THE ELPHINSTONE RAINFOREST

Increase Protection Before It's Too Late | **An ELF Publication Summer 2026 | elf-tr.org**

BC's beautiful Sunshine Coast deserves its fair share of parks. The Elphinstone Temperate Rainforest—8,400 hectares (ha) on the slopes and ridges of Mt. Elphinstone—is our last and best opportunity to save what's left of the mature, big-treed forests that once covered all of Mt. Elphinstone. Only 140 ha are currently legally protected in the Mt Elphinstone Provincial Park, Cliff Gilker Regional Park (55 ha) and Sprockids Park (48 ha). The Elphinstone Rainforest lies on the unceded swiya (lands) of the shíshálh and Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh) First Nations, with xwesam-Stalkaya (Roberts Creek) serving as the colonial defining line.

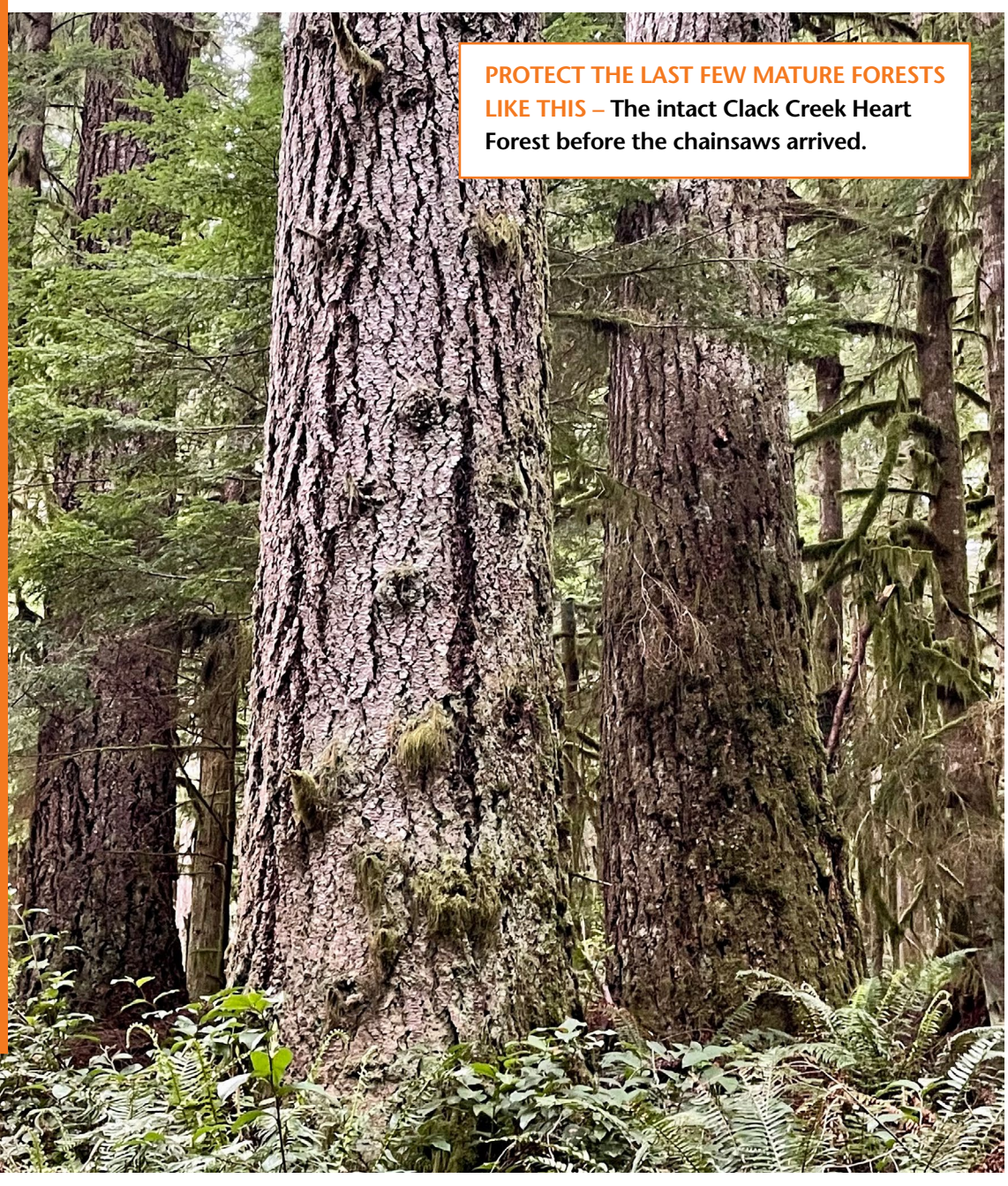
This paper provides an update on the need to expand protection on the largest and best remaining forests: the Elphinstone core area. We address this region's ecological significance, eco-tourism opportunity, and a current shíshálh-BC Land Use Plan process that will determine its long-term future.

This 8-km wide Elphinstone Forest core area extends from Wilson Creek on the west, to Robinson Creek to the east, with main access up B & K (Largo) Forest Service Road off Hwy. 101.

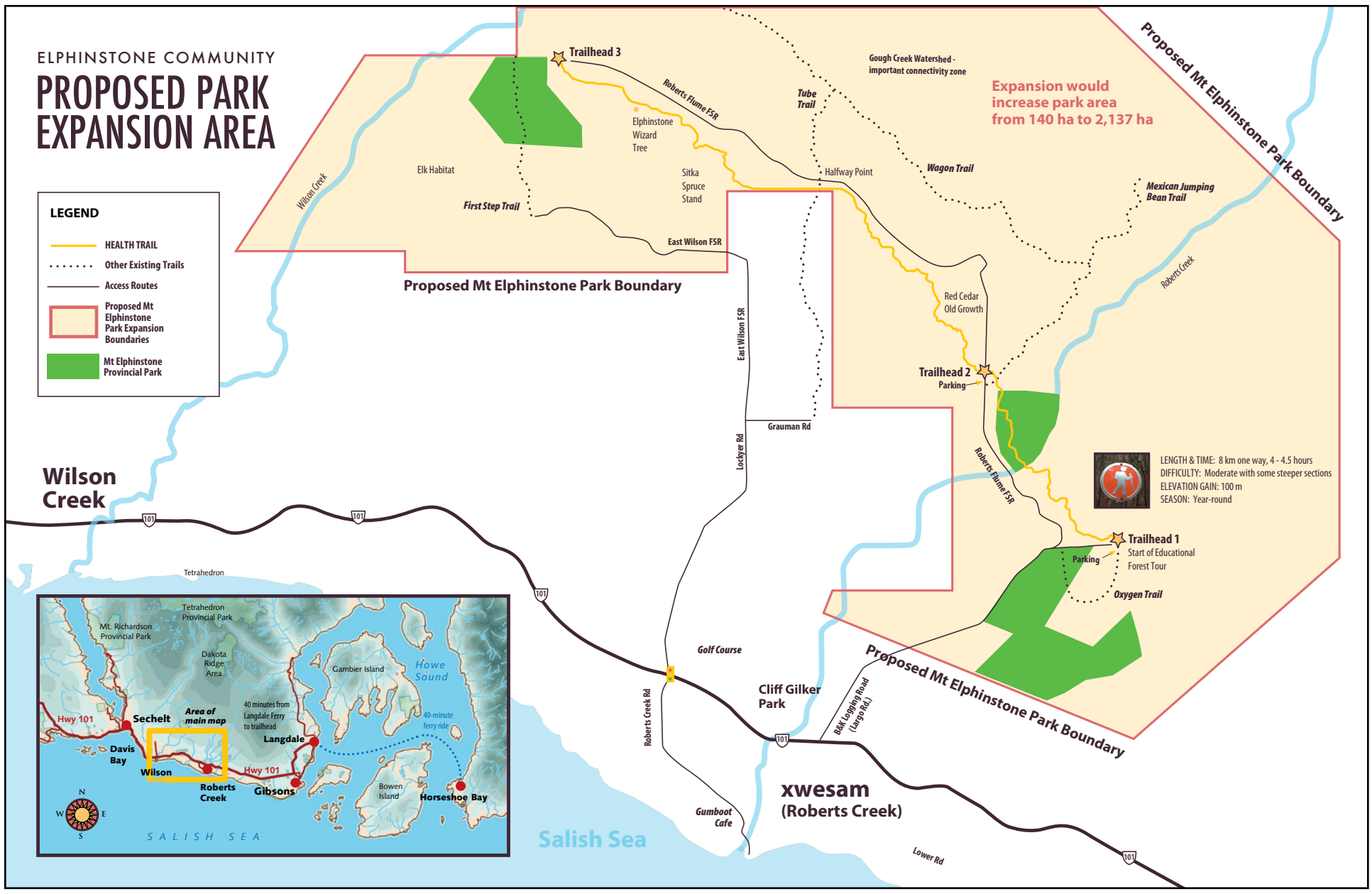
It is a low-elevation, mature coniferous forest with old-growth attributes and many beautiful step-pool streams. It's 150-700 metres above sea level in the high-biodiversity biogeoclimatic zones CWHxm1, CWHvm2, and CWHdm. To protect the area's high biodiversity from logging and roadbuilding, conservation biologists recommend legal protection of a 2,100-ha minimum core Elphinstone Protection Area. Protection could be secured with an Indigenous Protected Conservation Area combined with BC Class A Park designation achieved through collaborative government-to-government negotiations and agreement.

Please spend 10 minutes reading about the opportunities and threats to this one-of-a-kind area.

STOP MORE OF THIS – BCTS logging block A93884 in the Elphinstone Park expansion area (2020)



PROTECT THE LAST FEW MATURE FORESTS LIKE THIS – The intact Clack Creek Heart Forest before the chainsaws arrived.



ELPHINSTONE'S TRAIL NETWORK: A GROWING TOURISM OPPORTUNITY

Above: Green identifies the existing three Elphinstone Park zones, and the tan shading (within the red outline) shows the proposed expansion area.

Over hand-built foot bridges, the 6-km Health Trail crosses xwesam (Roberts Creek), Clack Creek, East & West Gough, Flume, and East Wilson Creek. Other creeks in the park expansion area include Stephens, Malcolm, and Robinson on the eastern boundary. Their step-pool formation modulates stream flow providing ideal conditions for a variety of amphibians to lay their egg masses in, with adults sometimes found sitting Zen-like on the trails.

The Health Trail passes by several top ecological features, including the oldest-recorded tree in the Elphinstone Forest core area at 617 years old, with its seedling established in 1409. A researcher identified the age of this spectacular tree as part of a wider study of old-growth trees in the Elphinstone Forest expansion area, recording Douglas-firs 250 to 400 years on average.

The Health Trail's name pays homage to the ancient Japanese practice of "forest bathing" (shinin-yoku), a sensory immersive activity in nature to improve health by reducing stress. Inhaling "phytoncides"—antimicrobial oils released by trees—increases the activity of natural killer (NK) cells, which help the body fight off disease and infection.

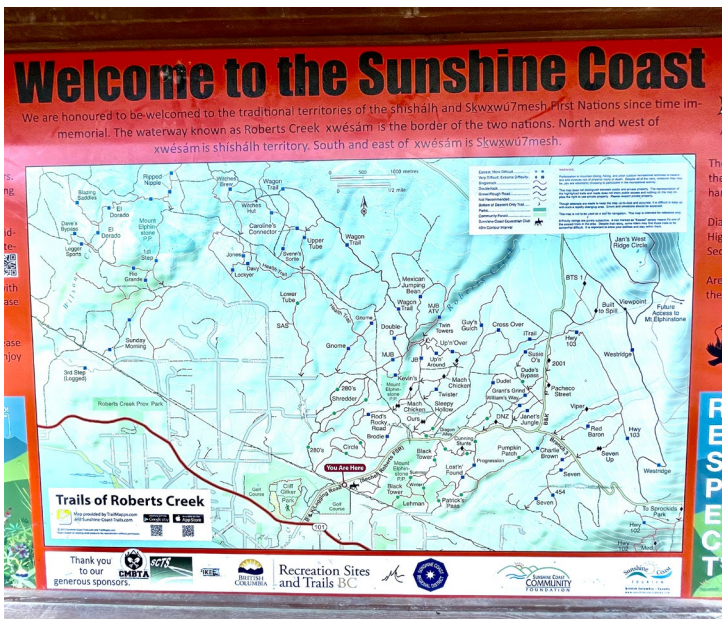
The Elphinstone Forest's rich biodiversity of mushroom species is the highest of anywhere in the province with up to 165 species (20 edible), including highly sought after Chanterelles and Pines. It's a sustainable harvest, but logging has reduced the number of unique patches. Bird and big-game watching is growing, while the unregulated mountain biking usage in the Elphinstone Forest has become an international destination.

Outdoor Recreation: a long-term economic win

When a new or expanded park is announced, it adds to the economic vitality for nearby communities, boosting its recreational industry. Across the province, outdoor recreation contributed 4.8 billion to the economy in 2023, or 1.5% of the GDP, with 3.2 billion paid in salaries. An expanded Mt. Elphinstone Provincial Park and investment in its marketing and infrastructure would be a clear economic win for the lower Sunshine Coast.

The shíshálh and Squamish First Nations could capitalize on increasing tourism by providing bike shuttles to the hundreds of mountain bikers who arrive at the B & K powerlines every weekend. They could offer interpretive tours and possibly look at building a cultural centre showcasing their rich history of being stewards of this land. These opportunities all require political will to lay the ground work for wider protection. Allowing future logging by licensees in the area, including BC Timber Sales and Sunshine Coast Community Forest, runs counter to supporting sustainable, low-impact eco-tourism, which awaits.

Marker along the Health Trail.



This large map appears at the start of the Elphinstone Core Forest along the B & K FSR. It shows most of the hiking and mountain trails for this 2,100-ha area.

EXPAND PROTECTION OF ELPHINSTONE FOREST NOW

The existing Elphinstone Forest protected area (a Class A provincial park) lies within the 1.55-million-hectare (ha) Sunshine Coast Forest District. It comprises a minuscule 140 ha in the 34,000-ha Chapman Landscape Unit (LU).

Experts says that a minimum of 30% of an LU should be protected to secure biodiversity from irreversible loss. But the Sunshine Coast only has 3% of its forests and lands protected. That's less than any other area in B.C. It's a level that leads to species extinctions.

Conservation biologists have done the research to verify that biodiversity is most complex in old-growth forests. Currently, only 1.2% of the Chapman LU is old-growth. However, 70% of the proposed 2,137 ha Elphinstone protected area expansion is intact mature forests. Year-by-year, these mature forests are becoming old-growth forests. This is the heart of Elphinstone's biodiversity, now and in the centuries ahead.

The other 30% of lands in the proposed expanded Elphinstone protected area have been logged since the late 1990s. Some of the cutblocks were planted with commercial tree species for future harvest. These areas will need some intervention to establish more natural forest succession. This includes cutting gaps in the dense stands of planted trees to allow increased sunlight. That will encourage native berry-producing plants such as Blueberries and Huckleberries to get re-established.

Animal trails need to be cut through these recovery zones since getting animals back into the forest is a conservation tool: they help renourish soils. The Elphinstone Forest supports a complex, predator-prey relationship between Cougars, Wolves, Elk and Deer. Hunting and gathering throughout is an Indigenous value that needs to be respected and sustained.

One of many old-growth Douglas-fir trees creating a multi-storied canopy.

ELPHINSTONE FOREST CORE: A BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

In the Elphinstone Park expansion area, hundreds of old-growth Douglas-fir trees tower skyward in a multi-layered canopy. Beams of sunlight fall to the forest floor, just like an Emily Carr painting. However, successive governments assign zero economic value to these forests until the trees are logged, hauled away, and sold. It's truly an outdated and short-sighted mindset, especially in an era of global biodiversity loss and climate change, that puts no value on the critical environmental services that forests provide for free, including the clean air and water that we can't live without.

These Douglas-fir "mother trees" support a network of young seedlings and younger firs via a web of mycelium. This root-like structure of fungus contains a mass of branching, thread-like hyphae (filaments) controlled by various stimuli, including electrical fields.

Within the core area, but outside of the small, protected areas, is a rare stand of old-growth Western Red Cedar spared from the mid-1800s wildfire by a surrounding wet zone. In the westernmost proposed park addition, so not yet protected, is the largest stand of Sitka Spruce trees (about 100 trees) found anywhere on the Sunshine Coast.

All of these tree species grow in relation to unique plant communities that the B.C. Conservation Data Centre has identified as red and blue endangered ecosystems. Examples are Red cedar + Sword-fern and Sitka Spruce + Huckleberry, only found together under specific conditions.

Two-thirds of the Elphinstone Park expansion area was mapped as Old-growth Recruitment by the provincial Old-Growth Technical Advisory Panel. This conservation tool is used when landscapes teeter on the brink of irreversible biodiversity loss. Recruitment is a management tool meant to secure mature forests from logging so they can become tomorrow's old-growth.

The big trees in the Elphinstone Forest provide very specific habitat conditions for the endangered Marbled Murrelet, a seabird that spends its days in the Salish Sea. Under the cover of darkness, it flies inland to nest on the wide, mossy branches that serve as nesting platforms where it lays its eggs.

Lucky to have these Elphinstone giant Douglas-firs, several centuries old, still available to protect.

The endangered Roosevelt elk also depend on these low-elevation forests to provide shelter during the winter. Since they can't manoeuvre through snow, they move down into these Elphinstone Park expansion areas. Elphinstone's temperate rainforest supports a diversity of species, including Black bears, White-tailed deer, Cougar, Lynx, Bobcat, and many amphibians, including the Coastal tailed frog (longest lifespan of any frog – up to 20 years). This also includes a host of birds, such as Woodpeckers, Owls, Blue Grouse, with its haunting call signifying wilderness, and the Winter Wren, a year-round resident requiring a dense understorey.

ACTIVE LAND-USE PLANNING WILL INFLUENCE THE ELPHINSTONE FOREST'S FUTURE

Thanks to current talks between the shishalh Nation and the Province of B.C., hope exists that the Elphinstone Forest core area will be expanded and legally protected for future generations. As background:

In October 2018, the shishalh Nation and the B.C. government signed the B.C. Government Foundation Agreement. The Foundation Agreement provides direction for the development of a joint shíshálh – BC Land Use Plan for the public lands in the swiya: the lands that shíshálh Nation has occupied and utilized since time immemorial. The shíshálh – BC Land Use Plan will provide clear management direction on biodiversity, watershed integrity, resources important to shíshálh culture and sustainable economic development.

Public input is being considered during the development phase. To have your voice heard, refer to the back page of this paper to add your comments, which will be added to the planning record.

ELF and hiwus Calvin Craigan, a shíshálh Knowledge-keeper, presented a paper to the Land Use Plan table in 2022. There, we jointly recommended that an Elphinstone Forest core protection area of 2,100 ha be established as an Indigenous Conservation Protection Area (ICPA), a co-management arrangement between BC Parks, shíshálh Nation, and the Squamish Nation. (Lands east of xwesam (Roberts Creek) fall within Squamish territory.)

To learn more about the land-use plan go to **https://planninginpartnership.ca**

What Makes the Elphinstone Core Unique?

The Elphinstone core area is exceptional due to a combination of a patchy wildfire in the 1860s and selective hand-logging of the 1920s, which left intact an area of mature and old-growth forest. There's nothing quite like it of this size at this elevation on the lower Sunshine Coast.

These two events reduced timber volumes, although the old-growth Douglas-fir "vets" survived. This forced post-war industrial logging to look elsewhere to stands with higher volumes, such as along the higher-elevation Elphinstone west ridge. Serendipitously, this safeguarded the lower elevation from the first wave of industrial, liquidation logging.

The core area also contains a mix of Alders and Broadleaf Maples, helping this urban interface zone to be fire resistant for the most part. The groundcover is a diverse carpet of mosses, ferns, shrubs, and plants. On the western side of the proposed Elphinstone Park expansion area is the largest patch of the endangered Rubus Nivalis (snow bramble) in B.C., and further west a very special stand of wild Pacific Rhododendrons (one of only four in B.C), which grows up to 4.5 metres (15 ft) tall, blooming between May and June. It remains a hidden area to safeguard it against overuse.

Due to these rare plants growing outside of the Mt. Elphinstone Park (between "park islands" No. 2 and No.3), it's critical to connect these special plant zones into a robust plan.

Stephens Creek, a step-pool channel, on the edge of protected area No. 1.

Elphinstone Conservation Review Recommendations by McCrory Wildlife Services (2015):

Top priority: Have ELF and community groups work closely with the shíshálh and Squamish (Skwxwú7mesh) First Nations to document cultural/heritage and traditional use of the study area. Include immediate consultation of protection options, such as a provincial Class A Park.

Fully protect the Elphinstone study area as a core benchmark region due to its high biodiversity values. Core protected areas form the cornerstone of conservation (Noss 2000, p. 197).

The 2,137-ha Elphinstone study area needs legislative protection as a provincial Class A park, encompassing the three existing small parks. Unfortunately, provincial and federal governments do not recognize First Nations' Tribal Parks, such as in Clayoquot Sound and the Chilcotin. Therefore, they are still susceptible to resource development sanctioned by the province. The one exception is the Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park. Extreme pressure from First Nations and the public resulted in its protection as a Class A Provincial Park.

Elphinstone biodiversity corridors connecting older and old-growth forests to the core 2,137 ha study area must be at least 0.5 km in width, if not wider. GIS (Geographic Info System) corridor modelling techniques will greatly help define such biodiversity corridors for the Elphinstone map area.

Yes, I support the expansion of the Elphinstone Provincial Park up to 2,100 ha in cooperation with shíshálh and Squamish First Nations into a legally protected area. Please accept my donation to help keep the work of ELF going forward on this initiative and others.

Clip this out and mail to ELF at PO Box 85, Roberts Creek, BC V0N 2W0, or visit the website at elf-tr.org to complete an online donation.

Print Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____ Postal Code: _____

Add email to receive information updates: _____

Accept my enclosed cheque for:

____$30 ____$50 _____$100 _____other

THANK YOU!

How you can help

Send an email to the BC Land Use Planning office and and cc: the Minister of Environment and Parks. Each communication they receive is added to the public record.

A hand-written letter (pen & paper) has more impact so consider mailing a letter. Put into your own words key points you've learned from reading this paper. Please cc: the local Sunshine Coast MLA to help champion this cause.

Subject line: **Expand the Elphinstone Forest Core to 2,100 ha.**

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This free report was prepared by ELF-TR, a Sunshine Coast based environment organisation who has been advocating for an expanded protected Elphinstone Forest since 2012, and tracks proposed logging blocks that may contain important biodiversity and recreational values.

Thanks to the following scientists who provided research supporting this Elphinstone initiative: Applied Conservation GIS, McCrory Wildlife Services, Snowline Ecological Research, Artemis Wildlife Consultants, Strathcona Forestry Consulting, and to citizen-scientists, including Hans Penner, Paul Kroeger and Rick O'Nell (past). To hiwus Calvin Craigan (shishalh Nation knowledge-keeper) who continues to inspire, and Paul George (co-founder of the Wilderness Committee) who encouraged this report and helped publish the 1995 "Mount Elphinstone Forest: Eco-Forestry Proposal" found at:
https://www.wildernesscommittee.org/publications/mount-elphinstone-forest

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To read the full "Elphinstone Conservation Review" go to ELF's homepage.

Thank you for your interest, support and action on this issue.

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