

A Closer Look at Canada's Unsustainable Pacific Gateway

Strategy

by Ben West

I work at Canada's largest membership-based wilderness preservation organization, The Wilderness Committee. Sometimes people are confused about why we are trying to stop the expansion of Metro Vancouver's Port Mann Bridge, which is part of the federal and provincial "Gateway Project". Historically The Wilderness Committee has taken people into remote parts of our beautiful country to protect ancient forests and endangered species.

"Where's the wilderness on the Port Mann Bridge?" a friend of mine asked me plainly. It's a good question because the answer explains not only the problem with this particular bridge but also the core of what's wrong with the Canadian government's Asia Pacific Gateway Strategy. Ultimately, this is a story about unsustainable trade and development.

The wilderness that will be affected by this new bridge--if it is built--will not just be the Fraser River it crosses, but all the wilderness downstream, metaphorically speaking. If we open the floodgates to the new traffic which is induced by highway expansion it will inevitably lead to sprawling development. This is the pattern which follows highways wherever they have been built around the world.

Why are our governments really doing this? A 2005 Maclean's article said "China is shipping goods out of a fire hose and we are sucking it up out of a straw." When you see Gateway in these terms you realize Gateway is really about opening the international floodgates, and importing more and more low cost disposable goods while exporting more and more non-renewable resources like tar sands oil and Canadian coal.

It's my job to take people to see the farmland, green spaces and wildlife habitat throughout the region which will be in danger from unsustainable car-dependent sprawl if the existing Port Mann is torn down and replaced with a mega-bridge more than twice its current size as part of the Gateway

project. We are trying to help people understand that it is impossible to build your way out of congestion, and frustrated commuters need to know the truth about why they're stuck in traffic. Expanding highways only briefly relieves congestion, if at all. All we can do currently at the local level is move people more efficiently through congestion by building convenient light rail and rapid transit. Ultimately the best approach is to reduce the need for commuting by building smart compact independent communities. You don't have to look much farther than cities like Los Angeles to see what happens when you follow the old design model that Gateway is setting us up for.

At the international level we see the same problem. I seriously doubt any Canadians want to be the enablers of the climate crisis, yet this current trade strategy is, in truth, a gateway to global warming. Opening the floodgates of unsustainable trade will enhance severe global climatic destabilization and will affect us all worldwide. We can't knowingly participate in this.

It has been said that we are only really borrowing the world from the next generation and their children. The financial, social and environmental challenges our children face are already huge, but Gateway will make it so much worse. We can't do this to them. We need to work together with all our neighbours on this continent and across the Pacific to do what's right.

All the countries of the world must achieve smart land use and transportation planning that ensures food security, equity and ecological balance. Working together we can help each other reach these goals. We must abandon the Gateway race to the bottom and replace it with a path to a truly virtuous life for those living on both sides of the Pacific Ocean and around the world.

