

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

June 22, 2006

The Editor
Prince George Citizen

Re: Parks system being ignored, June 22.

I was disappointed by Bruce Strachan's recent column in the Prince George Citizen because it overlooks a number of very positive changes for BC Parks.

It is true that park visitation numbers have declined across North America in recent years, and British Columbia is no exception. It's a challenge that many jurisdictions are grappling with.

Earlier this week, The Nature Conservancy in the U.S. released a study that concluded Americans are less interested in spending time in national parks because they're spending a lot of their time watching television, playing video games and surfing the internet.

The decline in park visitation numbers is no doubt more complex than that. In B.C. we have changing demographics, including an aging population.

Our government is working hard to improve the camping and day-use experience for park visitors. In 2005 we made a commitment to invest \$20 million for park capital improvements over three years, including \$12.2 million in 2005/06.

Recently, we announced an additional \$13.3 million for this year to upgrade BC Parks infrastructure and to acquire additional park land. New or improved facilities are now complete or underway in 80 parks across the province.

I know that Mr. Strachan is well-acquainted with our parks system, and I appreciate his support for parks. I'm pleased to note that we're investing \$1.3 million to upgrade infrastructure in six provincial parks in the Omenica region.

Also, we recently launched Project Go!, a program aimed at engaging urban youth in positive parks experiences, and we are offering more interpretive services through the B.C. Conservation Corps. This year, more than 150 students and recent graduates are working on projects through this important, new program.

Our latest park visitation numbers show the number of recorded visits (those recorded through campground registrations, trail and traffic counters and visitor counts) in 2004 was 18.337 million. In 2005, there were 18.362 million recorded visits at BC Parks, for a modest increase of approximately 25,000 visits.

So, while we are making some headway, I'm determined to keep working to improve our world-class park system.

Barry Penner
Minister of Environment