

**Creature Comforts:  
Remaking the Animal Landscape of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1887-1911**

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The creation of Stanley Park as Vancouver's landmark urban park at the end of the nineteenth century was an active process that required a massive human effort to reshape the landscape to conform to popular expectations of idealized wilderness. Park advocates did not simply aim to preserve nature unimpaired by human disturbance, but instead sought increasingly elaborate means to improve nature through active management and intervention. In order to produce an authentic wilderness experience within the city that would satisfy Vancouverites' expectations of wilderness, nature in Stanley Park required improvement.

Park improvements to Stanley Park in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included a refashioning of the animal landscape with subsequent ecological changes and feedback effects. The Vancouver Park Board set out to eliminate certain animal species and enhance the presence of others for the pleasure of park-goers. They hunted and killed pest and predator species, and simultaneously propagated and protected recreational animals. Park authorities confined desired wild animals to where they could best be controlled – the zoo. This careful management of animals in Stanley Park was another form of landscape art intended to produce composed animal vistas for leisure and recreation. One could spend an afternoon in the park feeding graceful swans and playful squirrels on the shores of Lost Lagoon unaware that the scene was dependent upon deliberate human intervention. The construction of this city park as a natural retreat nestled within the urban environment involved significant manipulation of animal-life to achieve an “authentic” nature experience. But there were clear limits to this kind of human control. These modifications opened new niches for opportunist species to exert their autonomy and occupy the park. Animals found new ways to elude park policy and operate beyond the purview of human control.<sup>1</sup>

Urbanization transformed wildlife habitats on the Burrard peninsula leaving Stanley Park an isolated island of forest for a significantly reduced population of wild animals (Figure 1). The Great Fire in 1886 and clear-cut logging drove larger animals like deer, elk, bears, cougars, and wolves to the suburban fringes of the city in South Vancouver, Burnaby, and across the inlet to the North Shore. Furthermore, settlers demonstrated hostility toward any wild animal that transgressed the perceived boundary between wilderness and civilization. Patricia Partnow argues that the urban view of wildlife is rooted in a territorial separation of humans and wild animals. Settlers showed little tolerance for these “intruders.” One pioneer settler named George Cary recalled the presence of deer in the West End in the 1880s as loggers cleared the land. He said that the deer “got so used to the men slashing that they became quite tame; they would come around, you could see them any day; everyone knew about them.” On one occasion, a few of those unfortunate deer treaded too close to the city. Cary said he “heard those deer go by on that board walk, tap, tap, tap, as they walked along the boards,” before two men shot the deer that dared to mix the wild with the urban.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more on the agency of animals, see Jason Hribal, “‘Animals are Part of the Working Class’: A Challenge to Labor History” *Labor History* 44 (4) 2003: 435-453; Jason Hribal, “Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing

the History of Animals from Below? *Human Ecology Review* 14 (1) 2007: 101-112.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn argues that the urban environment offers new habitats for alien wildlife species, but usually in smaller numbers due to the reduced greenspaces in cities: “Scattered, fragmented remnants of woodland, meadow, and marsh embedded within the urban fabric are islands surrounded by a sea of buildings and pavement.” Anne Spirn, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) 207; Patricia H. Partnow, “Ursine Urges and Urban Ungulates: Anchorage Asserts Its Alaskaness” *Western Folklore* 58 (1) 1999: 39; Major J.S. Matthews, *Early Vancouver: Narratives of Pioneers of Vancouver* Vol. 2 (Vancouver: 1933) 182.

Stanley Park was too small to sustain significant numbers of large wild animals, but it did contain many small animals, including raccoons, rats, and a variety of birds. In its early years, the park was also home to the domestic animals of the former park inhabitants. Prior to the creation of Stanley Park, the peninsula – once the site of a large Aboriginal village called Whoi Whoi – was inhabited by both Native and non-Native people and their domestic animals.<sup>3</sup> August Jack Khahtsalano, a former resident of Whoi Whoi, described how his family raised cattle on the peninsula:

The cows, at night, were put in the stable; in the day they ran loose in the park; or along the beach; they got wild grass mostly – along the beach – but there was some English grass, not much, some, enough to carry us over the winter, and if there was not enough, Father bought hay from Black’s and Maxie’s. Mother milked the six cows in the morning – the other six were dry – and put the milk in big high milk cans – about five gallons – and took it to Hastings Mill in the canoe.<sup>4</sup>

The 1876 Indian Reserve Commission census recorded two horses, seven cows, and 151 fowl living on the peninsula that would later become Stanley Park. When the Park Board took charge of the park in 1888, they evicted or destroyed the remaining domestic animals tended by the European, Chinese, and Native inhabitants of the park. Sarah Avison, the daughter of the first park ranger, recalled the fate of some of these animals when the city evicted the Chinese settlers at Anderson Point in 1889:

The Park Board ordered the Chinamen to leave the park; they were trespassers; but the Chinamen would not go, so the Park Board told my father to set fire to the buildings. I saw them burn; there were five of us children, and you know what children are like when there is a fire. So father set fire to the shacks; what happened to the Chinese I do not know, but the pigs were set loose and the bull untied, and they got lost in the forest of Stanley Park, and they could not track them down until the snow fell. Then my Dad tracked them down, and they shot them in the bushes, and the bull’s head was cut off, and my father had it stuffed and set up in our hallway in our house, the “Park Cottage”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For more on the former inhabitants of Stanley Park, see Jean Barman, *Stanley Park’s Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch and Brockton Point* (Vancouver: Harbour, 2005) and Susan Mather, “One of Many Homes: Stories of Dispossession from “Stanley Park”” M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Major J.S. Matthews, *Conversations with Khahtsalano, 1932-1954* (Vancouver: City Archives, 1955) 114.

With most of the large wildlife driven out of the area and the settler livestock destroyed by 1900, the Park Board set out to remake the animal landscape of Stanley Park.

Park visitors expected to see particular free-roaming animals in Stanley Park as part of their nature experience. Early park visitors often complained that Stanley Park lacked these animals. Vancouverites expected the forest to be teeming with wildlife, crawling throughout the woods. One resident wrote to the Park Board curious why “[t]he province is full of wild game

[but] none in Stanley Park plenty of feed there and hiding places.”<sup>6</sup> The board selected animals with a gentle demeanour and pleasant appearance to entertain park visitors, producing a sanitized and tamed wilderness effect. The swans and squirrels in Stanley Park illustrate the Park Board’s deliberate efforts to produce a rationalized modern urban wildlife experience for park-goers through the construction of new habitat and the introduction of alien species.<sup>7</sup>

The majestic swans that cruise the waters of Lost Lagoon today owe a debt to early park officials who strove to maintain a vibrant swan population in Stanley Park. In 1900, Chairman Robert Tatlow successfully procured black swans from the Zoological Gardens in Sydney, Australia to stock a series of seven ornamental ponds constructed along the broad promenade from Coal Harbour to Lumberman’s Arch. The Park Board stocked the ponds with the popular birds to the delight of visitors (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA). Major Matthews Collection. Topical and Categorical Files. Henry Avison. AM0054.013.00126.

<sup>6</sup> CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation fonds. Correspondence. Stanley Park. 1916-1919. 49-A-5. File 2, Letter from “An Observer” to the Board of Park Commissioners.

<sup>7</sup> Tina Loo argues that the wildlife policies adopted in provinces across Canada were intended to produce a “modernized wilderness” where principles of practical sciences were applied to the breeding of certain species and the construction of new habitats for game preserves. Tina Loo, “Making Modern Wilderness: Conserving Wildlife in Twentieth-Century Canada.” *Canadian Historical Review* 82 (2001): 91-120.

<sup>8</sup> *The Province*, 19 May 1900, 2; 1 August 1901, 8.

It was also common for park authorities across North America to stock urban parks with grey squirrels, which were admired for their charcoaled coats and charming appearance – Stanley Park was no exception. The Park Board introduced grey squirrels into Stanley Park in 1911. After consulting with Park Commissioners in other cities, the board ordered twenty-four grey squirrels from a company called Wenz and Mackensen, which sold animals to parks across the continent. The company was originally unable to fill the order and instead sent eight fox squirrels until they could forward a shipment of twelve grey squirrels to Vancouver in 1911. The swans and squirrels of Stanley Park were just two examples of how the Park Board sought to remake the animal landscape through the introduction of new species.<sup>9</sup>

The tenacity of opportunist species like racoons and crows challenged the Park Board’s efforts to manipulate animal populations in Stanley Park. When the board stocked the park with grey squirrels, they ignored warnings from William Manning, General Superintendent for the Department of Public Parks and Squares in Baltimore, who shared his experiences at Druid Hill Park: “The racoons in the less frequented places of the Park kill the squirrels during the night, and we are unable to kill all of the racoons as they come from adjacent woodlands.” The much-admired swans of Stanley Park were equally vulnerable to predator attacks. A newspaper report described a gruesome scene at the birth of a nest of cygnets: “Shortly after the young ones were hatched, an immense flock of crows attacked the nest in an unguarded moment and killed three of the little ones by picking their eyes out before the old birds could hasten to the rescue.” Marauding racoons also regularly pillaged the ponds, further challenging the fate of the adult swans in Stanley Park. The pleasure species provided new opportunities for predators like crows and racoons that quickly filled the open niche, prompting the Park Board to exercise new methods of pest control.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation fonds. Correspondence. Stanley Park. 1916-1919. 49-A-5. File 2, Letter from “An Observer” to the Board of Park Commissioners; 48-C-1 File 3, Letter from Henry Smith, Commissioner of Parks, Boroughs of Manhattan and Richmond, to Charles E. Tisdall, Chairman of the Board of Park

Commissioners, Vancouver, B.C. March 29, 1909; Invoice from Wenz & Mackensen, Naturalists, Yardley, Pa., proprietors of the Pennsylvania Pheasantry and Game Park, to Charles Tisdall, Vancouver, B.C. January 3, 1910; Letter from Wenz & Mackensen, Naturalists, Yardley, PA., to Mr. A. Hauchet. June 22, 1910.

Crows posed a particularly obstinate challenge to the Park Board's vision for the animal landscape of Stanley Park. They were loud, aggressive, and generally thought of as a nuisance to park visitors and other more desirable bird species, especially swans and small songbirds. The board's reaction to the crows vividly illustrates Anne Whiston Spirn's observation that "[i]n the city, humans subsist in an uneasy cohabitation with other animals," especially those they cannot control. Park-goers demonized the crows in Stanley Park, describing them in sharply unfavourable terms. M.W. Woods, a Vancouver resident and self-proclaimed "student of nature," offered one such perspective on the state of the crow "problem" in 1908. Woods believed that "[t]here is possibly no bird more rapacious and destructive [sic] than the common black crow." He blamed the crow for the dearth of small songbirds in the park. M.G. Johnson, another park observer called the crow, "the worst of all winged vermin." Yet another park user complained that the park was full of "nothing but nest robbing crows." In an effort to respond to this public outcry, the Park Board approved a motion to allow members of the Vancouver Gun Club to shoot crows in Stanley Park on Saturday mornings during the month of April 1910 – a policy they renewed every year into the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation funds. Correspondence January – December 1909. 48-C-1 File 3, Letter from William S. Manning, General Superintendent, Department of Public Parks and Squares, City of Baltimore, to Charles E. Tisdall, Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners, Vancouver, B.C. April 23, 1909; *The Province*, 1 August 1901, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Spirn, *The Granite Garden*, 208; CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation Funds. Correspondence January-December, 1908. 48-C-1. File 2, Letter from Mr. M.W. Woods to the Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners. July 2, 1908; Letter from M.G. Johnson to the Board of Park Commissioners, February 12, 1909; 49-A-5. File 2, Letter from "An Observer" to the Board of Park Commissioners. CVA. Board of Parks and Public Recreation. Board Minutes. MCR-47-1, 9 March 1910; *The Sun*, 28 December 1916, 10; One year, the Park Board invited the Vancouver Gun Club to shoot horned owls in Stanley Park.

Forestry experts even blamed the crows for insect outbreaks that threatened the trees of the park. Thomas Hawkes, a park commissioner from Portland, first raised the problem in 1914 after experts from Oregon reviewed the forestry conditions in Stanley Park and concluded that a recent insect outbreak was a result of a lack of insectivorous birds. Hawkes claimed "that they have been driven away from their habitat by the large number of crows." He encouraged the Park Board to expand the crow hunt and suggested that "when the balance of nature is again restored the depredations of the insects will be checked." Federal entomologists also suggested that the board should construct bird boxes throughout the park to attract smaller insectivorous birds.<sup>12</sup>

The Stanley Park crow hunt did not occur without dissent. Some Vancouver residents questioned the scientific wisdom and class interests that lay behind the Vancouver Gun Club's hunting privileges. Ronald C. Campbell Johnson wrote to the *Daily News-Advertiser* to complain about the legality of the crow hunt stating: "these commissioners cannot condone such offences and grant class privileges to any particular men." Campbell Johnson was also opposed to what he considered "bad taste and wanton cruelty to destroy our crows." He was not alone in this opinion. The *Sun* echoed Campbell Johnson's sentiments in its editorial pages, referring to the hunt as a "slaughterfest." It questioned the scientific rationale behind the crow hunt, arguing that "there is much reason to believe that the depredations of the crow family have been much exaggerated." Furthermore, the paper suggested that the crow played a useful role in the urban environment, claiming that crows "perform an immense service in the destruction of injurious

insects of almost every description and in performing duty as scavengers.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation fonds. Correspondence. Entomological Dept re insect pests. 48-C-5, file 3, Letter from Thomas Hawkes to W.S. Rawlings, May 26, 1914; 49-A-5. File 5, Letter from Gordon Hewitt, Dominion Entomologist, to W.S. Rawlings, Superintendent of Parks, November 8, 1916.

The case of the crows demonstrates some of the difficulties the Park Board faced in their attempt to reshape the animal landscape of Stanley Park in the early twentieth century. Despite their best efforts to introduce new species for the pleasure of visitors, opportunist species were still able to fill new niches and exercise a considerable degree of autonomy. Park officials were unable to exert complete control over the animals in Stanley Park, even in the zoo – the most controlled animal environment.

The Stanley Park zoo was one of the earliest and most popular attractions in the park. In the 1890s, the first park ranger’s wife tended to a bear and a few other small local animals just outside their residence at the Coal Harbour entrance. This modest collection eventually grew into a more elaborate assemblage of animals, which drew the attention of thousands of visitors every year (Figure 3). BC residents donated animals from across the province to display the wealth of the region’s wildlife. The Park Board also sought more exotic creatures from zoological societies around the world. Eventually, the park zoo featured a wide range of animals, including bears, elk, kangaroos, bison, coyotes, racoons, and a very popular collection of monkeys. The animals in the Stanley Park zoo were the best example of the rigid control of animals in the park for human delight, but even within this closed area, the zoo was vulnerable to natural forces beyond human control.

Not all of the animal species in zoo were suited to the climate of the Northwest Coast, nor did their keepers always manage the conditions of their captivity with proper care. The Park Board kept very rough early zoo facilities, constructed in an ad hoc manner to accommodate the great variety of animals. The quality of the cages failed to provide adequate protection against harsh winter weather. Although Vancouver’s climate was milder than other parts of Canada, temperatures dropped well below tolerable levels for some of the exotic animals. One report from 1907 noted that not “only with the monkeys, but with many other inhabitants of the zoo which are natives of more tropical climates than this, has the present period of cold weather been particularly hard.” The park ranger had to board up the enclosures and light fires for the vulnerable animals during snowfalls and cold snaps. He also had to shelter the swans in the winter before their ponds froze over. Despite these efforts there were always winter casualties.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Daily News-Advertiser*, 19 March 1914, 10; *The Sun*, 20 March 1914, 6.

Park visitors also posed a threat to the animals in the zoo. In October 1905, a fire broke out in the zoo killing several of the animals inside. The fire killed an opossum, twelve rabbits, three Belgian hares, and several birds. After investigation, the park ranger discovered that the likely culprit was a careless visitor who dropped a cigar or cigarette stub causing the tragic blaze. The zoo animals were equally capable of literally biting back at the crowds of human spectators. On more than one occasion, mothers wrote to the Park Board, seeking compensation after their poorly behaved sons lost fingers to frustrated monkeys. The condition of their captivity was ultimately the greatest threat to the animals in the Stanley Park zoo. Year after year, annual reports recorded the deaths of different animals from various causes. In one year alone a falling tree crushed an antelope, someone stole a black swan, a bull elk was killed in a fight with another elk, a brown bear died from a mysterious disease, a dog killed a pea hen, a cougar cub was found strangled in a fence, and several animals died from “natural causes.” Recording those deaths as “natural” was most likely a case of unintended irony given the most unnatural conditions of the

ZOO.

<sup>14</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 15 January 1907, 6.

The most famous case of the mismanagement of wildlife in Stanley Park occurred in the autumn of 1911 when a wild cougar from the North Shore took refuge in the depths of the park. In the middle of October, the park zookeeper awoke to find five of his animals killed – two deer and three goats. The remains were strewn about the animal paddocks, evidence of a brutal attack. The Stanley Park zoo, with its vast collection of animals, was also a veritable feeding ground for wild cougar. The Park Board hired three game hunters from Cloverdale to scour the forests of the park and kill the offending cougar. For two weeks, the creature eluded hunters and devoured another deer until a team of hounds tracked the cougar down. The hunters volleyed a number of shots into the animal finally ending the “terror” of Stanley Park.<sup>16</sup>

The cougar episode revealed the fragility of the human relationship with wildlife in the city. Many considered the cougar to be a threat because it had transgressed the boundary between wilderness and the urban environment. There were clearly limits to the wilderness experience in Stanley Park, which was still after all, part of the city. Newspapers portrayed the cougar as “a very crafty animal.” One newspaper report headline pondered whether they were dealing with a “Cougar or the Devil[?]” Like the crows, some saw the Stanley Park cougar as an intruding murderous villain, threatening human life and safety. After viewing the body of the animal, one reporter said that “one could not help thinking how terrible it would have been if it had crept up behind one of the little ones in the park and given it one stroke with its mighty paw” (Figure 4). This attitude toward cougars was common across the province and was rooted in a long-standing tradition of cougar hunting in BC and Vancouver Island.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *The Province*, 14 October 1905, 1; CVA. Board of Parks and Public Recreation. Board Minutes. MCR 47-2, 28 May 1913; 10 January 1917; 14 February 1917; CVA. Board of Parks and Recreation Fonds. Annual Reports. 1920-21. PDS 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 20 October 1911, 1; 23 October 1911; 26 October 1911; *Daily News Advertiser*, 27 October 1911, 15.

The portrayal of the cougar as an immoral killer helped justify its extermination, but there were some who were sympathetic toward the creature. A.H. Peters, a local Vancouver resident and park-goer, was a lone voice calling on others to see the cougar as “a noble beast.” Peters blamed human intervention for the presence of the cougar in Stanley Park. He claimed that the animal was “[i]ured from the mountain fastnesses by the persistent boosting of the Vancouver Tourist Association... of Stanley Park’s wild and prehistoric tangle,” where it found, “[d]eer and goats that had, in its native home, often taken days, nay weeks, of unremitting toil to capture, were here provided free of charge or toil.” Despite the accuracy of Peters’ remarks, they were drowned by the excitement of a cougar hunt on the doorstep of the city.<sup>18</sup>

Observers were enthralled by the excitement of big game in the city. Cougar hunting in BC was a popular recreational activity. The provincial government and tourist promoters carefully managed the image of BC as a wildlife frontier and a hunter’s paradise. The *Province* followed the hunt daily with such fervour that they even offered a reward for the cougar’s capture. When the hunters finally killed the animal, they delivered the corpse to the offices of the *Province* to be photographed and displayed. The Park Board later mounted the pelt in the Stanley Park Pavilion where it remained for many years. One reporter claimed that “[t]his cougar hunt has been so remarkable as to be almost without parallel in the annals of Canada.” He was amazed by the thrill of “hunting absolutely wild big game within the limits of a big city.” The story of the cougar in Stanley Park captured the imaginations of Vancouverites and remained part of the lore

of the park for many years. In his 1929 recollections of Stanley Park, Robert Allison Hood colourfully recounts the story, informing tourists that “looking savage and cruel just as she was in life, the animal is to be seen stuffed, in a case above the mantelpiece, in the Park Pavilion. Thus were the deer avenged.” The presentation of the skin in Stanley Park was intended to both symbolically affirm the wilderness qualities of the park and human dominion over nature and its creatures.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 28 October 1911, 6; 26 October 1911, 1; Richard Mackie, “Cougars, Colonists, and the Rural Settlement of Vancouver Island” in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia*, ed., Ruth Sandwell (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> *Vancouver World*, 31 October 1911, 5.

In its quest to improve nature in Stanley Park and reshape the animal landscape, the Vancouver Park Board encountered the limits of human control over non-human nature. Animals found numerous ways to exert their own autonomy and challenge human authority over the park. With each human modification, animals were able to quickly take advantage of new niches within Stanley Park. As Mike Davis argues, nature in the city is “constantly straining against its chains: probing for weak points, cracks, faults, even a speck of rust,” just as the cougar had done when it chose to raid the park zoo. Furthermore, the case of Stanley Park demonstrates the ways in which urban park advocates at the turn of the century shared a modernist perspective that sought to improve upon what they considered deficiencies in nature in order to produce a more satisfying nature experience for urban dwellers that would conform with popular expectations of idealized wilderness. Because Stanley Park lacked pleasant, free-roaming animals, the board introduced new species and modified the physical environment in an effort to remake the animal landscape of the park.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Tina Loo, “Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia” *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (3) 2001: 296-319; *Vancouver Daily Province*, 27 October 1911, 7; Robert A. Hood, *By Shore and Trail in Stanley Park*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1929) 147.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (New York: New Press, 2002) 362.

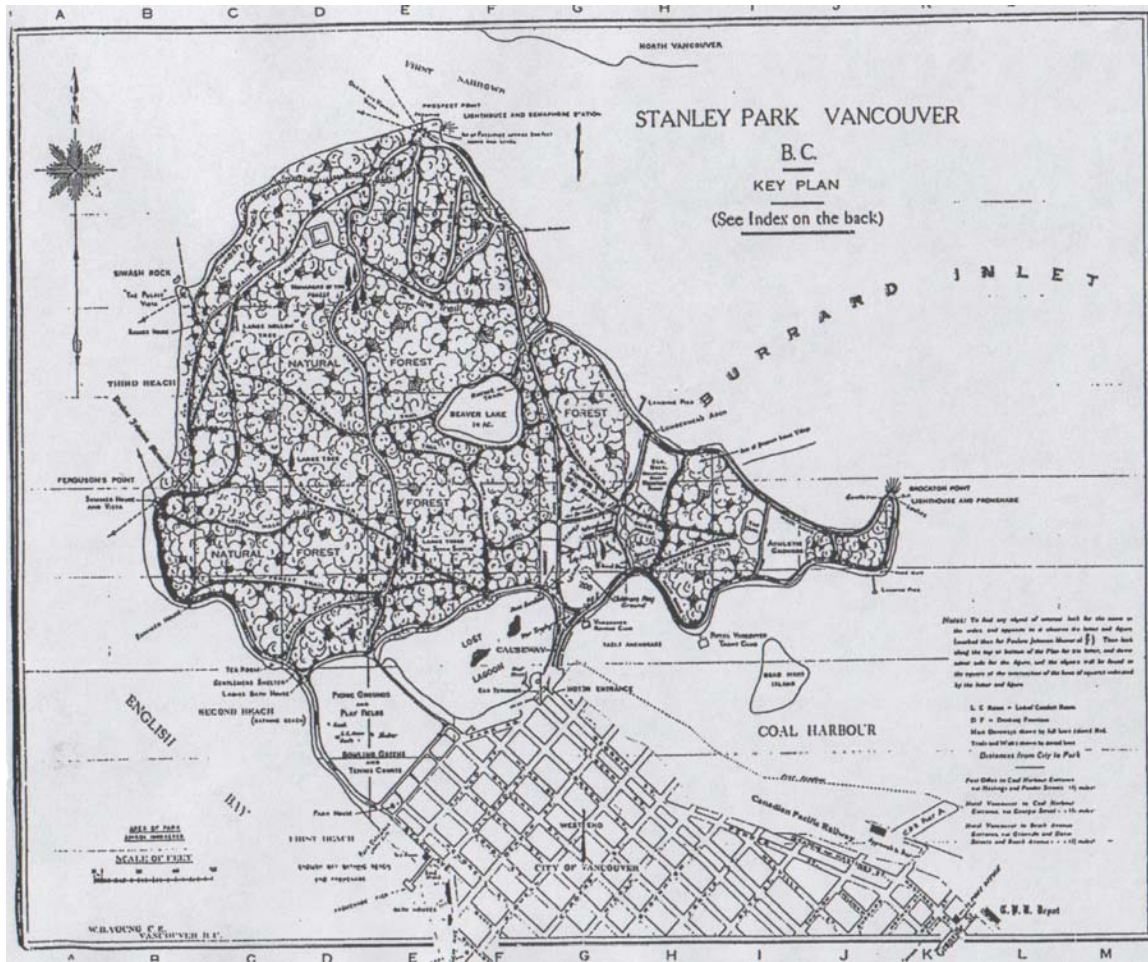


Figure 1.) Standard Tourist Map of Stanley Park from 1923. Source: City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA) Pamphlets Collection, 1923-3.





Figure 2.) The ornamental swan ponds were a popular attraction in the early years of Stanley Park drawing many to stop by the shores to feed the birds. However, these picturesque ponds were also the sight of significant carnage as the unwanted wildlife of the park, including crows and racoons, preyed upon the swans and their young. Source: CVA. Photograph Collection. SGN 1555.



Figure 3.) For many years, the bear pit and the monkey house (shown in the background) were two of the most popular attractions in Stanley Park. Visitors could enjoy the splendour of wilderness in Stanley Park, but at a safe distance in a controlled setting. Source: Major Matthews Photograph Collection. St Pk P288.2N173.2



Figure 4.) Cartoon depicting the Stanley Park cougar hunt. Source: Vancouver Daily Province, 27 October 1911, 1.