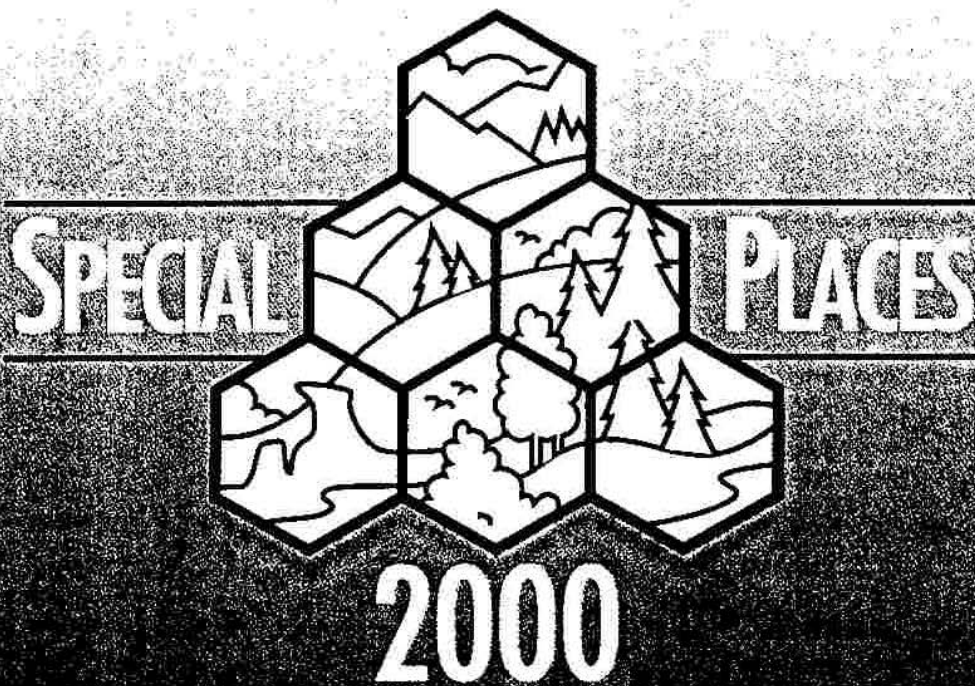

SPECIAL PLACES 2000:

Alberta's Natural Heritage

Report of
The Advisory Committee



November 15, 1993

THE STRATEGY

The Special Places 2000 draft document recognized that, in addition to a systematic approach to the selection of new protected areas, a number of parallel initiatives were required. The document recognized the need for immediate action if the network was to be completed by the year 2000. The need to examine the role of existing sites was acknowledged. The draft recognized the need for new and creative partnerships. The need for an effective, streamlined process for the evaluation and designation of new sites was recognized. The document stressed the need to involve the public in all stages of this process.

Immediate Action

The Special Places 2000 draft document indicated that there is a sense of urgency in getting on with the task of completing a comprehensive network of protected areas and identified a number of opportunities where immediate action could be taken towards fulfilling the vision of completing the protected areas network. Immediate action should be taken to designate Natural Areas under reservation. A number of candidate Special Areas have already received approval through the integrated resource planning process. There should be few impediments to the establishment of these sites. Similarly, a number of areas have been held under reservation for ecological reserve and provincial park purposes. Action could be taken on these sites.

Public Response

In order to achieve completion of a comprehensive network of protected areas by the year 2000, many people expressed the need for early action. The urgency of getting on with the task was a common theme of most responses. These people expressed the concern that ongoing land use decisions and industrial activities are rapidly impacting the few remaining natural landscapes in the province. Many people stressed that the expedient designation of new sites is imperative if the vision is to be achieved. Local residents identified specific sites with which they are personally familiar. They are especially concerned that these sites they cherish be given priority attention. A frequently occurring comment was that timetables for the establishment of new sites should be set so all Albertans could celebrate progress towards achieving goals. Many people felt that a priority should be the establishment of at least one large Special Place in each of Alberta's natural regions. It was frequently pointed out that the best remaining large sites have been identified for a number of years. Many of these sites in fact

have been proposed for designation by both government and non-government organizations.

Members of the public, particularly those who belonged to environmental organizations, suggested that areas which have already been identified for protection through a public consultation and integrated planning process should proceed to be legislatively designated to ensure long-term legal protection.

"We are rapidly losing ecologically important areas and not much time is left."

"I would urge you and your government to proceed with legislation aimed at protecting and preserving all six natural regions and nineteen subregions."

Advisory Committee Recommendations

16. **Timelines for designation of sites should be announced to signal the government's commitment towards achieving the vision of Special Places 2000.**
17. **Immediate action should be taken to ensure that the Special Places network is 75% complete by the end of 1996 and 85% complete by the end of 1997. Currently, about one-half of the Special Places 2000 goals and targets are included in existing protected areas. The committee believes that perhaps 3% to 5% of Alberta may be required as new Special Places to complete the network before the year 2000.**
18. **The backlog of sites that have already received public support through integrated planning and other processes such as Natural Areas under reservation should be designated by the end of 1994.**
19. **Areas already managed as wildlands, including Kakwa, Bighorn and Upper Elbow-Sheep, should be formally designated by the end of 1994.**
20. **A large Special Place should be established in each of the five Natural Regions that presently have inadequate representation within existing protected areas. These regions are Parkland, Foothills, Canadian Shield, Grassland and the Boreal Forest. Within the sixth Natural Region (Rocky Mountain region) protection efforts should focus on the Montane Subregion. These should be a priority of the implementation process.**

21. **The largest remaining contiguous natural landscapes within each of the Natural Subregions which have the fewest options available should be identified by the end of 1994. Those which help to fill gaps in the system of protected areas should be designated within the following two-year period.**

Existing Sites

The Special Places 2000 draft document outlined the benefits of adding lands to existing protected areas, especially where this increased their environmental diversity and enhanced their long-term integrity. The cost-effectiveness of enhancing opportunities for heritage appreciation and outdoor recreation where existing staff and facilities already exist was stated. It was also suggested that some lands of low ecological significance might be exchanged for lands of greater significance.

Public Response

The respondents accepted the environmental and economic advantages of adding lands to existing protected areas. There was support for land exchanges that would benefit Special Places.

"The report identifies the expansion of current sites. I support this approach. Public land should be utilized as much as possible to minimize expense."

Advisory Committee Recommendations

22. **Existing protected areas should be evaluated and, where the opportunity exists to increase the contribution they make to achieving Special Places 2000 targets through the addition of adjacent land, should be undertaken by the end of 1994.**
23. **Although the general philosophy for the establishment of protected areas should be "in perpetuity", there must be consideration for disestablishment if a site is no longer serving a protected area function. Any areas "disestablished" could be considered for exchange for lands which would contribute to the Special Places 2000 program.**

Partnerships

The draft Special Places 2000 document indicated that the comprehensive network of protected areas needed to be forged through the cooperation and efforts of all levels of government, non-government organizations, resource based industries, individual landowners and the public at large. It was suggested that creative partnerships would be explored. Partnerships with existing public and government committees, with public living near Special Places, and between all levels of government would be examined. Partnerships with conservation organizations and foundations such as the Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation and the Nature Conservancy of Canada would be strengthened. Partnerships with industry would also be built.

The implementation of Special Places 2000 was suggested as an opportunity to create harmony among various institutional sectors of Alberta society and as an important opportunity to harmonize economic development with environmental protection. All Albertans were invited to share in the partnerships of Special Places 2000.

Public Response

The public response to the concept of partnerships was extremely positive. It was felt that the program could be strengthened through partnerships - the variety of which seemed to be limitless. Other levels of government, particularly municipal, along with the regional planning commissions, were stressed as being essential partners for the successful implementation of Special Places 2000. This is particularly important in the settled area of the province. Some respondents pointed out the importance of Special Places in and adjacent to cities for environmental education purposes.

"It is important that local governments, service clubs, youth groups, special interest organizations and individuals have an opportunity to collaborate with the provincial government... and in implementing and caring for the facilities..."

Environmental groups and individuals repeatedly offered to assist in data collection and to act as volunteer stewards. The forest industry similarly pointed out that they are collecting valuable ecological information that would assist in selecting sites to fill gaps in the Special Places network. Several forest companies offered to become stewards of Special Places.

The oil and gas industry pointed out several instances where their assistance has contributed to the success of existing Special Places. They expressed a desire to be a part of the ongoing process.

"I would be very interested to help in any way I could with your ambitious plan."

"All Albertans - industry, government, individuals and organizations - should be invited to participate and assist. This would ease the burden on government as well as make us all directly part of the plan and actively responsible for Alberta's future."

The agricultural community repeatedly stated that they did not wish to be left out of the Special Places 2000 initiative, especially decision-making processes. Many rural residents suggested that, since they live in close proximity to Special Places, that they can play an important stewardship role. The Natural Areas volunteer stewardship program was frequently mentioned as a successful venture that should be extended to other Special Places.

Many participants thought that private lands were an important part of the program and that there should be some formal way in which they would be included. Compensation for landowners was a consideration for some.

The public response to the concept of participatory cooperation was discussed extensively at the public open houses and the provincial focus group interviews. People from various sectors expressed an interest in participating in a process where mutually desirable solutions could be reached.

Many people stressed the importance of coordinating the Special Places 2000 program with other initiatives such as the Prairie Conservation Action Plan and Fish and Wildlife's Landowner Habitat Program. The public want to see the coordination of all conservation efforts at the local, regional, provincial, interprovincial and federal levels. There was a concern expressed that existing government subsidies support non-conservation practices. Government support for agriculture and forestry practices that negatively impact wildlife habitat was a common concern. This was the central theme of much of the focus group discussions in the south.

"The important role that many land owners and lessees play in protecting Special Places is acknowledged. In order to facilitate the protection of Special Places, it is important that they be involved in the planning and management processes."

"Protection of conservation values on some private land will be essential to successful delivery of Special Places 2000 in the Grassland and Parkland regions."

"The Natural Areas volunteer steward program is a very cost-effective way to increase the quality of management of Natural Areas while minimizing government expenditures."

Advisory Committee Recommendations

24. **Early win-win opportunities should be identified with grazing lessees and other tenure holders, such as petroleum and forestry companies where active partnerships will facilitate the designation and management of new Special Places.**
25. **Technical assistance should be made available to organizations and community groups to help them become involved in the Special Places 2000 initiative.**
26. **There should be direct public involvement in the long-term management of designated sites. Programs like the Natural Areas Volunteer Steward Program should be expanded to include other designated areas and to include other aspects of public involvement (i.e., legal tenure opportunities, local economic development opportunities).**
27. **Local government and planning authorities should be encouraged to participate in the Special Places initiatives through municipal planning, zoning and management activities.**
28. **Private landholders should be provided the opportunity, at their discretion, to include their lands in the selection and designation of Special Places.**

Implementation Process

The Special Places 2000 draft did not provide much direction for an implementation process for the program but rather invited the public's suggestions in this regard.

The Special Places 2000 draft suggested that the provincial government should play a role in the coordination of the program and that this should be done in an interdepartmental manner. It was also suggested that the lead role be played by the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation. Following government reorganization elements of this former department are now in Environmental Protection along with Economic Development and Tourism.

The draft document also suggested an expanded role for the existing Advisory Committee on Wilderness Areas and Ecological Reserves.

Public Response

Implementation processes and public input were mentioned by almost every respondent. Responses varied from individuals volunteering to sit on a committee to the need for an expert panel to receive recommendations from both government and the public.

By far, the most commonly made comment was that the process should be open to the public, both locally and provincially. It was repeatedly stressed that all Albertans must have a voice and share in decisions regarding the implementation of Special Places 2000.

The following points summarize and capture the essence of comments made by the public:

- community based
- input from local residents
- input from local and provincial organizations
- local (municipal) government involvement
- involve any interested citizens
- land owners and tenure holders must be involved
- public advised of potential sites and reasons for selection
- final selection be made by qualified personnel
- open public process
- independent body outside of government and politics
- blue ribbon panel of experts to receive recommendations from government and public
- provincial level advisory committee
- utilize expertise of professionals, academics
- native involvement
- civil service experts to establish the framework

Many respondents suggested there was need to ensure potential Special Places were not impacted by industrial activities prior to their consideration for designation. A number of respondents felt a moratorium should be placed on all sites; others suggested that sites should be placed under reservation. Several responses from industry spoke of the need to fast track decision-making processes so that candidate sites that are of immediate interest to industry can be dealt with expediently and to everyone's satisfaction.

Advisory Committee Recommendations

29. **The implementation process should provide the opportunity for regional round table forums to refine site selection criteria on a regional basis and to recommend specific sites for designation under different classes of protected areas. This process will help weigh protected areas values versus other uses. These regional round tables should report to a provincial level implementation committee.**
30. **A coordinated, efficient process for the evaluation and designation of sites including local public input should be implemented. Candidate sites should be advertised and a suitable length of time for public review and commentary should be provided prior to designation.**
31. **Site selection should consider existing resource commitments and future potentials. For example, where two alternative sites of equivalent ecological values are being considered for designation, the site with the lower subsurface potential for oil and gas and other minerals should be favoured.**
32. **A review of government policies and initiatives that are both supportive of and contrary to the goals of Special Places 2000 should be undertaken, with a view to eliminating inconsistencies.**
33. **The government should ensure consistency and cooperation between the Special Places 2000 program and other conservation strategies and policies such as for wetlands, old-growth forests and wildlife protection which are currently being developed.**
34. **An annual report should be made available to the public. This report should highlight the accomplishments of the past year, including progress toward achieving the targets of Special Places 2000. The report should also outline priority sites for consideration and a plan of action for the coming year.**
35. **The Minister of Environmental Protection should play the lead role in implementation of Special Places 2000 and should ensure that it is a priority of his department and that resources are reallocated to accomplish the vision of completing the network of Special Places by the year 2000.**

To accomplish these, it is further recommended that:

36. **The existing Advisory Committee on Wilderness Areas and Ecological Reserves should be replaced by the Special Places 2000 Task Force. This provincial level committee should ensure continuing progress and the vision of completing the Special Places network before the year 2000 is achieved. The mandate of this committee should be:**
 1. To establish and direct Special Places 2000 Regional Round Tables that will systematically identify, evaluate and nominate candidate Special Places on a natural region and subregion basis.
 2. To recommend to government the establishment of Special Places and changes to existing Special Places.
 3. To recommend policies and action required to fulfil the vision of Special Places 2000.
 4. To produce an annual report on achieving the goals and targets of Special Places 2000.
 5. To annually publish an updated map of Special Places study areas capable of filling gaps in the network and an accompanying list of study areas under consideration for the following year.

This senior level committee should be appointed by the Minister and should include representation as follows:

1. Chairman, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, who should report directly to the Minister of Environmental Protection.
2. The Assistant Deputy Ministers of Parks Services, Land and Forest Services, Fish and Wildlife Services of Alberta Environmental Protection and one Assistant Deputy Minister from each of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Energy, Economic Development and Tourism and Historical Resources.
3. Secretary, Director of Management Support Division, Parks Services.
4. Public members should include one representative each from conservation organizations, recreation organizations, forest, ranching, tourism and oil and gas industries. These members will be nominated by their respective organizations for consideration by the Minister. Four additional public members with expertise in protected areas systems and ecological matters should be selected to provide scientific support to the committee.

To the extent possible, the public members should come from different parts of the province. At least two of the public members from the Special Places 2000 Task Force should be members of each of the regional implementation round tables.
5. The committee should meet at least twice per year. Recommendations for the establishment of new Special Places should be forwarded within 30 days of their meeting to the Minister of Environmental Protection for consideration by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

The Management Support Division, Parks Services, should serve as Secretariat to the committee to provide the following:

- 1. Administrative, logistical and facilitation support.**
- 2. Coordination of required research and data compilation.**
- 3. Drafting of background papers, policies, public communications and annual reports.**
- 4. Compilation of inputs from the Special Places Regional Round Tables and preparation of required Orders in Council.**

The Special Places 2000 Task Force should be disbanded in the year 2000 or such earlier date as Alberta's system of Special Places is complete.

Special Places 2000 Regional Round Tables should carry out the work necessary to ensure implementation of Special Places 2000. More specifically, the round tables should carry out the following tasks:

- 1. The systematic identification and evaluation of candidate Special Places.**
- 2. The design and conduct of local and regional public consultative processes for specific sites.**
- 3. The identification of supportive land uses, private stewardship and other partnerships that will support specific Special Places.**
- 4. The recommendation of the boundaries and categories for the establishment of sites.**
- 5. The ongoing integration of Special Places into surrounding landscapes and planning initiatives.**

Membership on the regional round tables should be sensitive to local and regional needs and should include both government and non-government representatives. Government members and the chairman of each round table should be appointed by the Special Places 2000 Task Force and should include such staff and resources as required to carry on the work of the round tables. Non-government members on each round table should include two representatives from and be appointed by the Special Places 2000 Task Force to provide a link and liaison between the two levels. Additional local and regional members from the forest industry, agricultural industry, tourism industry, Aboriginal or conservation groups should be added so as to not duplicate representation from the Special Places 2000 Task Force. Local requirements should be determined by each regional round table.

The regional round tables should be accountable for the timely evaluation and recommendation of candidate Special Places to ensure the vision is achieved.

Alberta's Special Places 2000 network will not be complete for as much as seven years.

37. **The following interim procedure is recommended to ensure that:**

1. candidate Special Places do not lose their ecological integrity prior to their nomination being properly assessed; and
2. the assessment process does not unreasonably delay tenure holders or other economic uses of the land.

As a basis for this, a map should be used to signal to the public, to industry, and to all government departments, the full extent of areas with high potential for Special Places. This map should have application to all planning processes, including for such diverse activities as industrial use, integrated resource planning and agricultural development.

'Special Study Status' should be afforded any site identified on this map for which resource exploitation such as logging, mining, or oil and gas activity is anticipated in the near future. Other proposed changes in land use should also trigger 'Special Study Status' consideration. Industry should be requested to voluntarily refrain from land use activities in sites placed in 'Special Study Status' for a period of twelve months.

Sites placed in 'Special Study Status' should be reviewed during this twelve month period as the Minister may decide in consultation with affected parties. The Minister, after consultation with affected parties, should determine whether any or all land use activities should be put on hold during the period of 'Special Study Status'. The regional round tables should carry out necessary studies and evaluations to determine the most appropriate areas for designation as Special Places. Those portions of the study area not required to complete the Special Places network should be deleted from subsequent issues of the map.

Prior to the initial meeting of the Special Places 2000 Task Force, Alberta Environmental Protection, Parks Services, should prepare such maps as are required to delineate areas of high potential for Special Places. These maps should include areas identified in existing Environmentally Significant Areas studies along with sites of known high potential. Most of the high potential sites are known to the public, industry and non-government organizations. These high potential sites along with a number of smaller sites of local significance were suggested for designation as Special Places during the Special Places 2000 public consultation process.

The Special Places 2000 Task Force should annually release updated versions of these maps based on the completion of Environmentally Significant Areas studies (recommendation #5). Local and regional sites identified by the Special Places 2000 Regional Round Tables should be included in future editions of these maps.

The approximate boundaries depicted on these maps will serve as the best early signal of where some areas of high potential for Special Places are generally located and will serve as a basis for further refinement.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The priority of Special Places 2000 should be the protection goal - to include within the network of Special Places, the full range of natural landscapes, environmental diversity and special natural features of Alberta.
2. To the extent that they are compatible with the protection goal, Special Places should achieve the three parallel goals of heritage appreciation, outdoor recreation and tourism.
3. The hierarchy of natural regions and natural history themes and associated targets as provided in *Natural Regions and Natural History Themes: Targets for Alberta* should be adopted as the scientific base for Alberta's network of Special Places.
4. Implementation of the Special Places 2000 program should be based on a balance of scientifically sound information combined with public acceptance of specific sites.
5. Environmentally significant areas studies (ESAs) and similar research, along with local interest, should be the basis for identifying potential new Special Places. Priority should be given to completing ESAs based on opportunity and important gaps in the network. The Foothills region should be completed in 1994 followed by completion of the Parkland and Grassland regions in 1995. The ESAs for the Boreal Forest should be completed in 1996 and the remainder of the province in 1997.
6. To ensure that there is a common information base that becomes a "living" data management system both for site selection and site evaluation and for coordination between jurisdictions, a Conservation Data Centre for Alberta should be implemented by means of reallocating internal government resources and in cooperation with the Nature Conservancy of Canada and other partners.
7. A spectrum of categories for Special Places should be adopted including Ecological Reserves, Wilderness Areas, Wildlands, Provincial Parks, and Natural Areas. The Special Places 2000 policy should outline the management intention of each category of Special Places 2000 and provide a list of permitted and restricted activities in each category consistent with the definitions and table provided in the table on the following page.
8. The Provincial Park Act, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act and the Willmore Wilderness Parks Act can form the basis for implementation of the Special Places 2000 initiatives in the short-term. Wildlands should be designated under the Provincial Parks Act as an interim measure.
9. Provincial Parks, Natural Areas, and Provincial Recreation Areas should be evaluated relative to the Special Places category definitions and redesignated where warranted. Alberta's wildlife and bird sanctuaries and historic sites should be evaluated in the context of the Special Places 2000 policy and included where they are consistent with the definition of Special Places.
10. Consideration should be given to consolidating the Provincial Parks Act, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act and the Willmore Wilderness Park Act under one piece of legislation, with clear definitions and the management intent for the five categories of Special Places. Based on the public

consultation of the Special Places 2000 initiative, this should be an administrative consolidation only and not diminish the protection currently afforded by this legislation. This act should be called the SPECIAL PLACES ACT under the authority of the Minister of Alberta Environmental Protection.

Activity	Selected Activities in Special Place Subject to Management Guidelines					Activities in Other Lands
	Ecological Reserves	Wilderness Areas	Wildlands	Provincial Parks	Natural Areas	Recreation Areas / Resorts
Foot access	1	1	1	1	1	1
Primitive camping	3	1	1	2	2	1
Fishing	2	3	1	1	1	1
Hunting	2	3	1	3	1	1
Livestock grazing	2	3	2	2	2	1
Horse use	3	3	2	2	2	1
Bicycling	3	3	2	1	1	1
Auto camping	3	3	3	1	3	1
Power boats	3	3	3	2	2	1
Off-highway vehicles	3	3	3*	3	3	1
Snowmobiles	3	3	3*	3	3	1
Oil and gas developments	3	3	3	2	2	1
Resorts/golf courses	3	3	3	3	3	1
Cultivation	3	3	3	3	3	2
Commercial logging	3	3	3	3	3	2
Surface mining	3	3	3	3	3	2
Road construction	3	3	3	2	3	1

1 - regularly permitted
2 - occasionally permitted
3 - normally prohibited
3* - Off-highway vehicles may be accommodated on designated routes in a few potential Wildlands such as the Southcastle where an access management plan was negotiated between various public interests prior to the endorsement of the Special Places policy.

11. Legislation should be introduced to facilitate private landowners who wish to voluntarily become more active partners in conservation. For example, conservation easements should be considered. Tools including economic incentives to maintain or return land to its natural condition should be investigated.
12. Various categories of Special Places should be used in combination to help integrate Special Places into the management of the surrounding landscape.
13. Carefully managed corridors should link Special Places, where necessary, to ensure they do not become ecologically isolated islands.
14. Alberta participation in the Canadian Heritage Rivers program would complement the Special Places 2000 initiative. Rivers in each of the six natural regions should be

included in the system by the year 2000 and consideration should be given to the Clearwater River as being Alberta's first heritage river outside the national parks.

15. Special Places is closely linked to other initiatives, including those for wetlands, old growth forests, special species, heritage rivers, the Prairie Conservation Action Plan and the Forest Conservation Strategy. Special Places should help provide a context and direction for these initiatives and, where appropriate, these other initiatives should contribute to Special Places 2000 by identifying candidate sites.
16. Timelines for designation of sites should be announced to signal the government's commitment towards achieving the vision of Special Places 2000.
17. Immediate action should be taken to ensure that the Special Places network is 75% complete by the end of 1996 and 85% complete by the end of 1997. Currently, about one-half of the Special Places 2000 goals and targets are included in existing protected areas. The committee believes that perhaps 3% to 5% of Alberta may be required as new Special Places to complete the network before the year 2000.
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