



## MARKING 100 YEARS OF PEAKS AND VALLEYS; PARKS CANADA NEEDS TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC, NOT VULGARIZE THE GRANDEUR



By Ed Struzik

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On May 21, Parks Canada will celebrate its 100th birthday with a big media event in Ottawa that will be followed by a number of similar birthday parties, including one here at Elk Island, outside Edmonton.

If you're over 40 and wondering what those national parks centennial celebrations were all about in 1985, you're not alone. The birth of the national parks system actually occurred in 1885 when Banff, Canada's first national park, was established. This centennial celebrates the birth of the department in

1911, nothing new except that we may now be the first country in the world to celebrate the creation of a bureaucracy.

The real reason for this celebration is that Parks Canada is in trouble, or more accurately, it thinks it's in trouble. Senior officials in the agency know that Canada's population has been changing and that fewer people are going to national parks. The centennial celebrations are part of an initiative to reverse that trend.

This initiative has actually been going on for more than a decade. Over the years Parks Canada has hired scores of public relations people, media consultants, marketers and image-makers. It's restructured the bureaucracy, redesigned uniforms, and created so many websites that it would take months to get through them all.

There are many reasons why these investments have failed to raise the

number of visitors.

Most new Canadians come from parts of the world where people can't afford – or have no experience with – camping, canoeing, climbing, or putting 20-kilogram packs on their backs and hiking up mountainsides. They tend not to be birdwatchers. Nor do they fly-fish or cross-country ski.

The reality of this cultural shift came to light several years ago when Parks Canada officials at Point Pelee National Park in southern Ontario interviewed visible minorities to see how they might improve the parks experience. Point Pelee is a very small park, notable for its birds and rare plants. One man, who identified himself as recently coming from East Asia, said he very much enjoyed the hike through the marsh along the park's boardwalk. When asked how Parks Canada might improve it, he thought for a moment and then said, "You know, you

could use a hippopotamus. Come to think about it, two would be better. That would really get people excited.”

Extreme as this example is, it shows that Parks Canada’s recent “visitor experience” mantra – “It’s about them. Understand them. Respect their needs, expectations and motivations” – is misplaced. What about educating new Canadians (and old) instead about what national parks represent?

The same might be said about younger Canadians who are not embracing the park experience as enthusiastically as their parents did or still do. Talk to any backcountry specialist and they’ll tell you most people they encounter huffing and puffing along backcountry trails are geezers or quickly moving in that direction. They see almost no one on the more rugged routes such as Jasper’s North Boundary Trail. Parks Canada is not the only national park agency facing these challenges. The U.S. National Park Service has seen a much bigger drop in visitors.

A study published by the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences blames much of it on videos, iPods and other indoor, sedentary activities. Nature, it seems, doesn’t stand a chance when it comes to competing with Nintendo.

Add to this a high dollar and the skyrocketing price of gas, and prospects of getting more people to come to parks do not look good.

Hoping to reverse this trend, Parks Canada is pushing the limits on what it thinks are appropriate activities in national parks. Earlier this year, it added canopy walks, zip lines, aerial parks and via ferrata (a system of bolted ladders and cables) to its list of approved activities. Via ferrata, Italian for “iron way,” is a concept developed by the Italian military to move troops more quickly through the mountains during the First World War. Since then, it has been adopted by less than highly skilled climbers who would not otherwise ascend rock faces.

Few could argue that the technique doesn’t deface a mountain slope.

To the dismay of many current and former employees, Parks Canada is now considering a skywalk along a glacier in Jasper.

Parks Canada would like the public to believe that former employees such as Gord Anderson who are speaking out about this, are in the minority. Anderson

says employees are riled about the direction Parks is going. “It used to be sadness. Now it’s fear,” he says. “We are scared the mandarins in Ottawa are actually considering outlandish proposals better suited for Disneyland.”

Max Winkler spent a lifetime working in Jasper, Kootenay, Forillon (Quebec) and Waterton Lakes, where he was chief park warden for 15 years. “It would be easy to put this behind me now that I’m retired,” he told me. “But like most people in Parks Canada, I believe that national parks stand for something in this country, and that it is my duty to preserve that ideal for future generations. This idea that parks should be all things to all people is not right.”

Before Parks Canada continues on this path, it might want to examine what CBC did a few years ago when it decided to court younger listeners by transforming CBC Radio Two from a classical music and jazz channel to one more pop-oriented. Almost overnight, gifted hosts such as Tom Allen, who had a highly entertaining program that managed to bring hockey and Holst, cage matches and divas and web goddesses into his morning show, was struggling to tell listeners something new and exciting about the Guess Who, Bob Dylan and Stevie Wonder.

A vast majority of listeners demanded CBC restore the old format. CBC refused. Not only did CBC Radio Two lose listeners, but it also lost a loyal audience who would have gone to the mat to save

the national broadcaster from the severe budgets cuts that are always looming. It’s hard to imagine Guess Who fans going out of their way to save the CBC. It’s just as unimaginable to think that zip liners or paragliders are going to write their MPs the next time someone in government proposes logging in national parks or directional drilling for oil and gas, as was suggested in the 1980s. They can get this kind of entertainment anywhere.

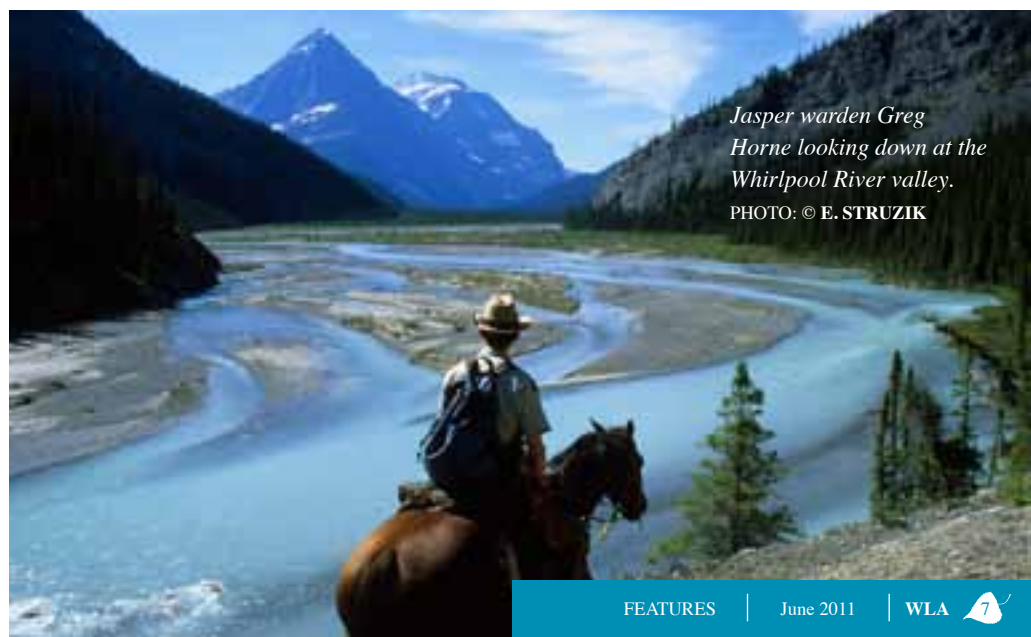
One would have thought this tendency in Parks Canada to flirt with development and amusement park interests would

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have ended with the Ecological Integrity Panel that was struck in November 1998 to examine Parks Canada’s approach for maintaining ecological integrity and provide recommendations for improvement. The panel members travelled extensively to speak with park staff and other interested Canadians to see first-hand the problems and stresses that threaten our national parks.

Most everyone was satisfied when Parks Canada responded with a clear plan for limits on development and a strategy for ecological integrity.

In the ensuing years, more scientists were hired to work in parks. Controlled burns were lit to mimic forest fires that



*Jasper warden Greg Horne looking down at the Whirlpool River valley.*

PHOTO: © E. STRUZIK



*Amethyst Lake,  
Jasper National Park*

PHOTO: © E. STRUZIJK

had been suppressed in the past. Elk were no longer allowed to take up residence in Banff and Jasper where they'd be safe from wolves. And recovery plans were put in place for endangered species like the black-footed ferret.

In time, though, some of the tougher challenges such as saving caribou in Banff and Jasper were put on hold. Caribou now have the dubious distinction of having disappeared in Banff, Canada's most famous national park, before disappearing in the oilsands region and the clearcut areas of the Alberta foothills.

Bad as the numbers seem to be, the situation isn't that dire. In Alberta, Jasper has almost the same number of visitors now as it did 10 years ago. Banff is holding its own.

True, Elk Island is struggling with a drop to 185,253 in 2009-10, compared with the 219,000 who visited in 2000-01. But who should be surprised? Down the road, the Blackfoot Grazing Reserve has the same terrain, better snow for skiing, no entry fee and the wildly successful Canadian Birkebeiner race that reminds people of its existence each year.

Nationally, park numbers have gone up and down the past decade, but they are more or less the same as they were a decade ago. More than 12 million people visit each year.

Parks Canada needs to be reminded that most government departments or agencies would kill for that kind of

consistency and for the tremendous approval ratings it gets from users. Among the 120 countries in the world that have a national parks system, Canada has for decades been the undisputed leader. Our national parks are found in every province and territory.

Nowhere in the world can a visitor be wined and dined in the splendour of a Lake O'Hara or Jasper Park Lodge one night and then spend the next part of the visit 2,900 metres high in the rustic comfort of the Alpine Club of Canada hut at Abbot Pass tent or fishing for trout in Amethyst Lake in Jasper.

Several of Canada's parks, including Nahanni, Wood Buffalo and the seven Rocky Mountain parks, are considered so special that they have been declared World Heritage Sites. Parks Canada is perfectly justified in celebrating this legacy. But it might also be worthwhile reflecting on the costly mistakes it has made over the past 100 years.

Jasper is still working hard to improve relations with First Nations and Métis people who were kicked out of the park when it was established a century ago. A lot of money has been spent trying to convince fishermen that the introduction of eastern brook trout to Rocky Mountain lakes to improve recreational opportunities was a bad idea.

Parks Canada is still struggling with a way of dealing with the elk that were brought in from the United States, and

they're now trying to find a way of bringing back caribou that became extinct in Banff two years ago. If taxpayers knew how much has been spent dealing with diseased bison that were shipped to Wood Buffalo in the 1920s, they'd be appalled.

Reading Ted Hart's recent book on J.B. Harkin, the first Commissioner of National Parks, one could imagine what Harkin would have to say about what is happening. Throughout his career, he worried that "increased demands for more and more roads, cheaper forms of amusement, and commercial exploitation," would result in national parks losing the "very thing that distinguished them from the outside world."

"Future generations may wonder at our blindness if we neglect to set them aside before civilization invades them," Harkin wrote. "What is needed in Canada today is an informed public opinion which will voice an indignant protest against any vulgarization of beauty of our national parks or any invasion of their sanctity." 🐾

*Ed Struzik, a senior writer at The Edmonton Journal, has been writing about environmental issues for more than 30 years. He has won dozens of writing awards and honours. His third book, The Big Thaw: Travels in the Melting North, was published in 2009.*