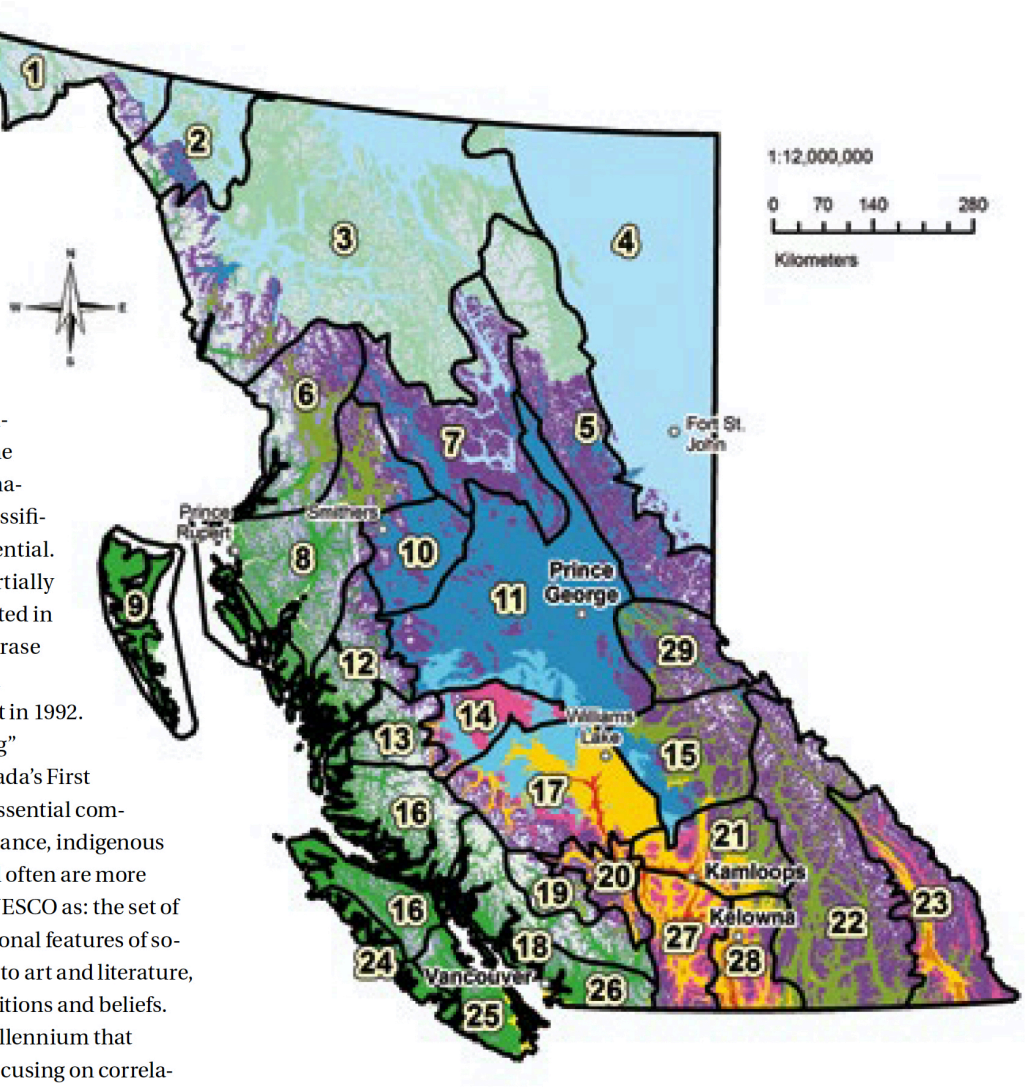
Is it time for Biocultural Diversity (BCD) Zonation in BC?

By Michael Blackstock, RPF



British Columbia is a diverse province, but how diverse is its aboriginal relations and resource management policy? Forest professionals appreciate how the provincial Biogeoclimatic (BEC) Zones map portrays why British Columbia is the most naturally diverse province in Canada. This map shows the dispersal of 14 BEC zones that reflect unique combinations of vegetation, climate (zonal), site and seral classifications, of which site and climate are the most influential. Furthermore, the province's forest policy regime partially rests upon the BEC foundation that V.J Krajina initiated in 1949. In 1986, biologist E.O. Wilson converted the phrase "biological diversity" into "biodiversity." The United Nation's Convention on Biodiversity came into effect in 1992.

Curiously, British Columbia also has an "amazing" diversity of indigenous languages, about 60% of Canada's First Nations languages are found in BC. Language is an essential component of the cultural diversity of the planet. For instance, indigenous place names define their relationship to the land and often are more than just "labels." Cultural diversity is defined by UNESCO as: the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group that encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

"Biocultural diversity" emerged as a term this millennium that inextricably links cultural and biological diversity, focusing on correlations between biodiversity and linguistic diversity. Most importantly, the notion of "linked" implies that biological and cultural diversity have co-evolved, are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Cultural groups interact and influence the biological diversity of their environment, and vice versa. Climate change discourse now commonly refers to this dynamic as anthropomorphic change. Biocultural diversity is the "sum total of the diversity of life in nature and culture."

In 2007 UNESCO launched an international dialogue on biocultural diversity which is a very valuable resource for policy makers. UNESCO concluded that there is a danger in addressing biodiversity independent of cultural diversity, and vice versa. When considering the process of change, like climate change, it is important to understand time scale and historical context. Indigenous peoples around the world are acknowledged to be custodians of biodiversity and proponents of cultural diversity.

So, the assumption made here is: there has been a close association and evolution of British Columbia's biodiversity and cultural diversity, which can be portrayed by interweaving BEC and linguistic zones (i.e. First Nations language groups) and thus creating Biocultural Diversity (BCD) Zone maps. As depicted in the map, indigenous language areas were interwoven with the BEC zones to create draft BCD zones. They require further and regular refinement as biodiversity and cultures co-evolve. The BCD zones were created to initiate collaborative apolitical conversations about how to incorporate biocultural diversity into resource management and aboriginal policy.

BC's forests and cultures are not a "monoculture" and therefore, neither should its policy. Public and private sector policy makers often chase a false hope called "consistency" because it is perceived as administratively efficient and fair across the geography of large

organizations. Administrative efficiency should not be the primary public policy goal. This approach, however, does not take into account the ecological and cultural diversity of this wonderful province. A more balanced and principled policy approach could be achieved by striving for consistency within, and variability between, BCD zones.

On the resource management front, BCD zones could inform water management, in particular, because there is a strong link between water, climate and culture. Climate change and population growth are the two main global drivers of environmental change, and BCD zones would be an appropriate planning and policy foundation to address mitigation and adaptation. Additionally, land use and cultural heritage planning could be guided by BCD zones.

On the aboriginal policy front, policy makers could move away from the provincial template-like negotiations with First Nations towards an approach that respects biocultural diversity. The province's policy framework is often guided using arbitrary administrative boundaries like Timber Supply Areas (TSAs), resource office districts, Indian reserves or electoral boundaries. BCD zone planning is grounded in the interaction between culture and the land, rather than in the political tension surrounding the "land question."

One practical example of how BCDs could be implemented in BC is through the development of a "caretaker" strategy for each BCD. The purpose of a caretaker strategy is to ensure biocultural diversity and to foster resilience in the face of climate change and population growth. Now that the Supreme Court of Canada, in *Tsilhquot'in v. British Columbia*, has affirmed the coexistence of crown and aboriginal title lands, the opportunity arises for the development of collaborative caretaker strategies (i.e. by provincial and First Nations governments and interested third parties) which sets out operational principles and monitoring mechanisms for the conservation of water, nature and culture, as well as sustainable resource management.

Biocultural diversity holds a key to ensuring resilience and crafting policy that wisely responds to cumulative impacts, climate change and achieving reconciliation with First Nations.

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