



WILLMORE WILDERNESS CONSIDERED FOR WORLD HERITAGE DESIGNATION

By Chris Wearmouth, AWA Conservation Specialist

With its one million acres of untamed beauty, Willmore Wilderness Park is a place that epitomizes wild Alberta. From the eastern forests, rocky peaks rise to a height exceeding 3,050 metres. Below alpine slopes, rivers rush through meadows that are home to some of Alberta's iconic wilderness species – the grizzly, the wolf, and the caribou. And despite it having been established as a park in 1959, it has managed to escape the development and crowds that are seen to the south in the mountain landscapes of Banff and Jasper National Parks.

However, the park, situated just south of Grande Cache in the elbow of Alberta, has not escaped the attention of all. Over the years, there have been proposals to develop ski hills, to open the area to motorized recreation, even to build an east-west highway through the park. Amid mounting pressure from developers, the Alberta government is looking at involving the international community in hopes of ensuring continued protection for the Wilderness Park.

Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture (TPRC), along with Parks Canada and B.C. Parks, is considering a new nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status of Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks, one that could include the Willmore along with other protected areas that are adjacent to the current UNESCO designation.

"[World Heritage] designation helps engage the support that Willmore needs to ward off ongoing pressure for activities that are inconsistent with what Willmore is now," says Archie Landals, director of Parks Resource Management Coordination Branch for TPRC. Landals is quick to clarify that a new nomination is still just a concept in preliminary talks between governing bodies.

The United Nations Educational,



"I didn't truly understand what the word wilderness meant until I spent time last summer in the Willmore," says Wild Lands Advocate editor, Joyce Hildebrand.

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Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) oversees World Heritage designation, which is meant to identify and protect cultural and natural heritage that is of "outstanding universal value," not only to local people but to all of humanity. Several criteria are used, including works of human ingenuity and cultural development as well as natural phenomena of ecological significance and/or representative of the planet's development.

The current Mountain Parks site was originally listed to include the contiguous national parks of Jasper, Banff, Yoho, and Kootenay. This was later expanded to include the B.C. provincial parks of Mount Robson, Humber, and Mount Assiniboine. Because the World Heritage convention only allows for a 20 percent increase in area to an established site, an increase that was presumably used to add the provincial parks, any additional land government wishes to include will have to be added under a new nomination. "On its own, Willmore would probably

not qualify as a World Heritage Site," says Landals, "but the land base and resources could add significantly to the existing Rocky Mountain World Heritage Site."

As Landals points out, adding surrounding areas such as the Willmore would result in better representation of complete ecosystems, which could fall under the convention's criteria of protecting significant natural habitat for conservation. "It is a key piece in the puzzle of health and wealth because of its wildlife corridors and networks, critical watershed, and important biodiversity," says Christyann Olson, AWA's executive director. Presently the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks is listed under the values of exceptional natural beauty and of representing major stages in earth's history.

AWA supports the inclusion of Willmore Wilderness Park in any future nomination. While the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act* is a strong piece of legislation, there is still no management plan for the area. World Heritage

designation requires that a management plan be in place and clearly outlines the values on which management must be based. By having the clear value of ecological conservation put into a management plan, we can ensure that this wilderness area remains intact well into the future. “UNESCO World Heritage designation would be a fitting tribute and would mean that the Willmore, despite relentless pressures to reduce its protection levels, could be truly protected from development,” Olson says.

But not all who have heard about this recent development are pleased with the possibility. Brian Bildson, executive director of the Willmore Wilderness Foundation, says his group is concerned that designation may lead to undesirable consequences. “The overall opinion within the foundation is that there is limited opportunity for benefit and in our opinion quite a bit of opportunity for conflict,” Bildson says.

The Foundation, whose mission includes preservation of the area’s history and restoration of pack trails, fears that with international recognition will come international standards that may conflict with traditional activities such as trapping and hunting, presently allowed in the park. Bildson says his group is not afraid that TPRC will immediately remove such activities, but he believes that future pressure from the international community could

be applied through UNESCO. “As a local group that supports responsible consumptive use, we are concerned that at some point we may be held up to an international standard that does not reflect conservation values, just public opinion.” Should international opinion sway against trapping in the future, his members may be forced to give up an activity that they see as having both a long history in the area and the ability to be a management tool within the park.

Landals, however, feels the Foundation’s worries are not warranted. “I don’t see any management policies or practices changing as a result of a successful nomination,” he says, adding that World Heritage designation does not change provincial legislation or give governing power to UNESCO.

Phil Hofer is the site manager for Dinosaur Provincial Park, another of Alberta’s World Heritage sites. Hofer says that, like trapping in the Willmore, cattle grazing has been occurring in his area since before the park was conceived and since grazing is an activity that is compatible with park values, it will not be leaving anytime in the foreseeable future. “I think there is a certain level of pride, especially amongst people who have been in the area for quite a while,” he says of the local residents’ feelings for the park.

But Bildson will not find the words of government representatives

comforting. He says his group has a history of being kept out of the loop when it comes to the park. In April 2006, the Alberta and B.C. governments designated the Willmore-Kakwa Interprovincial Park. Bildson says he only found out about the designation at a celebratory party after the deal was done. But Landals asserts that proper consultation, including First Nations, as required by UNESCO, will take place if government decides to pursue the nomination.

The Foundation also questions whether designation may ultimately lead to a loss of wilderness values through an increase in visitors to the park. Present outfitters can only support a few dozen clients a year, he says, not the hundreds he suspects would come with World Heritage designation. Hofer admits that with designation, a certain percentage of visitors, mostly international, seek out Dinosaur Provincial Park because of its World Heritage status. While designation may bring more international visitors into Willmore looking to put a check mark beside one more name, it is unlikely to bring the throngs of people Bildson fears. They will more likely visit the staples of the Mountain Parks – the town sites of Banff and Jasper and nearby attractions within a stroll’s distance from a parking lot.

AWA believes that World Heritage designation has the potential to help strengthen protection of ecosystems within Willmore Wilderness Park, thus maintaining its untamed nature and rich heritage. As other parts of Alberta are bridled by development, it is important to fully protect the last vestiges of our wild heritage. “Without the highest incentive for keeping the wilderness, there is always a risk that it will not remain wild, that development will be allowed, that its wild and free nature will be destroyed,” says Olson.

While TPRC gathers information in preparation for public consultation, the discussion continues. Visit [www. AlbertaWilderness.ca](http://www.AlbertaWilderness.ca) to learn more about Willmore Wilderness Park and AWA’s vision for it. The Willmore Wilderness Foundation can be found on the web at www.willmorewilderness.com. To learn more about UNESCO World Heritage designation, visit whc.unesco.org.



Willmore Wilderness Park boasts a rich history of outfitters, hunters and trappers, activities the Government of Alberta promises will continue should they pursue World Heritage status for the area. R.V. RASMUSSEN – RAYSWEB.NET