



## THE ILLUSION OF INTEGRITY

By Jeff Gailus



*Although overpasses prevent wildlife deaths, vehicle collisions, and provide some semblance of connectivity across the Trans-Canada Highway, they are also potent symbols of our unwillingness to change the way we do business in our national parks.*

PHOTO: J. GAILUS

*“If there is a more exquisite pleasure than driving into Banff, it must be watching it recede in one’s rear-view mirror... Mammon has set up stall all the way from Bow River almost to the foot of Mount Rundle, a hundred gift shops dispensing life’s identical duty-free necessities obtainable at any international airport: cashmere, crystal, Cartier, Caleche.”*

Michael Watkins,  
*The Sunday Times*, 30 April 1995.

Last summer, my co-instructor and I dragged six intrepid university students through the southern Canadian Rockies to study conservation biology and community-based conservation in the real world. They couldn’t have been more surprised at what they saw.

It was the second half of a two-month university field course for the Wild Rockies Field Institute, located in Missoula, Montana. When I joined the students in Waterton, they had already spent a month in and around Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, learning about how these American gems are managed, and experiencing, firsthand, the legacy of integrity: both of these parks are source areas for recovering grizzly bear populations that are literally bursting at the seams.

We spent a week exploring Waterton Lakes National Park and the Castle Wilderness in southwest Alberta, and then turned our 15-passenger van north towards the Bow Valley. None of the students had ever been to Banff, but they had certainly heard of it and were keen to experience it. The sense of anticipation was palpable as we left Canmore.

But as we passed the park gates and drove into Banff Townsite to pick-up our

backcountry permits, the students were utterly shocked at what they found in Canada’s first and most famous national park.

“I was surprised to learn as we barrelled down the Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) that we were already in the park,” wrote one of the students in her final paper. “Evidently the TCH and the Canada Pacific Railroad run right through Banff. I was in for another surprise as we exited the highway. The town of Banff ... was full of people bustling in and out of the Starbucks, Louis Vuitton and Gap stores that lined the streets. It was difficult to grasp that we were in a national park when surrounded by such a developed urban environment. The only reminder was the 360 degree backdrop of mountains.”

Such a reaction shouldn’t be surprising. These students read Banff’s weak new management plan, adopted by Parliament in 2010, which offers little protection for grizzly bears that die in unsustainable numbers in and around the park. More recently, Minister of Environment Jim Prentice’s announcement to allow a host of new activities in national parks – including zip-lining and canopy tours and mountain biking—is the latest in a slow but inexorable process to increase the profitable business of industrial tourism in our national parks.

In his introduction to (and approval of) the new Banff management plan, Prentice refers to our national parks as “places of learning, recreation and inspiration where Canadians can connect with our past and appreciate the natural, cultural and social forces that shaped Canada.”

“We see a future,” he continues, “in which these special places will further Canadians’ appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of Canada, the economic well-being of communities and the vitality of our society.”

Although he does refer to them as “protected places,” at no point does

he refer to ecological integrity, or biodiversity, or the act of protecting (a verb!) the plants and animals within their boundaries. You'd think he was referring to an amusement park or a science centre, not one of the very few places in Canada where federal legislation makes "the maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity" the "first priority."

These policies are based on a false assumption that has been handed down by Ottawa to be flogged by the very people who should know better. Greg Fenton, superintendent of Jasper National Park, recently stated that the "very future of the parks depends on getting more people to actually visit and appreciate them."

The claim is ridiculous. There is no question that we need a shift in consciousness to create a better, more respectful relationship with the natural world. We do need natural places that provide people with positive experiences. However, national parks are supposed to offer the pre-eminent level of protection to a natural world under assault everywhere. Many of the most popular parks are already underfunded and overused, their primary mandate to protect nature undermined by government indifference. Development, especially the infrastructure required to facilitate the industrial-scale tourism that dominates Banff, can be as harmful to ecological integrity as strip mines and clear-cuts. Increasing this kind of visitation places a burden on our national parks that they simply cannot bear.

Kevin van Tighem, Banff's superintendent, told me over a coffee that he believes that Parks Canada is making ecological integrity the first priority when it comes to managing our National Parks. But Shaun Fluker, a law professor at the University of Calgary, doesn't share van Tighem's optimism. In a recently published journal article, "Ecological Integrity in Canada's National Parks: The False Promise of Law," Fluker concludes that despite a strengthening of the national parks legislation in 1988 and 2001 to prioritize environmental protection, both Parks Canada and the federal court have "read down the priority of the ecological integrity first priority as simply a factor to be taken into account in parks decision-making. Not only is the preservation of nature not the first priority in the national parks, it isn't even a presumption in parks decision-making."

What we are maintaining here in

Banff National Park is not ecological integrity, but the *illusion* of integrity. Like molecules of mercury – each one harmless, but accumulation deadly – the tyranny of small decisions is destroying the commons. All the while, too many of us simply stand by with our hands in our pockets, nodding our heads while the bean counters and profiteers rub their hands together with glee. It's death by a thousand cuts, and the wounds are as much ours as the land's.

It is often said, as I have, that we are loving our parks to death, but I no longer think it has anything to do with love. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges makes clear in *Empire of Illusion*, "the power of love is about sacrifice for the Other ... rather than exploitation. It is about honouring the sacred."

Are our parks not sacred? Are they not an embodiment of all that is good and right about what it means to be Canadian? Or are they just profit centres designed to titillate and amuse rather than to honour and protect?

Far from connecting Canadians to our national parks and the natural world they are meant to safeguard, a visit to Banff distances us from the ecological realities our leaders choose to ignore; it reinforces the myth that we are responsible environmental stewards, and creates the illusion that we can have our cake and eat it too. Unsuspecting visitors, assuming the federal bureaucracy is fulfilling its mandate, come away with the sense that we can have freeways and railways and ski hills and small cities – and now mountain biking and canopy tours and zip lines and *via ferrata* (cables and ladders permanently attached to mountain climbing routes) – without compromising the ecological health of our National Parks.

The illusion we have created in our national parks, cemented in our imaginations by the wire fences and lofty crossing structures that allow us to speed smugly through the Bow Valley without a care in the world, is part of a larger strategy to develop in Canadians and our visitors a false sense of accomplishment – a kind of blind faith – in the integrity of our environmental track record. "You guys really know how to do it right up here," a school teacher from Virginia told me one day over an impromptu beer at one of Banff's innumerable watering holes. "Those overpasses are amazing."

Thus deceived, again and again, we can return home and easily (and conveniently) feel good about ourselves: that we are protecting our parks; that despite ignoring the Kyoto Protocol we signed almost 20 years ago, we are responsibly addressing climate change; that the tar sands are, in fact, the "green" and "responsible" source of energy Minister Prentice and other Tory politicians would have us believe, despite the growing scientific evidence to the contrary.

"The federal government has engaged in greenwashing as part of its search for environmental legitimacy," writes Douglas MacDonald, a senior lecturer at the University of Toronto, in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Canadian Studies*. "It is very clear that after the early 1990s, the federal government eagerly contributed to the construction of the new environmental norm of environmental protection coupled with economic growth, purely for anthropocentric reasons. By joining business and environmentalists at the new centre of mainstream environmental politics, the federal government helped to preclude fundamental change in the arc of capitalist development" that is irrevocably unraveling the natural world.

If we do not protect what is left of our parks from our insidious industriousness, we will lose, in the words of Canada's first commissioner of National Parks, James Harkin, "the very thing that distinguishes [our national parks] from the outside world." We need a renaissance in the way our National Parks and other federally managed "protected" areas are managed. Ecological integrity must be made the first priority, with consumptive forms of human use and enjoyment a distant second. They must become sacred places, immune from the corrupting influences of profit and power. As citizens of Canada, it is our responsibility to stand up to the powerful forces of greed that have been unleashed on our parks. "It's easy enough to blame governments and their henchmen, of course, but ultimately it's not them who are failing us," I wrote in *The Grizzly Manifesto*. "We are failing ourselves. The only way to turn things around in Canada is to begin paying attention to the environmental politics that whirl around us like snowflakes in an East Coast storm. We must incorporate these politics into the way we live our lives and, especially, into the way we vote.



*Backcountry experiences, far from the madding crowds and luxury shops found in any airport, help visitors better understand what makes Banff such a special place.*

PHOTO: J. GAILUS

“Although climate change captures most of the headlines these days, the grizzly bear is trying to tell us there are other problems afoot. Our governments are beholden to corporate interests, and they have become unresponsive and unaccountable beasts.”

You are not paying attention, Alberta’s beleaguered grizzly bear population is telling us. You are not taking care. Wake up. It is time for a revolution. 🐻

*Jeff Gailus is an award-winning writer and author from Calgary. His next book, Little Black Lies: One Man’s Search for Truth in the Tar Sands Propaganda War, will be published by Rocky Mountain Books in 2011.*