

Opinion

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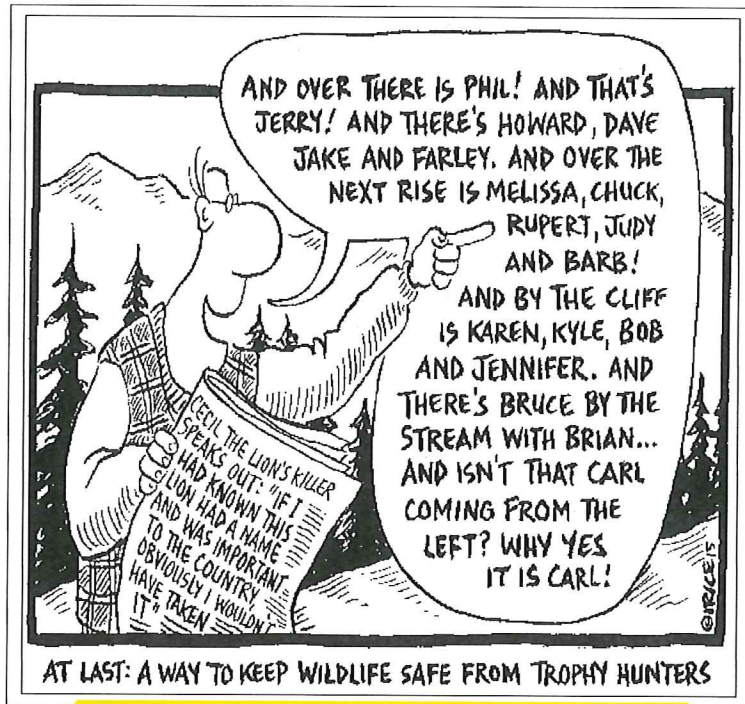
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AT LAST: A WAY TO KEEP WILDLIFE SAFE FROM TROPHY HUNTERS

Good, but not great

Last week, the provincial government issued a release bragging about how it's entrenched on the front lines in the war against zebra and quagga mussels.

According to the release, more than 3,200 boats have been inspected since May, keeping B.C. safe from the invasive creatures.

"Our co-ordinated and ongoing efforts are making a real difference keeping invasive mussels out of B.C.," said Mary Polak, environment minister.

"We have risen to the challenge, and are continuing to develop a sustainable mussel prevention program by building capacity, experience and additional partnerships."

The government's invasive mussel defence program includes six mobile decontamination units and 12 auxiliary conservation officers.

Financing consists of \$1.3 million from Victoria and B.C. Hydro and \$360,000 from the Columbia Basin Trust.

This all sounds great, but it's not enough, according to the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

"We'd like to see permanent decontamination sites at the borders," said Juliette Cunningham, an OBWB director and Vernon city councillor.

"There is an opportunity for some boats to get through. We don't have a level of comfort that all is being done that could be done."

And depending on mobile inspection stations means the B.C. border is like holes in Swiss cheese. If the six decontamination units are busy, who is minding the store at the other crossings along Alberta, the U.S. and the north?

The government's back-slapping over its mussel response came at the same time that OBWB heard from Julia Lew, with the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

Since the arrival of quagga mussels in 2007, SNWA has struggled to keep them from clogging water intakes and undermining water treatment infrastructure.

"Whereas we haven't seen some of the effects other jurisdictions have with the mussels, we've had others not seen elsewhere," said Lew.

"For example, in many areas where the mussels exist there is one reproductive cycle per year and one female can produce a million eggs. But the warm water temperatures in Lake Mead is resulting in six to eight reproductive cycles per year."

Another issue for SNWA is the \$8 million price tag to chemically pre-treat a new intake, which is needed because of declining water levels in Lake Mead.

Lew is urging B.C. and Okanagan officials not to sit back and wait for the mussels to show up on a contaminated boat.

"If we could go back in time, prevention would have been the way to go. I know some think prevention is costly, but the moment you don't have it, and the mussels get in, it's devastating. The costs once they arrive are far worse," she said.

Cunningham sees Nevada's experience as a wake up call for the Okanagan, particularly because warm temperatures in Kalamalka and Wood lakes could prove ideal for breeding mussels.

"It's quite alarming the measures that need to be taken and the cost involved," she said.

In the government release, Forests Minister Steve Thomson says, "Invasive mussels pose a threat to more than just ecosystems, but to drinking water facilities, hydro stations, agricultural irrigation and more. While we continue to see great success stories this summer, we all need to do our part to keep invasive quagga and zebra mussels out of B.C. waters."

And while all residents play a role in preventing the spread of mussels, the provincial government needs to do the heavy lifting.

Armstrong fair bolsters area pride

The Interior Provincial Exhibition has wrapped up for another year, and what an overwhelming success it was.

Over the five days, an impressive 158,238 people attended the Armstrong fair, leaving last year's attendance figure of 147,932 in the dust.

While many of those came from Armstrong-Spallumcheen, there was significant representation from the rest of the North Okanagan as well as from across B.C. and Alberta.

"It's a great opportunity for us to showcase our community to those visiting the fair," said Patti Noonan, Armstrong-Spallumcheen Chamber of Commerce executive director.

The out-of-town visitors spend time in motels and campgrounds, shop in local stores and explore the region, which may bring them back in the future as tourists or potential residents and investors.

Agriculture remains a critical focus of the IPE, whether it's the livestock or the exhibits of produce, flowers and preservatives. And that is important as it demonstrates the ongoing vitality of farming and its role in the Okanagan's economy.

But beyond dollars and cents, the fair is all about community pride. It's Armstrong-Spallumcheen's time to show off.

"I love seeing people with huge smiles," said Bryan Burns, IPE general manager.

"There is so much to see and do. To have something like this in the valley is massive. There is nothing else like this in the province."

None of this happens on its own, and Burns and the IPE staff deserve a lot of praise. But our hats are also off to the dedicated army of volunteers who ensure everything runs smoothly behind the scenes.

The IPE is a North Okanagan tradition that does the entire region proud.

Thanks for this year's memories and we look forward to 2016.