

# Pro- or Anti-Development? The Role of the Professional Biologist

**AS CITIZENS, WE** can hold any opinion we want on an issue. When we are working as professional biologists, this is a lot trickier, as we should be providing objective observations and facts. When we write a professional report about a piece of land that someone wants to develop, having a personal opinion about it is different from providing objective information about the property that will support a decision, one way or the other, by the proper authorities.

But there is a danger in dividing biologists into two camps: pro- and anti-development. We should be neither, and both. This divisive dynamic of pro- and anti-development biologists has the potential to damage our profession, and needs to end.

We have to recognize that land development is a legal activity in BC, provided that certain conditions are met, usually set out in local bylaws. Furthermore, property owners have important property rights that are codified in common law. As professional biologists, we are obliged to adhere to the established legal and regulatory frameworks.

What if we find rare plants, animals, or red-listed ecosystems on a piece of land that someone wants to develop? These findings get recorded in the professional report. Usually, there are comments in the report about what the consequences are if the land is developed, and hopefully some recommendations for mitigating the impact on those species and ecosystems. Except for a few species, there is really no clear regulatory framework in BC for biologists to adhere to that provides actual protection for these species and ecosystems on private land. And so what's left is moral suasion for the owner or decision-makers to "do the right thing". This works better in some local governments than in others. But, in my opinion, it is not our professional role to advocate for it. As a citizen, I can, but in my role as a professional, I should not. Setting these boundaries is very difficult for many.

If a professional biologist's report contains information that appears to support a decision to develop or alter land, does that make the author of that report "pro-development"? In my opinion it does not, provided that there is no attempt to hide or invent information about the land that would mitigate against

a decision to develop. If this is done, then the report is not professional, and the biologist could be sanctioned.

If a professional report is written that contains information that appears to support a decision to not develop the land, does that make the biologist "anti-development"? In my opinion, it does not, unless the report is intentionally misleading to serve that purpose, or contains flawed information. In either case, a client may pressure a biologist to make a recommendation that favours their plans. We all should be very cautious about doing so.

Personally, I know of no biologist who would report there are no features of sensitive or conservation concern on a property if in fact there are some. Nor do I know of any biologists that would report that there were some present, if there were none.

Our governing *Act* calls on us to protect the public interest by upholding the principles of stewardship of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and biological resources. We may all have different ideas about what that means, and how far to push on each case. I would certainly support the development of a more muscular regulatory framework for protecting species and ecosystems at risk, so that decision-makers can have clearer guidance when making land-use decisions. That would be a big improvement over the lack of this at present. Building that framework is where efforts by biologists will really pay off. 

Respectfully submitted,  
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