

NO PROJECT LEFT BEHIND: RUIN OF RIVER PROJECTS IN THE COLUMBIA VALLEY¹

James Knoop[©]

The Town of Golden may seem to be a backwater place in the middle of nowhere, especially in comparison to the sprawling metropolis of the lower mainland and other booming places in the province. It might appear that nothing of importance ever happens here. But when it comes to the environment, and in particular to the rampant push for independent power producer (IPP) projects, we've had to face our battles just as much as anywhere else.

I'd like to share with you a little information about what's been happening in the Upper Columbia Valley in regards to the IPP issue. It is not a story that is well known, and this account will give you insight into the potential long-term environmental consequences for the region. This story also signifies what is happening in small towns all over British Columbia.

It begins with a pristine creek in an out-of-the-way river drainage called Ventego Creek. Even in our area, where backcountry pursuits are a way of life, few have heard of this place, and fewer still would ever dream of traveling into this treacherous valley. Yet, with helicopters and dynamite, and dreams of entering the "green" economy, a Nelson-based company called Selkirk Power has imposed itself on this remote wilderness. Thus, one aspect of this story is about the disastrous consequences of this project should it go forward. The company has already embarked on a ruinous fish translocation project within a unique sub-alpine wetland area. In the future, half of the drainage will be blasted open to accommodate new infrastructure with profound environmental consequences. This is not a suitable location for a run-of-river project.

This story is also about the wider context of IPP development in the region, and the province at large. It appears at times, that entire regions are put up for sale on the auction block, especially when the region is sparsely populated. In our locale, a geographical area from Kinbasket Reservoir to Revelstoke Reservoir is threatened by multiple IPP projects. Should the first project be allowed to proceed, several other projects are highly likely to follow quickly on its heels. That is why it is so important to halt Selkirk Power and its project at Ventego Creek before it starts. We cannot afford to leave just one project behind.

A Golden Battle: Independent Power Producer Projects in the Upper Columbia

To tell the story in its proper context, a small history of IPP issues in the Upper Columbia area is required. To date, the residents of the Golden - a surprisingly active and educated bunch - have managed to ward off several proposed projects that have threatened to proceed without a local approval process. Two projects were particularly contentious between the years 2006-2008, these were smaller run-of-river projects proposed near the Town of Golden. Next, there was the company, AXOR Group with a much larger 99MW proposal on Glacier/Howser. This drew busloads of residents out of their homes to show opposition to the project. Over 1100 people went to the public meeting in Kaslo, more than the entire population of that small Kootenay community!

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After that, there was Atla Energy, a company with three proposals on the wild and untamed Upper Wood River. This area is so remote that simply traveling there is an all day affair that involves several hours of driving, arranging a special ferry, and significant bushwhacking to access the river. To counter this illogical proposal, the Golden chapter of Wildsight, assisted by the Council of Canadians, created a documentary video and distributed it widely. You can check out the video at: <http://www.wildsight.ca/wood-river-atla-energy-corporation>. Our little ol' Town of Golden has a long history of success where these projects are concerned.

Each project, in one way or another, was stopped dead its tracks. It is impossible to pin point precisely why or how this was accomplished. Each case is different and each project lies dormant to different degrees, for now at least anyways. But this doesn't mean the battle is over, far from it in fact. The next proposal has emerged.

Biggest Regional IPP Threat: Selkirk Power at Ventego Creek

In November 2010, it was announced that AXOR, a Canadian leader in the development of large-scale engineering and construction projects, no longer holds an Energy Purchase Agreement (EPA) with BC Hydro for the controversial Glacier/Howser IPP project. This should significantly slow this project moving forward. This also makes the proposal on Ventego Creek the next biggest environmental threat in terms of IPP's in this region. The proponent, Selkirk Power, has gained its EPA and is hopeful to begin construction next spring on a single project that involves developing two adjacent river drainages for a combined 44 MW project. One drainage, Ventego Creek, is of particular importance given its high wilderness, ecological and biodiversity values.

Ventego Creek meanders through a long pristine watershed that extends for about 18km and is located in the northern Selkirk Mountain range. The glaciers that feed Ventego sit atop tall mountain peaks, which form the border with Glacier National Park. At the back of the drainage there sits a high alpine lake, which plunges into a spectacular and dramatic waterfall to form the start of the creek. Ventego Creek is fed by 19 additional tributaries as you go down the valley, some of which contain spectacular waterfalls of their own. The valley is steep and the water flows at deathly rates of speed in some areas. The high velocity of the water flow makes it desirable for hydropower production.

The Ventego Creek proposal is of special concern for a variety of reasons. First, the Ventego drainage has never seen the human hand of development. There are no roads or even any recreationally used trails; the foliage is incredibly thick. There are also numerous avalanche paths in this valley, which makes it prime bear habitat. Additionally, there has never been a credible scientific wildlife or plant survey conducted in the Ventego Creek drainage, so we don't know the significance of the biodiversity that would be lost were this project to be approved and move forward.

In July 2010, a small group of us set out to hike the Ventego Creek drainage in order to document the area with photographs and raise awareness about these run-of-river projects. Because of the harsh conditions, the trip nearly became a deadly survival scenario, with myself on the receiving end! But that is another story altogether. Along the way, we conducted an informal wildlife survey of sorts, simply documenting what we found. We encountered bear daybeds, a bear rub tree and extensive bear scat. We traveled along multiple game trails, and were even forced to sleep on one due to the extensive steepness of the surrounding terrain. We also saw extensive moose and other ungulate scat, Columbian spotted frogs, osprey, waterfowl, varied thrush, marsh wren, and many other species of bird that we were unable to identify.

There have also been unconfirmed reports of Black Wolves spotted in the wintertime, and even the endangered Mountain Caribou. Clearly, the valley belongs to someone.

Second, in the middle of the river drainage there lays a 5.6 km stretch of unique sub-alpine wetland that has remained unchanged since the last ice age. The proponent Selkirk Power, has begun a controversial fish translocation project in the Ventego Wetlands. In order to compensate for the loss of habitat on neighbouring Cupola Creek, the company began introducing blue-listed westslope cutthroat trout into this unique amphibian-filled ecosystem, where previous to the introduction predatory fish did not exist. This alters the natural equilibrium that has evolved here. The fish translocation project was to take place involving a multi-step process, gradually introducing more and more fish, but significant opposition to the project emerged. The environmental group Wildsight and a First Nations group called the Ktunaxa have both taken a stand against it. The fish translocation has since been halted, an event that was big news for the environmental community in these parts. The story is available to read here: http://www.blocalnews.com/kootenay_rockies/thegoldenstar/news/108436954.html. Somehow, the Provincial Ministry of Environment and the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans approved the idea of a fish translocation into a pristine wetland. This is a clear example of how these projects can go wrong, despite a rigorous application process.

Third, the project offers no public benefit, while the local community inherits a laundry list of associated problems. The plans for this project call for a new 8.8 km road extending halfway into Ventego to the edge of the wetlands, increasing the vulnerability of this already exploited ecosystem. Blasting for the construction of the road and the intake pipe will be extensive given the rugged terrain, further disturbing sensitive animal habitat. Despite assurances from the proponent, recreational vehicles may begin accessing the drainage through new road infrastructure, which also increases the potential to introduce invasive plant species that travel on their tires. The plans also call for 40 km of associated transmission lines to interconnect with the nearest Town of Golden. Aside from compromised aesthetic values, in an area that is surround by four National Parks, other proponents will piggy-back on the infrastructure resulting in more projects down the road. Thus, while private power producers gain profits through the sale of electricity to BC Hydro on public land, residents of the local area are left to deal with the mess.

A Story with a Twist: Transmission Lines and IPPs

Another important factor to consider about the project is that it is the first of a series of proposals within a geographic locale that is slated for IPP development. The area where Ventego Creek is located is known to BC Hydro as the Beaver River "cluster." Selkirk Powers holds proposals on two creeks within the cluster, further north there another five proposals held by a large Albertan energy company named Trans-Alta. Already these creeks are being monitored with flow measuring equipment and they are waiting on BC Hydro's next Clean Power Call for purchase contracts. One of the five proposals within the Beaver River cluster also lies within a pristine river drainage, Palmer Creek. Should the first project be approved, it would greatly facilitate the remaining projects within the cluster.

The fact that the IPPs located within the Beaver River cluster will be developed in tandem with each other was discovered earlier this year when BC Transmission Corporation (now BC Hydro) sought approval from the now dismantled BC Utilities Corporation to build a transmission line. This summer, BC Hydro approved the construction of a 112 km Columbia Valley Transmission line (CVT line) from Invermere to Golden. Contained within the application for the transmission line, there was an economic study conducted for the purpose of estimating the profits that would

be gained through interconnection fees of up to 24 run-of-river projects in two "cluster" areas known as Beaver River and Goldstream River. At the present time, the cluster on Goldstream River is not moving forward, the Beaver River cluster however, begins with Selkirk Power.

Widespread opposition exists both to the transmission line and the IPP project on Ventego Creek. Wildsight vehemently opposed the construction of the CVT line through a written hearing process. The group made the argument that BCTC failed to inform the communities of Golden and Invermere of one of the primary functions of the CVT line - the fact that it would be used to transport power from the two cluster areas south into the valley. According to the application for the transmission line, the development would enable cross-border energy trade. Furthermore, the Council of Canadians (Golden) has a petition with over 500 signatures opposing the project on Ventego and Cupola Creeks. With the provincial government in a state of upheaval, and with minister portfolios changing at alarming frequency, it is important that Ventego Creek not be left by the wayside.

Take Action Now!

As Selkirk Power is hopeful to begin construction on the project at Ventego Creek next spring, it is important that we as environmentally-minded communities come together to take action now. This IPP project is particularly important to stop because it threatens a pristine river drainage, an increasingly rare piece of real-estate in these times of fast development. However, there are larger reasons for stopping this project as well. We cannot sit idly by as the government apportions large tracts of remote wilderness for sale on the energy market. The Upper Columbia region is not the only area in the province where transmission lines are being used to activate large clusters of IPPs within a confined geographic locale. These projects need to be proven to be in the public interest, and when pristine areas are threatened, it is very difficult to make the case that they are.