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## Dispute over Caribou Mountains Warns of Deeper Problems in Park System

By David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist

A dispute over the status of the remote northern Caribou Mountains Wildland Park may be a harbinger of things to come in other protected areas of Alberta, particularly if government continues to ignore Albertans' desires and expectations to see them managed for protection in perpetuity.

The local advisory committee (Caribou Mountains Wildland Park Planning Advisory Committee, or PAC), which has been charged with the task of creating a management plan for Alberta's largest provincial Wildland Park, recently requested that the park status be revoked. In a letter dated March 29, 2006 to Community Development Minister Denis Ducharme, committee member Jerry Chomiak also asked that legislation be enacted to allow the committee to "co-manage" the park, effectively putting it on equal footing with the province in decision making for the Wildland Park.

Minister Ducharme responded quickly in denying these unprecedented requests. In a letter to Chomiak, he stated clearly that demoting the park status is not an option and that allowing the committee to be a co-manager of the park will not be considered.

Also of concern are other items on the committee's list of demands, including increased off-highway vehicle (OHV) access, increased tourism development, bison hunting, and wildlife baiting. The Committee even suggested that the park's remoteness alone is enough to regulate activity in the park. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes these activities – particularly increased OHV access into woodland caribou habitat – are inappropriate in a Wildland Park and constitute threats to the park's ecosystem integrity.

At 5,910 km<sup>2</sup>, the boreal Caribou Mountains Wildland Park, adjacent to the western border of Wood Buffalo National Park, is the largest provincial Wildland Park. Established in 2001, it is a vast, remote park that receives relatively few human visitors and little attention. The area protects provincial Environmentally Significant Areas that include sensitive wetlands, unique permafrost features, and rich breeding bird habitat. It is a core refugium for woodland caribou and wood bison, both of which are endangered species. This intriguing mélange of distinctly northern characteristics made the park a prime choice for Wildland Park status.

AWA brought the issue of PAC's demands to the public's attention in April, pointing out that the Committee had lost sight of its conservation mandate and had become dysfunctional. The Committee was commissioned by the Alberta government to make management recommendations but turned that privilege into a lobby effort.

"This shows what can happen when you place all the power in the hands of special interests within one local community," says AWA Director Cliff Wallis. "These wildlands belong to all Albertans. Local committees are entrusted with the responsibility to act on behalf of all Albertans, not just their local or personal interest."

AWA believes the Committee should have more diverse representation or be disbanded. Ducharme turned down AWA's request for provincial environmental group representation on the PAC, but said AWA "will have ample opportunity to provide input into the management plan for the Caribou Mountains."





Although Chomiak presented the letter on behalf of the entire Caribou Mountains Wildland Park Management Plan Advisory Committee, at least one member of the PAC, Wood Buffalo National Park, denied that the letter reflected their position and interests in the management of the area. "Wood Buffalo National Park is and remains committed to the current designation and process," says their letter to Community Development.

Chomiak's letter also claimed that the Committee was only advised at the September 2005 meeting that the park had been declared a Wildland Park: "The current designation as a Park under the Provincial Parks Act does not have the support of the Committee, and was never recommended, discussed or agreed upon by this Committee."

However, minutes from the first PAC meeting in October 2002 record Committee Chair Ken Zurfluh of Alberta Community Development describing in detail the status of the Wildland Park and its general management goals and objectives, including reference to the legislative framework that established the park. The PAC's Terms of Reference do not include an objective to reconsider park status. The PAC was established because of the creation of the Wildland Park, and members of the PAC presumably understood the purpose of the committee.

References were again made to the Wildland Park status in subsequent meetings, including one in which Dave Brown of Alberta Lands and Forests Service introduced a copy of the 1994 Draft Resource Management Plan, explaining that the draft plan provided management guidelines that had been used to manage the area prior to its designation as a Wildland Park.

Why is a local advisory committee grossly abdicating its responsibilities to the rest of the Alberta public? Why was the process so obscure that the public did not become aware of this abdication over four years of a process that ACD says should take only one or two years to complete?

### **Bigger Problems: No Direction, No Plans**

This flare-up in Caribou Mountains Wildland Park may be a warning sign of what could happen in other protected areas of Alberta if the government continues to off-load its management responsibilities to local committees, does not commit the appropriate financial resources and technical expertise to complete management plans, and fails to take charge of the process to see that it is on track, with the original goals and principles of parks' designations intact.

While the newly appointed Ducharme took a firm and rapid stand on the park status issue, the question is why would such demands even come to the fore? The problem may lie in the process for creating and managing parks. Strong legislation to support these processes is absent; management plans, which give long-term guidance to achieve the original goals of a park, are given low priority; and top-down leadership is frequently left to atrophy.

We need substantive legal protection in our parks, as well as a commitment (including financial) to complete the process, with professionally prepared, ecosystem-based draft management plans being presented to the local and regional public for input and fine-tuning. Otherwise a park's ecological sustainability – and even its very existence – may continue to be subject to ministerial whim or to lobbying by local special interest groups, thereby creating conflict and threats to a park's ecological integrity for years to come.

Caribou Mountains Wildland Park is a clear example that it is not enough to simply declare an area a park. Legal protection and a long-term management plan must quickly be put in place, with ecosystem, wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and sustainable park use as ultimate goals. The door must be closed for local special interest groups and lobbyists to claim parochial "squatter's rights" to public land.





In many cases, the government has declared an area a park with limited or no legislation to support it and indefinite plans to manage it. "This lack of management plans for Alberta's parks is a hole in the system," says AWA Past-President Cliff Wallis. "Management plans play a huge role in representing the public's interest. Without them, the sustainability of parks as representative pieces of natural Alberta for future generations is seriously at risk."

According to Community Development's Parks and Protected Areas Division, only 53 of 521 Alberta parks have management plans. Of those, "some are not really management plans," says the department's Archie Landals, who has been dedicated to parks and protection for many years. "Some are volunteer-written and many are becoming very dated. This type of input is not to be diminished; however, on its own, it often provides insufficient direction for today's management requirements."

Community Development recognizes parks management plans as valuable conservation tools that have an important role in public consultation and that provide long-term vision as well as daily guidance. Maintaining ecological integrity is the primary consideration. But Landals notes that with a budget of only \$30 million for parks, the government must prioritize which parks will get management plans and can only do about two per year.

We have repeatedly seen well-researched and professionally prepared draft management plans get shelved (e.g., Willmore, Caribou Mountains, Little Smoky) before they ever have a chance to fill their roles as guiding documents. A recent example is that of Willmore Wilderness Park, where the government proceeded with a fire management plan without the benefit of a management plan in place. Government may fear that inviting public input will bring a plethora of special interests, each lobbying for its own desires, resulting in an unmanageable cacophony of demands, many of which can be contrary or bear little resemblance to conservation objectives.

"It is time for Alberta to put some of those dollars received from environmentally damaging activities – our forestry and oil and gas rents – back into managing and creating parks, performing wildlife research, and ensuring adequate enforcement resources," says Cliff Wallis. "We need to increase, not drop these budgets, which is effectively what is happening with the parks' budgets not increasing at a rate commensurate with resource revenues. When the government committed to establishing parks under the Special Places process, it committed to creating management plans within five years. They have not followed up on that commitment and our parks' conservation plans remain vulnerable."

### Top Down, Bottom Up

Well-crafted and professionally prepared draft management plans can function as productive starting points with common ground for both bottom-up (local input) and top-down (provincial government) management tools. The general public's concerns fall into both categories.

The top-down approach, which should be based on scientific and public values, provides needed direction, professional research, and a standard that can ensure that overarching public and ecological goals are maintained throughout the process. The bottom-up approach ensures that important general public and local interests are included in the process. The broad public interest needs to be represented at both levels. In the case of the Caribou Mountains, the broad public interest failed to be adequately represented, but local concerns of trappers and outfitters to be able to continue with their livelihoods was included.

Top-down planning may fail because it ignores local (or broader public) interests and bottom-up planning, if locally confined, often fails to identify clear-cut common positions. UNESCO stresses the importance of





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using both approaches in management processes. It is a tricky balance, requiring commitment from all levels to achieve the fundamental conservation and sustainability objectives of parks.

In the case of Caribou Mountains, a comprehensive draft management plan for the park was prepared in 1994 by Alberta Environmental Protection and appears to have been largely overlooked by the PAC. The draft plan could have provided a useful basis for the committee in creating a valuable inclusive plan. Instead, the process was left to be driven by the local Committee, which made it vulnerable to lobbying by local special interests and resulted in the PAC losing sight of its responsibilities and mandate, and culminating in the request to revoke the park's Wildland Park status.

All Albertans must be engaged in the future of our parks whether they have been to them, or live near them, or not. Committees are useful for ensuring that important local input is fed into the process; however, broad public concerns and values must be central in this process.

"Similar committees work successfully in other areas of Alberta," says Cliff Wallis, "such as Hay-Zama, Wainwright Dunes, and Milk River, where a diversity of interests and skills are brought to the table. A committee without such representation is doomed to failure."

Albertans care about their parks and want to know what's happening in them. They want to be assured that the government is ensuring that the ideals of its parks are kept intact; however, if the government's approach to the management of places like Caribou Mountains Wildland Park, Willmore Wilderness Park, and Kakwa Wildland Park is any indication of its attitude toward our parks, Albertans should be concerned.

