



Standoff at Big Meadow

by Joe Foy

Last month, my friend and I headed up to Fish Lake on the Chilcotin Plateau. We were on a Wilderness Committee mission to take some photos and video in aid of the campaign to protect Fish Lake from becoming the site of a huge open-pit copper mine, named, in Orwellian fashion, the “New Prosperity” mine.

But something happened on the way to Fish Lake.

We had stopped off in the town of Williams Lake to attend the Tsilhqot’in National Annual General Meeting. Fish Lake is in Tsilhqot’in Nation territory and we wanted to see if there were any updates. There were. Apparently there was some sort of protest happening at a place called Big Meadow. We were soon back in our truck, bound for Big Meadow.

We crossed over the Fraser River and entered BC’s wild west. It’s a vast highland plateau dotted with Tsilhqot’in villages set in a landscape of pine forests, salmon rivers, trout lakes, and meadows that are home to wild horses, wolves, caribou, deer, moose and grizzlies. Its front yard is the Fraser River at its most spectacular, roaring and seething its way through mighty canyon walls. The territory’s backyard fence is the highest and most rugged, glacier-clad portion of the Coast Mountain Range. This is the homeland of the Tsilhqot’in people, and they are mighty proud of it.

After half a day’s travel up the bumpy gravel road, we were finally

approaching Big Meadow. Up ahead we could see a line of parked pickup trucks, punctuated by several RCMP vehicles, that marked our destination.

Big Meadow is basically an old cowboy cabin surrounded by a natural meadow. Around a campfire was a group of Tsilhqot’in men, women, kids, and elders speaking to several RCMP officers. The Tsilhqot’in were there to protest logging that had stripped a vast amount of the surrounding territory of forests, leaving the local moose population no shelter from the weather or the hunters. The region’s moose populations have recently declined by up to 60 per cent.

Why do Tsilhqot’in elders need to camp at the end of logging roads to make a point?

Moose are an important food source for the Tsilhqot’in. Prior to the 1930s, no moose existed in their territory. The Tsilhqot’in hunted deer and caribou. But around 1900, moose in BC started to expand their range south from Prince George. Good thing too – because, thanks in part to logging, caribou have become so rare that no one hunts them anymore. Moose put food on the table now.

Tsilhqot’in elder Orie Hance took us up on a hillside to show us the view. And what a view. As far as the eye could see, massive clearcuts had stripped the land of all forest cover. Orie, now in his 70s, once worked these same hills back when he was 16, as a cowboy for the Gang Ranch.

“It was beautiful country back then,” said Orie. “Green as far as you could see and no roads – just trails.”

The pine beetle outbreak has affected the forest here to be sure, but Orie has observed far too many green, healthy forests being cut.

He said that in the old days before the logging, there were plenty of places for moose to hide, so over-hunting was not a problem. But now all a hunter needs is a pick up truck and a rifle with a scope, and you can see every moose for kilometres across the endless clearcuts. This has had disastrous results. Orie wants the remaining forests protected. I can see why.

This all begs the question, why do Tsilhqot’in elders need to camp at the end of logging roads to make a point? Why are the governments of BC and Canada in charge here? Shouldn’t the Tsilhqot’in people govern their own lands? I am thinking that it wouldn’t mean the end of all industrial activity – just bad industrial activity. And that would be a good thing for nature and people.

We left Orie at the stand-off camp at Big Meadow convinced that the only way things will get better is if management of these lands is returned to their rightful owners: the Tsilhqot’in people.

We said goodbye and good luck, and headed for Fish Lake – but that’s a story for next time.

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