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Power projects not really 'green'

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When the Campbell government started adding to B.C.'s electric power grid with privately owned "run-of-river" projects, government luminaries pushed it as a green initiative with little or no harm to the environment. I think some of us thought it might entail comfortable little "mom-and-pop" operations.

But what sounded like a few small installations generating power from basically undisturbed flows of water has morphed into a multibillion-dollar stampede of profiteering powerplants, chopping into our shrinking wilderness, threatening the very existence of some streams and endangering fish and wildlife. And as the hydro projects become bigger and more numerous, our government promotes it all the more, just as it promotes net-cage salmon farms that decimate our wild salmon runs.

On Nov. 25, Plutonic Power Corp., joining a unit of U.S. corporate giant General Electric, announced plans for 39 power plants in the Toba and Bute inlets area, totalling an outlay of more than \$4 billion.

We don't need to worry about the impact of this huge powerplay, of course, because it's all going into what is euphemistically dubbed the "Green Power Corridor."

Now, I'm not an expert in these matters, but it seems to me the only basic difference between run-of-river and conventional hydroelectric power projects is that run-of-river does not employ dams and reservoirs. Diversions, 16-kilometre tunnels through mountains, wilderness invaded by powerlines and roads, vast rock-moving work - no problem. But not those pesky power-dams. Somehow that makes it all green and tickety-boo. I hope the fish doomed to be sliced and diced in turbines are aware of that.

Also recently released through the Save Our Rivers Society (www.saveourrivers.ca) is an 11-minute film that goes behind Premier Campbell's green curtain to expose the controversial project of another private power corporation, Axor, in a prime wilderness recreation and wildlife area of the Kootenays. Involving Glacier and Howser creeks and three other streams, this powerplay would permanently divert 90 per cent of Glacier Creek, drill 16 km of 4.5-metre tunnel, plus a 91-km transmission line through key wildlife and old-growth habitat.

With the catchy name of Purcell Green Power, this project has grown from the 16 megawatt potential first approved to 125 megawatts. It is being opposed by Rainbow's End Ranch, a horse ranch 12 km below the planned diversion dam on Glacier Creek--a dam that would release only a trickle of water.

Last March, to the astonishment of its promoters, a run-of-river project planned for the Lower Mainland's Upper Pitt River was foiled by angry members of the public at a meeting in Pitt

Meadows. The people literally rose up and said "No" - insisting that preserving the integrity of that beautiful river was more important than another money-making scheme.

It takes the provision of objective information about this tide of private power plans to give British Columbians - the real owners of these threatened rivers - the chance to decide each by its own merits or dangers. Too often the deals are made between government and applicants with little concern for public involvement.

Sometimes what politicians and bureaucrats rule to be good for all of us may in fact lead to more heedless destruction of what is rapidly becoming the most valuable commodity in all the world - untrammelled lands of natural beauty beyond the reach of the profiteers, where the rivers run clean and free.

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