values on the Babine River are threatened. These threats continue even with the creation in 1999 of a Class A Babine River Corridor Park and a one km (0.6 mi) wide Special Management Zone (SMZ) on both sides of the Park. Even with this protection, the high quality wilderness values on the Babine River are vulnerable to cumulative impacts of adjacent logging and road access.

There are at least two reasons why this has occurred. The first is that protection of the high quality fishery on the Babine in the past has been understood by decision makers as a problem to be solved. The Babine River Foundation disagrees. The high quality wilderness fishery is an opportunity to be protected and a valuable natural resource that needs to be well managed. Past land use decisions have contained "the problem" by creating a narrow zone along the River that did not meet the real needs of the fishery. Continuing efforts over recent decades by the anglers and others to find a durable solution have fallen short.

Adequate protection of the high quality wilderness angling values on the River requires no road access (temporary or otherwise) closer than two km (1.2 mi) from the Babine River. Another contributing reason, which remains to this day, is that no technical fish and wildlife habitat vulnerability (i.e. hazard) assessment has ever been made to identify the causes and sources of these threats to the river based resource values. Vulnerability (i.e. hazard) assessment is routinely used elsewhere in making sound resource management decisions, but not in British Columbia.

The opportunities for optimizing the net economic and social benefits in the Babine are:

- Increasing the width of the Park on both sides an additional one km (0.6 mi);
- Converting the SMZ, one km (0.6 mi) on each side of the Babine River, to a Resource Stewardship Zone (RSZ), with logging and roads no closer than one km from the Park boundary; and/or
- Creating a new SMZ, adjacent to the new RSZ, another one km wide (0.6 mi) on both sides of the River which has the same objectives and criteria as the existing SMZ.
- More restrictive objectives and regulations in the existing SMZ.

The July 1992 decision to create the narrow protected zone along the river was based on the 1991 report "Options for the Babine River Area." "Option 2 was chosen -

maintain all resource values" and "maintain the wilderness fishery" This decision has permitted construction of road access within 2 km (1.2 m) of the river for its entire 85 km (53 mi) length. In the fall of 2001 there were seven logging roads, with two more planned within the SMZ - which can be as close as 300 m (984 ft) of the Park boundary. There were also 14 approved cut blocks in the SMZ and another 12 in the adjacent proposed "New Special Management Zone" or "New Zone". Most of these cut blocks and roads are located in the West Nilkitkwa (Pacific Inland Resources), Gail Creek (Small Business Forest Enterprise Program) and the Kisgegas (Skeena Cellulose Incorporated) logging areas. More roads and cut blocks can be approved in the existing SMZ at any time.

A valid analysis of the economic value of wilderness angling was not available in 1992 to adequately inform the decision makers of their real choices. Once the 1992 land use decision established the narrow protective zone along the Babine River, it was carried forward to the Babine Local Resource Use Plan (LRUP), the Bulkley and the Kispiox Land and Resource Management Plan's (LRMP's).

A good long-term decision in the Babine will be scientifically sound, can be successfully implemented and will have a desirable impact. Achieving this outcome will require a clear strategy and conducting effective operations:

#### **Clear Strategy**

New strategic direction (i.e. policy) is needed to ensure the high quality wilderness fishery is not degraded and its economic potential maintained. It does not make sense to degrade a more valuable economic resource for a less valuable one. The three indicators of high quality angling for monitoring this strategy on the Babine River are (1) clean water, (2) historical numbers of returning fish, (3) maintenance of class one waters (an un-crowded wilderness fishery in a natural setting).

#### **Conducting Effective Operations**

Neither the objectives and strategies in the Babine and Kispiox LRMP's, nor the proposed new results based Forest Practices Code will adequately protect the high quality wilderness fishery from logging and logging access impacts and optimize its net economic and social benefits. A vulnerability assessment is needed to reveal the causes and sources of these risks. Ongoing reductions in government staff are also reducing the public's confidence that road access impacts can and will be controlled, problems identified and timely corrective action taken.

A clear land use strategy supported by effective operations is needed in the Babine to sustain all values. This is not happening for any resource value - including fisheries, grizzly bears and timber. Bull trout, fisher and grizzly bears are blue listed

and classified as vulnerable in Canada. A robust solution will require improved resource stewardship, more and better information, increased collaboration across the range of resource interests and more effective on the ground solutions.

It is recommended follow up studies to this report be carried out including an economic analysis of natural resource based tourism, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the guidelines for protecting small stream habitat for steelhead and coho under the Forest Practices Code (FPC).