

The Sirens' Song of "Balance"

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An earlier version of this editorial first appeared in the Newsletter of the Calgary/Banff chapter, Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society.

"Balance" is a word of which we hear a lot. It is probably the concept most frequently referred to by those who oppose our advocacy of the value of parks and protected areas. In Canada, the Alberta government issues new oil and gas leases in some of the last virgin parkland at Rumsey, and cites balance. Increased commercial development in Banff National Park is justified in the name of balance. Balance might have dictated that industrial activity occur in the "Whaleback montane" - a remnant natural ecosystem on the eastern slopes of the Alberta Rockies.

There is no doubt that balance is an enormously attractive idea. Its essence informed Aristotle's counseling of people to follow "the golden mean" as the key to a good life. Its attractiveness has been underlined by recent psychological research indicating that one of the key factors in our judging of the physical attractiveness of others is the symmetry of the face. Indeed, balance is so inherently attractive to us that one of the definitions given for it in the Oxford English Dictionary is "harmony of design and proportion." How could anyone be against such a wonderful and pleasing thing?

Of course, wilderness conservationists are not against balance. We are against the abuse of the concept, a thing which occurs every day. This abuse happens in one of two ways: The first form of abuse is a failure to define on what level balance is to be sought. Environmental organizations around the world have advocated that the balance must occur on the international, national and provincial levels. Because large areas of landscape are already heavily industrialized, such balance would dictate that other areas be set aside to be free from such stresses. It is worth noting that claims of conservationists for such areas have generally been very modest. The now-mythical figure of 12 percent comes to mind. In most countries and regions totals far less than 12 percent have been sought, although there is evidence that a mere 12 percent would not be enough to achieve balance.

In contrast, as we attempt to protect small areas of land, we find our opponents advocating balance for particular sites. In Canada, Banff National Park is divided into zones of commercial activity and wilderness. Many tiny protected areas around the world are similarly divided further. By focusing on balance on these relatively small landbases, the degree of development and industrialization taking place elsewhere on the larger landscape is left out of the equation. There is no talk, for example, about "re-balancing" development versus preservation in cities such as Calgary, Tokyo, Mexico City, Sao Paulo or New Delhi (and hundreds of others), for that matter. To achieve "balance" in these larger cities would require the restoration of large areas of these urban areas to a natural or near-natural state.

The second form of abuse is more conceptual, more profound, and less conscious. Most people have lost sight of the fact that "balance" is a metaphor. The metaphor is of the scales. Weight on one side

must be counter-balanced by an equivalent weight on the other. One can tell when balance is achieved when the scales are even. The scales provide an objective standard. But in development and conservation issues we have no such scales. In the absence of an objective standard, each person thinks of his or her ideal situation, whatever it might be, as a state of balance. To the wilderness activist pristine wilderness is balance. To the ski hill operator a valley replete with downhill runs is nicely balanced. Hence, the equivalency we often see drawn between balance and increased development.

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Perhaps the best defence against seduction by balance is to refer to its flipside. When faced with an invocation of balance, we should learn to ask where the imbalance lies. If balance is used to advocate for more commercial development in a National Park, we should ask: "How is the Park currently out of balance?" If commercial development is the cure advocated, then the disease must be an excess of wild spaces and wildlife. In this manner the rhetorical fraud of the "balance" argument is laid bare. In this and other contexts the balance sought is usually nothing more than increased development and further destruction of the natural world.

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