



## The Current State of Habitat Inventory in British Columbia

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### Abstract

**Resource inventories are seldom funded soundly for extended periods and have suffered within BC in recent years through staff cuts and retirements. It is important for the Provincial government to maintain qualified staff to standardize habitat inventory projects in an attempt to maintain data integrity. Qualified staffs need to represent both the Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification done by the former Forest Service Research Branch and Habitat Inventory done by the Ministry of Environment.**

Wildlife habitat mapping is a Provincial Government program that has suffered a series of setbacks in the past ten years.

Historically there were two major thrusts to inventory work in the province. The first was led by Vladimir Krajina, a botanist at the University of British Columbia, in the early 1960's. He developed a unique ecological classification system for looking at forest sites, called the Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification. In the mid 1970's, Krajina's students, then working for the provincial Forest Service, took his classification system and applied it to logging and silviculture or reforestation systems.

The second classification emerged under the Agriculture Rural Development Act (ARDA) and Canada Land Inventory program where teams of soil, climate, recreation and wildlife scientists conducted resource inventories across the southern two thirds of BC. The initiative, which ran between 1965 and 1973, differed from Krajina's classification program in that it involved multi-disciplinary teams looking at resource values from differing perspectives. It was the first time wildlife biologists were brought into ecosystem inventories.

Both programs grew with time. The one in the Forest Service was slightly more successful, as the multi-disciplinary program suffered under too much political scrutiny in the 1980's. First, the soils scientists were divided between the multi-disciplinary program and their more traditional agricultural roles. Then, the rural climate program was disbanded and as other staff moved on to new careers, their positions were not replaced.

However, while the program was operational, one positive outcome of tightened budgets was the forcing of the various disciplines to travel together to do their fieldwork. This meant greater coordination of effort in biophysical mapping. A soils specialist described the framework for the habitat unit; a vegetation ecologist described the plant communities; and a wildlife biologist described the animal use and habitat value.

With time and new provincial initiatives, came the realization that the Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification should become a part of the habitat interpretation. In fact, great strides were made in the 1990's whereby all resource inventories conducted in the Province developed standardized field identification and data management standards (Resource Inventory Committee standards or RIC standards).

The collapse of the provincial forest industry in the new millennium spurred the layoffs of provincial inventory specialists, a trend that continues with a resultant loss in capacity. The former Research Branch of the Ministry of Forests, responsible for the Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification, was divided into three with forest ecology positions moved under the control of regional offices and no remaining provincial headquarters staff left to provide oversight and control. In the provincial Ministry of Environment, meanwhile, wildlife habitat inventory staffing levels haven't fared much better having been dropped to one person for each of the soils, terrain and vegetation, with no dedicated wildlife habitat specialist, although that position is still on the books, and there are two biologists responsible for seeing that the data coming from consultants is put into the Government data warehouse.

Understanding the natural resources we have (or are at risk of losing) requires robust, regularly up-dated habitat inventories. Without them, wildlife managers and ecologists cannot adequately carry out wildlife and ecosystem conservation and recovery efforts. Oftentimes, senior bureaucrats, government ministers and the public get inundated with emotional claims of the 'last old growth' or 'the last remaining populations'. Without objective standards, they have no way of knowing what is true and what is just hyperbole. They require the steady hand of provincial professionals who understand the standards as they need to be applied.

This is accentuated in an era of increased usage of computer databases. Before computers, inventory maps were made by hand and reports were written to document findings, thus all the data they contained were static. Currently, inventory information is stored in large databases, often without the scrutiny that ensures the right methodologies and standards were used. Now that more reliance is on computer generated maps and other products this oversight is critical to professional management interpretations, future users of the data in the warehouse will have no way of knowing what data is up to the standards and what is not. It is up to government to provide the staff to perform the quality control, and in the case of ecosystem mapping in the province it means a provincial coordinator in headquarters for Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification, and teams of provincial specialists for habitat mapping.