



PEACEFUL
PARKS
COALITION

For Immediate Release - March 21, 2007

60 Witnesses Needed to Prosecute Environmental Activist

Toronto March 21, 2007: Senior staff from the highest echelons of the Ministry of Natural Resources were set to testify against environmental activist, AnnaMaria Valastro of the Peaceful Parks Coalition when the crown withdrew the charges of criminal harassment, harassment and mischief on March 5, 2007.

Ms. Valastro was arrested in September 2005 when she refused to accept an imposed communication's protocol issued by Minister of Natural Resources, David Ramsay in an attempt to control "messaging" regarding the McGuinty government's controversial plan to kill thousands of nesting double-crested cormorants across Ontario. The communication's protocol prohibited all members the Peaceful Parks Coalition from accessing bureaucratic staff at the Ministry of Natural Resources, and ordered staff to disconnect all their calls. All enquiries were to be redirected to the office of the Deputy Minister.

"We absolutely refused to accept Kremlin-like messages from Dalton McGuinty and his cronies, and absolutely rejected bureaucratic staff from disconnecting our calls," says AnnaMaria Valastro. All members of the Peaceful Parks Coalition ceased to identify themselves when asked by staff if they were calling on behalf of an organization, except Ms Valastro who is already well known as the primary spokesperson for the group.

Potential witnesses included Deputy Minister Gail Beggs; Assistant Deputy Minister Kevin Wilson; Director of Research, Fraser Dunn; Director of Fish and Wildlife, Cameron Mack and scores of staff from every department at the ministry including the Minister's office. Even though disclosure from the crown was three binders thick, many of the statements from staff were flimsy scribbles, some contradictory.

"We knew this trial was never going to court," says Valastro. "Deputy Minister Gail Beggs would have gone down in flames if she had exposed herself to vigorous cross-examination and forced to explain to the judge why her office ordered mute hundreds of employees simply to contain a controversial issue."

The crown requested two weeks of court time to accommodate all their witnesses. The court flatly rejected their request. As a result the crown threatened to charge Ms Valastro with an additional 25 counts of criminal harassment, harassment and mischief to ensure their witnesses received a court appearance. "It didn't matter to us because it didn't change the defence but I think at that point everyone could see the emperor wore no clothes," says Valastro.

"While we are satisfied the charges have been withdrawn, we feel we've lost a lot by not going to trial", says Valastro. "Going to trial presented a valuable opportunity to argue whether a government has the right to deny access to the civil service and basic information depending on who is asking." It also raises the question as to whether the civil service is a political extension of the current government or an independent public agency.

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Unfortunately, the Ministry of Natural Resources generates revenue from consumptive uses of natural resources, primarily the cutting of trees and the killing of wildlife, and the majority of their staff and programs reflect the needs of these two 'client' groups – the forestry and sport hunting industries.

Cross-examination and numerous of pages of internal records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act would have revealed a fragile bureaucracy that was extremely insecure to criticism and held a profound negative bias towards environmental and animal rights activists. It would have also revealed the extent the McGuinty government will go to conceal facts about their environmental programs.

For more information, please contact AnnaMaria Valastro at 416.785.8936 or Liz White at 416.809.4371

Note to the Editor:

Using official government documents released through crown disclosure and the Freedom of Information Act, several complaints of misconduct will be filed with the appropriate government bodies whose role it is to oversee government conduct. A joint submission by several organizations involved with the campaign to protect the double-crested cormorant will be filed with the Ontario Ombudsman. The Peaceful Parks will present internal records calling into question the legality of a cull of cormorants on Rice Lake with the Environmental Commissioner, and has spoken to the offices of the Auditor General and the Privacy Commissioner. There is not one agency authorized to review a ministry in its entirety.

Background

The communication protocol against the Peaceful Parks Coalition was issued on Feb. 8, 2005 immediately after a meeting with the office of the Deputy Minister, Ministry of Natural Resources, to discuss the government's program to kill cormorants across Ontario. The action was taken after the Peaceful Parks submitted a scientific paper, and staff communications that called into question the merit and motive behind the double-crested cormorant lethal research program on Lake Huron. MNR fisheries biologist Mark Ridgway, who spearheads the research program on Lake Huron, was present at the meeting and received the information submitted by the Peaceful Parks.

The memo issued to all staff from the office of the Deputy Minister is as follows:

MEMO TO: NRMD Directors

ADMs

FROM: Kevin Wilson

Assistant Deputy Minister Natural Resources Management Division

SUBJECT: One Window Contact Assignment for Questions from the Peaceful Parks Coalition regarding Cormorants

DATE: February 8, 2005

Last week I met with representatives of a number of groups, including the Peaceful Parks Coalition, regarding MNR's approach to Cormorant Management. Specifically as it relates to research in Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, and control activities in Presqu'ile Provincial Park. The meeting was productive from the point of view of facilitating a frank exchange of views and mutual understanding, although there is still potential for fundamental disagreements regarding options under consideration for 2005.

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Effective immediately, I am appointing Bruce Pollard, Senior Avian Biologist, to be a one-window point of contact for the Peaceful Parks Coalition and their representatives on the subject of Cormorants. All staff should be instructed to refer any communication from this group to Bruce at (705) 755-1932.

This action is considered necessary in order to manage the amount of time required for staff to respond to inquires from this group, and to ensure that consistent messages are being delivered. I would ask that you inform all of your staff of this, and instruct them to continue to be professional in their interaction, but simply instruct the caller to contact Bruce, and then end the call. E-mail and written communications should be referred as well.

Thank you for your assistance

Kevin J. Wilson
Cc: Deputy Minister's Office
Minister's Office

When the Peaceful Parks objected to this 'communication's protocol', the ministry took punitive action and restricted all enquiries regardless of the subject to the office of the Deputy Minister.

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