

## Vancouver Islands' Marmot

### *Not Out of the Woods yet*

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Recently the Times Colonist announced the 'thumbs-up' news that Canada's most endangered species, the Vancouver Island marmot, has been brought back from the brink of extinction and now numbers more than 200 animals. Over the past few years the Vancouver Island Marmot Recovery Project, which is currently funded by tax-payers and the TimberWest and Island Timberlands logging companies, has received bad press for its clumsy efforts to save the marmot. These efforts have included the scapegoating of predators as the proximate cause of the marmot's extinction which resulted in years of controversial wolf and cougar culling and the scandalous shooting of Golden eagles (authorized by the Campbell government) which embarrassed British Columbia before the world. So why not celebrate this news that Vancouver Island marmot populations are now finally on the increase?

Well, first of all, the public needs to know that *wild-born* Vancouver Island marmots are now totally extinct, having passed away into oblivion, without obituary, several years ago. That means that all of the 200 marmots that are alive today are laboratory-bred specimens which have been born and raised in captivity. These *lab-born* animals are slated for release onto the empty former sub-alpine colony sites with a hope and a prayer that they might somehow make themselves at home again, re-occupy a cold and lonely burrow and reproduce. For this purpose, the VIM Project has managed to secure some of the naturally treeless meadows and ridges around their final Green Mountain redoubt where wild Vancouver Island marmots made their last stand on this Earth. Every year, the distribution of lab-bred marmots over the extinct colony sites offers much-coveted PR photo-ops for government and logging industry officials who are depicted cuddling the cute animals as they are released.

The second thing that the public needs to know is that the protection and restoration of critical Vancouver Island Marmot habitat is not part of the Recovery project. Aside from several small sub-alpine colony sites above the tree line which have been protected, the forested connectivity corridors which once provided essential safe-access for marmots between their many mountain-top colony sites are entirely unprotected. Wild marmots once traversed the thickly forested valleys between their colony sites to spread out their gene-pool to avoid inbreeding. Not any more. These areas of marmot habitat are now dedicated as perpetual logging zones, where having cleared the old-growth forests from the valley bottoms to the tops of the mountains, the logging companies are now stripping away second-growth down at the bottom again. The cutting has been so voracious that the companies are now hacking into stands of timber as young as 30 years old. One can see truckloads of these 'pecker-poles' any day on the Island Highway, headed for the ocean log dumps from where they are exported in the round to feed American saw-mills.

The lab-bred marmots are now being released into a single complex of colony sites along the Green Mountain/Gemini Ridge and will never be able to fulfill their wild instinctual imperative to disperse across the mountains. Without protection and restoration of connectivity in the region, the Vancouver Island marmot can never regain its wildness and will be forever dependent on human intervention and captive breeding. This is the same management ideology which has been revealed recently in the Campbell government's secret

scheme for the Spotted owl, in which they plan to capture all of BC's 16-or-so remaining owls for captive breeding so that all of its remaining old-growth habitat can be destroyed by logging. Just like the long established practice of allowing the total destruction by logging of natural salmon-spawning habitat which is replaced with occasional fish-breeding hatcheries along our devastated rivers. Just like the government's final management solution for the imminent logging-caused extinction of BC's Mountain caribou: a massive predator cull while allowing the logging destruction of its habitat to continue.

The logging corporations have enjoyed significant tax breaks on their 'private lands' and pay nowhere near the rates that ordinary landholders on Vancouver Island do. This presumably was so that they would continue to manage the land base for forestry purposes. But now TimberWest and Island Timberlands have sprouted real estate arms and are selling off massive chunks of their denuded stumpfields for subdivision and development. This, of course, pays significantly more quarterly dividends for their shareholders than sitting around waiting for the trees to grow back ever could. But it does nothing whatsoever for the wild creatures which depend on those forests. In the wake of southern Vancouver Island's logging holocaust, we are left with a legacy of despoiled drinking-water supplies, erosion, invasive species proliferation (Scotch broom, fireweed etc.) extreme fire hazards, massive log jams, sprawling subdivisions and of course, extinctions. The logging has utterly destroyed the balances of nature which once allowed wolves, cougars, Golden eagles and marmots to coexist together on the landscape.

The annual distribution of fresh, lab-bred marmot pups into their extremely degraded habitat may offer some fancy PR photo-ops, but without habitat protection and restoration, the Vancouver Island marmot will remain entirely dependent on artificial means such as captive breeding for their survival. And ultimately, after the companies have logged and flogged all of their remaining forestlands they will disappear too. Weyerhaeuser abandoned the VIM Recovery Project when it cut-and-run from Vancouver Island after 7 years of gutting marmot habitat. As the logging companies laugh their way to the bank, the beleaguered tax-payer will ultimately be responsible for the enormous costs of cleaning up the mess.

*Ingmar Lee* planted trees on Vancouver Island for 21 years and has seen the scale of devastation firsthand. He now works to protect what's left of the forests. He can be reached through his website: [www.ingmarlee.com](http://www.ingmarlee.com)