

Abstract Submission for 5th Canadian River Heritage Conference

Title of Presentation:
The Real Wealth of the Mackenzie Watershed

Category: River Conservation

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Abstract

Canada's boreal region is home to some of the world's largest and wildest rivers and watersheds. These natural assets provide a rich variety of ecosystem services and natural resources. This natural capital, especially the value of ecosystem services, is not properly accounted for in land use decisions. We need to start counting the value of natural capital so we can make informed stewardship decisions that balance broader ecosystem and cultural values with sustainable economic growth.

The Canadian Boreal Initiative has been working with ecological economists Mark Anielski and Sara Wilson to improve the availability of boreal natural capital knowledge. In January, CBI released a report that estimates the economic value of ecological goods and services provided by nature in the Mackenzie watershed. The Mackenzie watershed, home to Canada's longest river, is one of the most natural and intact portions of Canada's boreal region. The study is the first watershed-based natural capital review in Canada, and the findings emphasize the critical importance of the region. The value of ecological goods and services in the watershed are estimated to be 10 times the total economic value generated by natural capital extraction industrial and other activities. The most valuable ecological services include carbon regulation and water stabilization, regulation and supply.

The Mackenzie watershed also contains valuable natural resources, including globally significant deposits of oil and gas. Land use in the region is increasing, with the potential to degrade ecological integrity. Simulations conducted by the Canadian Boreal Initiative indicate that decisions made today will determine whether land use in the watershed is sustainable over the long-term. Fortunately, the watershed's current intactness provides an opportunity to achieve ecological, cultural and economic goals if a balanced approach is followed.

Biographical Sketch:

Matt Carlson oversees the Canadian Boreal Initiative's science program that is targeted at improving the availability of knowledge for sustainable land use planning in Canada's boreal region. Components of the program include natural capital assessment, conservation planning, land use scenario analysis, and species conservation. Matt's own research focuses on conceptual and simulation modeling to explore the relationships between land use and ecosystems. The Canadian Boreal Initiative is an independent organization working with conservationists, First Nations, industry and others to link science, policy and conservation activities in Canada's boreal region.