

Everyone Belongs Outside. Inclusion Belongs in Parks.

By Don Carruthers Den Hoed



I was just a singing, dancing beaver - part of the acclaimed musical theatre interpretive shows put on by Alberta Parks in Kananaskis Country. I gave a voice to animals, plants, and natural processes in the Rocky Mountains. So why did most of my park programs suddenly involve people crying tears of joy, and why was I the one with tears in my eyes now, as I walked across the windswept dam at North Interlakes in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park with my father, desperate to find solid footing on an unfamiliar path?

In 2009, during the second Adaptive Kananaskis Challenge, a decision to cancel a backcountry kayak trip due to weather hammered home the lesson that my mandate to foster inclusion in nature was radically altering the role of parks and challenging my readiness to become more than an environmental educator. I had to learn how to give voice to stories of social diversity alongside stories of biodiversity.

Parks and protected areas face many challenges – whether from maintaining their relevance against a rising tide of environmental issues or from a media-saturated public or from the Herculean task of trying to ensure sustainability in a financially, socially, and ecologically dynamic world. No issue captures this complexity more than the fundamental question: what belongs in parks, and why? While I don't want to dismiss the specific challenges this presents on the ground my answer would be “what belongs in parks is belonging itself.”

Drive along the Bow Valley corridor on any given weekend and the casual observer might infer that the provincial and national parks of the area are saturated with visitors. To a degree they would be correct. From Heart Creek to the Banff Park gates, ditches overflow with vehicles and visitors. Remote back roads experience traffic jams as people try to escape the stress of modern urban life. This exodus to the eastern slopes is

nothing new, and, in fact, was a driving force behind the creation of Kananaskis Country in the 1970s. But the planners of the past likely never imagined usage to get to the scale of double, triple, or quadruple-parked cars at obscure and seemingly random access points. Campgrounds in the Rocky Mountains are equally overwhelmed – finding a last-minute campsite without a reservation usually means a weekend in overflow. It is often said that protected areas get “loved to death” and in the Bow corridor and other high profile sites in this province that would be hard to deny.

But, this is an anomaly, somewhat of an illusion. Park visitation has been generally declining across North America for the past two decades. In Alberta, while many sites are approaching or exceeding capacity, especially since Alberta's recent population growth, there are other parks with little visitation at any given time. Even the most popular sites can seem like ghost towns mid-week or on a cloudy day. Too much use of a particular site strains the landscape, facilities, and the experiences people cherish. But from a slightly different perspective, it's *out of sight, out of mind*: a park that nobody visits risks irrelevance.

The Challenge of Social Diversity

More important than the number of people visiting parks is the social diversity of visitors. The diversity of visitors is disproportionate to the reality of today's changing society. A 2010 Outdoor Foundation report revealed that the majority of visitors to North American parks were white, male, able-bodied, single, and financially stable (this fairly homogeneous user group

participates in a fairly uniform set of activities, mainly photography, wildlife viewing, picnicking, day hiking, and swimming, which also could lead to the isolated crowding noted above). There are many Albertans facing barriers to daily life such as transportation, time, and finances who would give anything to visit even the most overlooked park on the cloudiest day; there are immigrants to Alberta who moved here specifically because of the environment, yet lack the knowledge, resources, or equipment needed to get out to parks.

These, and other, underrepresented communities, foreshadow our demographic future, one where 20 percent of Albertans will be visible minorities or immigrants, where 17 percent of Albertans will experience limitations due to a disability, and where 80 percent of the population will live in cities. These people must be given compelling reasons to be included in parks, not just because it's the right thing to do, but because that diversity will lead to better political, social, and fiscal sustainability within parks themselves. As Fritjof Capra writes in *The Web of Life*: “A diverse community is a resilient community, capable of adapting to changing situations.”

What Is Belonging?

Belonging in parks is not about numbers. When someone visits a park, they develop affinity towards that landscape and that experience. This connection leads to stewardship and choices that benefit ecological integrity, choices such as choosing to recreate away from wildlife corridors, writing feedback letters, or volunteering time to contribute to research or restoration

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Lakeland sunset

PHOTO: C. WEARMOUTH

projects. Belonging is about building a broader base of support for parks and for the policies and practices necessary to ensure ecological integrity into the future. Visitation to sites like Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park is already limited, and off-trail recreation is restricted within wildlife corridors and sensitive areas such as parts of Dinosaur Provincial Park. These can be effective conservation strategies but they will only work if people support the regulations through changing their behaviour and adopting compatible values.

Conservation of healthy ecosystems and biodiversity is an important role of Alberta's parks and protected areas. So too is providing opportunities for outdoor recreation and nature-based experiences. This is the constant struggle of park agencies and advocates alike, as the two goals often seem unbalanceable. Ultimately, conservation and recreation both belong in parks. As Philip Dearden argued at the Parks for Tomorrow Conference: "Protected areas have a key role to play in reconnecting Canadians with nature to engender that sense of personal responsibility that will translate

into more responsible activities." Put another way, parks are not just about protecting the landscape, they are about protecting our relationship with the landscape.

There is ample evidence that any connection to nature – even in the city, and especially through recreation – provides significant benefits to mental, physical, social, and spiritual well-being. It stands to reason that anyone who cannot connect with nature to receive these benefits may experience an ecological poverty no less significant than financial or social poverty. It is an imperative for park agencies to remove any barriers and provide space for this connection, whether the individual is seeking adventure, escape, or prayer.

The need for increased levels of environmental citizenship is also clear, and the low-hanging fruit of increased conservation and stewardship is inclusion; we should remove barriers and tap into the vast number of people who have never before been asked to be stewards, or never been shown that outdoor recreation is even possible. As Ross Wein wrote in the June 2010 issue

of the *Advocate*, "the conservation and environmental communities [...] do not appreciate the reservoir of support the disabled could bring to conservation campaigns." The inclusion of diverse communities – whether persons with disabilities, First Nations, new Canadians, youth, or seniors – is an opportunity to enrich our understanding of natural heritage, as these unique perspectives "interpret nature in ways that are refreshing and valuable to the rest of us. They can educate us to "see" nature in new ways." (Vol. 18, Issue 3, page 11) Inclusion is not about convincing various groups to recreate the way current mainstream users do. Rather, it is about inviting participation in new ways that are relevant to these new users and demonstrating that these new participants belong and can contribute as part of the parks community.

Given this, the question is not just "how do you balance conservation and recreation?" It is also "how can conservation serve recreation, recreation serve conservation, and how can both foster stewardship for life?" The answer is to look beyond measures of



Sapphire Lines
24" x 60" oil on canvas
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visitor satisfaction, head counts, permit numbers, or funding, or even measures of ecological integrity, carrying capacity, and conservation targets. These are important practical indicators, but they should be augmented by measuring how parks enhance quality of life through transformative park experiences and how effective parks are at fostering stewardship for nature inside *and outside* of parks and mainstream park activities. We must measure how parks broker a renewed sense that nature belongs in everyone's life and everyone belongs in nature, regardless of age, culture, gender, income, postal code, background, or ability.

Accessibility is not new for Alberta's Provincial Parks. William Watson Lodge and a whole network of barrier-free trails and standards were developed in the late 1980s as part of the KananACCESS program. Likewise, there are many organizations who provide exceptional opportunities for outdoor recreation for new Canadians, youth, veterans, and so on (e.g. Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Boys and Girls Club, Outward Bound Canada). However, since the completion of the first Inclusion Strategy for persons with disabilities, and thanks to the many efforts of Alberta park staff, partners, and volunteers, inclusion has moved from isolated projects to core business. Alberta's *Plan for*

Parks contains the strategic priority to: "Implement a province-wide inclusion strategy to increase opportunities for, and invite full participation of, all Albertans."

As of this writing, the inclusion strategy is near completion, and many pilot inclusion initiatives are becoming a regular part of park operations throughout Alberta. The final strategy, "everyone **belongs** outside," will set out practical guidelines and clear principles to removing barriers so that all Albertans can participate in outdoor recreation; connect to their natural and cultural heritage; become park employees or volunteers; and can become the next generation of environmental stewards. More importantly, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation listens to *all* Albertans, regardless of who they are, and acts to make things better. By hearing these voices and sharing their stories, everyone will benefit from the perspectives, experiences, and ideas of people who are as diverse as the landscapes and wildlife in this province.

I was overwhelmed on the dam because I was learning more about the human relationship with nature in a single cancelled event than I had in the previous fifteen years as an environmental educator. I took my access to nature for granted and never really appreciated how many privileges I carry around with me:

I speak and read English, I am male and white, I am able bodied and I have full cognitive abilities (for now). I am mobile, I have a supportive family, I have grown up in the outdoors and am knowledgeable about wildlife safety, renting equipment, driving in the mountains, and preparing for the weather. I have a job, I have a home, and I have the experience and education to hope for a relatively stable future. I am welcomed in parks. Despite all these privileges, I spend far too much time inside my office, my work, and my mind.

Across the dam were people with none of these privileges, and they were outside: they were belonging in parks. Time for me to join them. ♡

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