

Whose Vision?

In this season of hope, I'm concerned. I fear the dismantling of Alberta's public lands and provincial parks regime is picking up steam. I say this despite Minister Nixon's late December news release designed to reassure Albertans that a version of the status quo they have fought for since March will be retained. Perhaps my family lineage runs through Missouri - the "Show Me" state. I need more than a news release on the eve of Christmas to convince me of a genuine change of heart.

Alberta's current provincial government hasn't looked kindly on the provincial parks system since it was elected in 2019. The 2019 budget made it clear the government thought too many tax dollars were being spent on parks. It pegged operating spending for the 2021-22 fiscal year at \$64 million – 26 percent below what was spent in 2018-19. And then there was the decision to remove 164 sites from the provincial parks system (and, make no mistake here, these were the Minister's words - they weren't concocted by malicious conservation organizations).

This battering shifted to a new target midway through 2020 – the protection public lands outside of the parks system enjoyed from open-pit coal mining along the Eastern Slopes. Revoking the 1976 Coal Policy stripped that protection away. Only coal companies and the Coal Association of Canada were consulted about this change.

In late November, the government simultaneously made both the parks system and public lands more generally its targets. It did this through "Alberta's Crown Land Vision" and an accompanying survey about outdoor recreation (which AWA hopes you will complete before January 15, 2021). The focus in this editorial is on the threat I see in the government's *vision*; a critique of the survey comes a few articles later.

The government's vision is long on pretty pictures and short on convincing argument. You're right...as we've come to expect from the UCP we're told repeatedly that the vision reflects "common sense." (see Lorne Fitch's article for a common sense critique of common sense) In the minds of the Kenney cabinet, the system for managing public lands is too complicated, too confusing. Their vision promises to make the system "simpler and more efficient." Apparently, we need this vision because Albertans "asked us to untangle the many classification, rules and regulations so they're easier to understand." Although the Minister insists that Albertans believe this, I cannot recall any consultation whatsoever with citizens on this subject.

During the UCP's November townhall on parks Minister Nixon telegraphed his intent to act on this theme. Then he seem troubled by the fact we have one piece of legislation dealing with public lands generally (*Public Lands Act*) and another law that deals with a small subset of public lands (*Provincial Parks Act*). It's

hard for me to believe that he and his political staff really find this complicated and confusing. It's no different than the situation in a Ministry like Health. There, the Health Minister is responsible for 53 different laws, laws dealing with dozens of different dimensions of health. And, it's no different than the situation in six other provinces governed by conservative or centre-right political parties: Ontario, Québec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. They are able to navigate their waters with both a Parks Act and a Public Lands Act. So too was Ralph Klein's government.

What the Minister didn't say during his townhall or in his visionary document is that the subjects governments are responsible for such as health and public lands are complicated. Complicated, multi-dimensional subjects demand exactly what the Minister seems to object to – multiple laws enabling governments to make distinctions and prescribe different practices for different purposes.

This brings me to the most important reason I fear what the Minister is going to present to Albertans in 2021. His statements don't reflect as well as they might the "prime directive" of Alberta's *Provincial Parks Act*. During his townhall he said "parks, at the end of the day, is about creating recreation opportunities within the department but not necessarily the number one way to do conservation of large landscapes..." I hope he'll accept a friendly amendment to that position – a careful reading of the *Provincial Parks Act* suggests a very different ordering of priorities. The first purpose listed in the Act is "the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage;" the second purpose is "the conservation and management of flora and fauna;" the third is "the preservation of specified areas, landscapes and natural features and objects in them..." Recreation is only mentioned as part of the fourth purpose. Our parks legislation prioritizes much more than recreation opportunities.

This ranking of the purposes of parks is well-accepted throughout Canada. For example, in Conservative Ontario the *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act* states its purpose as: "to permanently protect a system of provincial parks and conservation reserves that includes ecosystems that are representative of all of Ontario's natural regions, protects provincially significant elements of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage, maintains biodiversity and provides opportunities for compatible, ecologically sustainable recreation."

I worry then that this year the ghost of Christmas future is going to warn us of the death of a public lands and provincial parks regime that makes vital distinctions between how Alberta's public lands should be managed.

Be well and may your holidays be filled with joy and fellowship – from a distance.

- Ian Urquhart, Editor