

Efforts being made to establish an ecological reserve on Pink Mountain

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FORT ST. JOHN – A Vancouver science photographer and wildflower enthusiast is taking a stand in an effort to protect some extremely rare flora and fauna on Pink Mountain.

The top of the mountain, which also hosts the Elbow Creek gas field and the future site of an Aeolis wind farm, is teeming with endangered or rare species of butterflies, plants and birds, says Ron Long, and that's just the beginning of it.

Long, with the help of a growing group of volunteering biologists and experts, in partnership with the University of British Columbia's Botanical Garden and a grant from the Vancouver Natural History Society, has spent over thirty years cataloguing these species, which he says need immediate protection in the form of an ecological reserve.

As opposed to a park, of which there is already a Provincial one on Pink Mountain, an ecological reserve is an area dedicated for preserving "representative and special natural ecosystems, plant and animal species, features and phenomena," according to BC Parks. They are used for scientific research and educational purposes.

Of 187 species of butterfly in B.C., 65 are located on Pink Mountain; it has a worldwide reputation as a unique habitat for butterflies, many of which are listed as red or blue under B.C.'s Red and Blue lists of Endangered Species and Ecosystems. Further, each butterfly depends upon a specific plant as a food source, many of which are also red or blue listed.

B.C. has the highest concentration of butterflies than any other province, making Pink Mountain even more of a hotspot.

"Our research is not even scratching the surface of what needs to be looked at," Long said. "There's material there for generations of PhD and Master's students to work on."

What makes Pink Mountain's habitat so unique is a combination of almost freakishly-rare geological circumstances which have resulted in nutrient-rich Triassic rock exposed at the top, a condition ideal for plant growth and which is not emulated in even in the nearest mountains and foothills.

"Over the last couple of years we have done plant surveys on a number of those other mountains by helicopter, and it turns out that none of those mountains has anywhere near the number and diversity of plants that Pink Mountain has," Long said. "We've done soil studies that indicate that the area where we are planning the 2.2 square kilometres, the soil has much more in the way of plant nutrients available than the soil in other parts of the mountain. ... It's almost conclusive that Pink Mountain is absolutely unique in the area, in northern B.C."

Long is proposing a 2.2 square kilometre reserve, in addition to the Provincial Park already located on Pink Mountain.

"Within that 2.2 kilometres we have a total of 19 significantly rare species," Long said, including three species which have only just been identified for the first time in B.C.: a bee, a butterfly, and a moss.

Also, moth experts visited the area last summer, and calculated that there could potentially be 200 species of moth on Pink Mountain.

Long has been compiling the research results and is presently working on a report which he will distribute to various governmental departments and industry.

But he is concerned that industry will move faster than government processes.

While the Elbow Creek gas field is as yet untouched save for two dormant wells, that could change along with the economy; "that is my greatest concern, if they go up there and start trying to develop those gas leases, that could be the end of the whole thing," said Long.

Also, Aeolis Wind Power Corporation has plans in the works for a wind turbine project on Pink Mountain, although Aeolis president Juergen Puetter says that is a long way from realization.

Not, he says, that Aeolis would be averse to being sensitive to fragile ecosystems.

"Obviously we're very interested in doing anything we can to protect any special

species up there, there's no doubt about that," Puetter said.

Long's efforts are to work with, not against, industry, he says.

"I'm not trying to stop anything, as much as I'd like to, but I know that's just not going to happen. But there are ways of working around the rare species to protect them," he said.

"There is just so much we still don't know. We're almost certainly going to discover more unique things about this mountain."

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