

Parks Canada: Standing on Guard For...



By Ian Urquhart

“Each of Canada’s protected heritage areas is part of Canada’s collective soul and part of our nation’s promise to its future. It’s not by accident that in Canada, natural and cultural treasures continue to thrive in the 21st century. They survive because Canadians have chosen to safeguard places of stillness, natural wonder, and meaning.”

**– Alan Latourelle, CEO,
Parks Canada Agency,
May 28, 2008**

Controversy. That’s what I see in the above excerpt from Mr. Latourelle’s testimony to a parliamentary committee several years ago. The controversy doesn’t rest in his poetic reference to the place of parks in our collective soul and future. Nor does it rest in the CEO’s observation about what Canadians want to safeguard. It rests in whether our treasures are thriving or merely surviving.

The difference is crucial. People survive a tsunami; they don’t thrive in one. Sage-grouse and woodland caribou survive (we hope) in Alberta; they don’t thrive. This polemic, contrary to the celebratory sounds associated with Parks

Canada’s 100th birthday, believes that our national parks’ natural and cultural treasures are just surviving. They are not thriving. This is a political failure. Our federal politicians, Conservative and Liberal alike, too often have shirked their responsibilities. Rather than value our national park treasures for the precious gems they are, too many political positions and decisions treat them as little more than cheap costume jewelry.

Before going any further down this infuriating path several qualifications need to be made. Our politicians don’t always get it wrong. There are positive stories out there. One was contained in this past June’s Speech from the Throne. There the federal government announced the commitment to establish Canada’s first urban national park in the Rouge River valley east of Toronto. Showing the importance of our national park system to urban and new Canadians is vital to the future of parks. The establishment of Rouge National Park on the doorstep of Canada’s largest urban centre offers a wonderful opportunity to make essential introductions.

Wilderness devotees also will applaud the sixfold expansion of the Nahanni National Park Reserve announced in 2009. At just over 30,000 square kilometres Nahanni contains nearly 10,000 more square kilometres than what is contained in the Rocky Mountain parks. But, as we will see later,

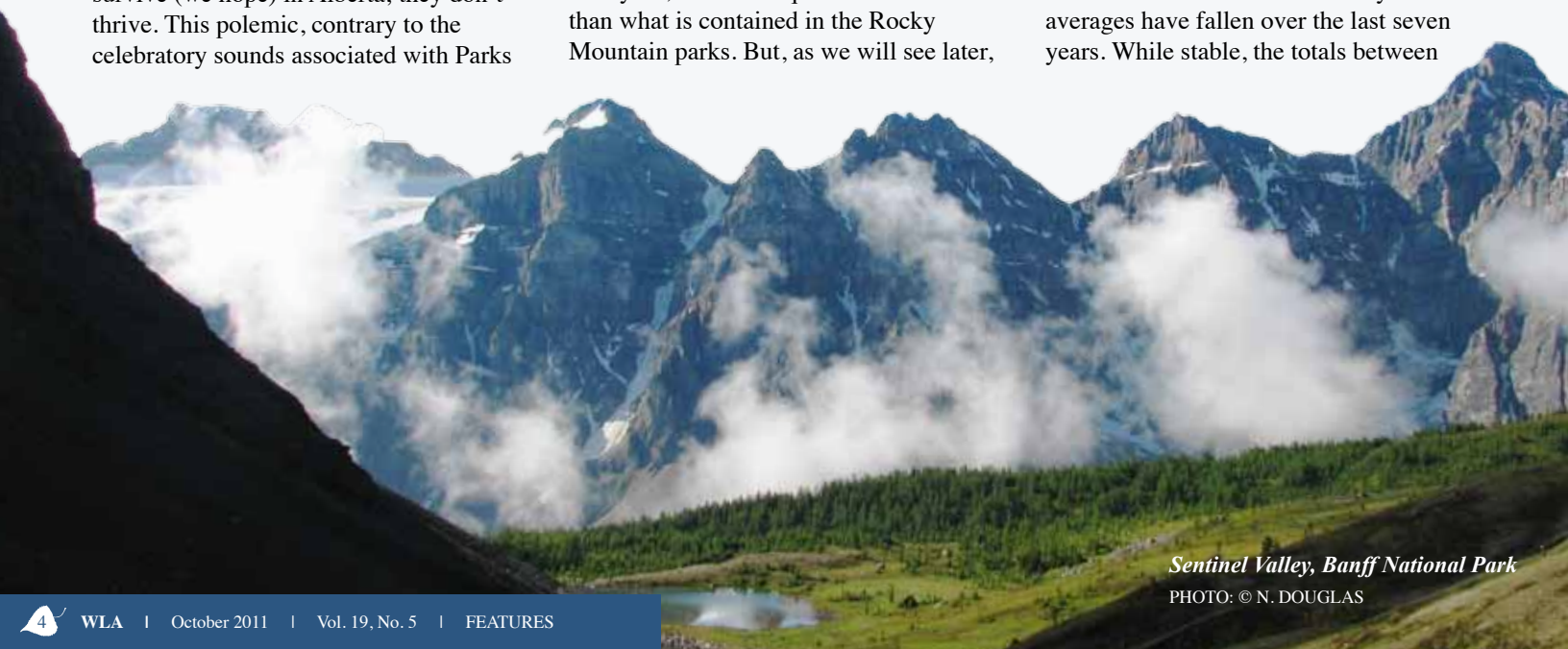
threatening clouds are on the horizons of even good news stories.

Most importantly, what follows is not a critique of Parks Canada frontline staff. The vast majority of the frontline staff I have met over the years impressed me with their enthusiasm and passion for our parks; I have no doubt they very seriously take their jobs as the stewards of our parks and their ecological integrity.

How Are the Parks Doing? It’s All About Values and Priorities

By some measures our national park system looks pretty good. The 2008 *State of the Park Reports* for all three of Alberta’s Rocky Mountain parks cited visitor survey data to show how impressed park visitors were with the services available to them. A 2003 survey of visitors to Banff, Kootenay, Jasper, and Yoho National Parks found that 82 percent of those surveyed rated their visit as “extremely enjoyable.” Seventy-five percent of visitors surveyed in Waterton in 2005 expressed the identical sentiment.

But if annual increases in park visitor numbers help define a healthy national park system then there are reasons for concern. Between 1998 and 2004 Parks Canada estimated that, nationally, the annual number of visitors to parks remained quite stable at between 15.7 million and 16.4 million annually. Those averages have fallen over the last seven years. While stable, the totals between



Sentinel Valley, Banff National Park
PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS

2006 and 2011 are notably lower: over these later years the number of people visiting the national parks ranged between just over 13 million to just under 12 million, or roughly 20 percent lower than between 1998 and 2004.

With respect to Alberta's mountain parks, however, the picture is a bit brighter. They have not suffered the decline in visitation that has taken place nationally.

Some readers may shake their heads when reading this. They might think that *fewer* visitors would contribute to healthier mountain parks. Fewer people

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may reduce the human footprint and increase, or at least not damage further, ecological integrity.

They have a point. It's one that Parks Canada certainly recognized in the past. The *1997 State of the Parks Report*, for example, identified visitor/tourism facilities as the most important source of stress to the national parks. Tourism also was intimately related to the other most important stressors identified then: transportation/utility corridors, urbanization, exotic vegetation, and perhaps ironically, park management practices (to the extent that those policies encourage tourism).

The ecological integrity indicators those readers might like to cite are troubling. The *2008 State of the Park* reports for Banff, Jasper, and Waterton Lakes National Parks don't paint a pretty picture. Banff's record was no better than fair with grizzly bear and woodland caribou populations in poor condition. Jasper's was little better. There woodland caribou recovery was identified as a "priority." Waterton's record was more of a mixed bag. Native biodiversity and aquatic ecosystems were listed as being in good condition (the biodiversity trend was stable but the aquatic trend was declining); terrestrial ecosystems and landscapes were in poor condition (the terrestrial ecosystems indicator's trend was declining but the trend in landscapes was improving).

A potentially more positive story may be found in the federal government's recent track record on establishing new parks and expanding existing ones. When Environment Minister Peter Kent appeared before a parliamentary committee in March he noted that, in just four years, the federal Conservatives decided to add roughly 133,000 square kilometres to the territories administered by Parks Canada. "That's a 48% increase," he testified, "or an additional protected area equivalent to the size of a country such as Greece."

WWF-Canada was very impressed with this achievement. Last November it nominated Parks Canada for a Gift to the Earth Award. "As WWF's highest accolade," exclaimed WWF-Canada's President and CEO Gerald Butts, "this recognizes Parks Canada's many significant conservation achievements, including its globally significant track record in creating protected areas and reintroducing endangered species." The award was presented over cake at the party to celebrate Parks Canada's 100th birthday in May.

Dollars for Parks. How Many? Where Have They Gone? Where Will They Go?

With hindsight Minister Kent's selection of Greece for his celebratory comparison was unfortunate. Greece may soon be better known for financial calamity and contagion than it will be for being the cradle of Western civilization. While it would be sensationalist to suggest that Parks Canada is in Greece's dire financial straits a look at the agency's past and future budgets is discouraging. It raises questions about whether federal politicians are genuinely committed to the values embodied in the national parks system.

What follows is based on examining Parks Canada performance reports and corporate plans. Table 1 presents historical and prospective data. Its 10-year timeframe begins with Parks Canada program activity spending in 2005/06 and concludes with what the agency plans to spend looking ahead from 2010/11 to 2015/16.

Table 1: Parks Canada Actual/Planned Program Activity Expenditures, 2005/06 - 2015/16, (in thousands of dollars/selected programs are also shown as percentages of total program expenditures)

	Heritage Places Establishment	Heritage Resource Conservation	Public Appreciation/Understanding	Visitor Experience	Town/Thruway Manage.	Total Prog. Activity Expenditures
2005/2006	23,017	185,848 (34.8)	70,259	194,415 (36.4)	61,159	534,699
2006/2007	22,716	207,772 (34.4)	78,120	189,598 (31.4)	106,409	604,615
2007/2008	19,808	201,388 (31.8)	33,287	286,621 (45.2)	92,939	634,043
2008/2009	29,323	183,956 (30.6)	39,300	244,923 (40.8)	102,957	600,459
2009/2010	15,240	191,926 (27.8)	54,165	274,984 (39.9)	153,628	689,943
2010/2011	24,311	240,482 (33.2)	29,371	267,901 (37.0)	161,344	723,409
2011/2012	22,751	198,921 (32.4)	34,155	235,521 (38.4)	122,625	613,973
2012/2013	21,588	195,013 (34.8)	31,610	235,368 (41.9)	77,608	561,187
2013/2014	21,588	194,977 (36.0)	26,954	235,296 (43.5)	62,610	541,425
2014/2015	21,588	194,977 (36.4)	26,449	235,296 (43.9)	57,610	535,920
2015/2016	21,592	195,019 (36.5)	25,602	235,163 (44.0)	57,622	534,998

Sources: Data for 2005/2006 to 2009/2010 are from Parks Canada Agency, *Performance Report*, various years. Expenditure estimates for 2010/2011 to 2015/2016 are from Parks Canada Agency, *Corporate Plan, 2010-2011/2014-2015* and Parks Canada Agency, *Corporate Plan, 2011-2012/2015-2016*. Totals may not agree due to rounding.



Several other comments about these categories and spending forecasts may be helpful. First, they are national data. These expenditure data are for all territories administered by Parks Canada. They should be seen as suggestive then, not definitive, when it comes to the financial state of Alberta's national parks.

Second, the figures are in current dollars. The past and potentially future effects of inflation on purchasing power are not considered (The Bank of Canada's inflation calculator concludes that, between August 2005 and August 2011, there was an 11.91 percent decline in the value of money.)

Finally, what programs or activities fall within these categories? First, Parks Canada does not regard all of its program activities as core programs. Townsite management and Throughway management (providing municipal services and maintaining highways/waterways in national parks) are non-core program activities and are combined together in Table 1.

Two of Parks Canada's core programs are tied intimately and inextricably to protecting and preserving Canada's natural and cultural heritage. Establishing Heritage Places is devoted to establishing new national parks or national historic sites. The second of these core programs, Conserving Heritage Resources, has both cultural and natural dimensions. With respect to nature, the program activity requires identifying and implementing measures that will restore and promote ecological integrity. "It is important," Parks Canada wrote in 2008, "that implementation of these measures stay on track and that these measures be consistently applied across individual parks."

The other two core programs are Public Appreciation and Understanding and Visitor Experience. Public Appreciation aims to increase the appreciation Canadians have for national parks and the need to protect and preserve them. It pursues this goal with "a diversity of carefully targeted outreach

education approaches, such as the Parks Canada website, broadcasting and new media, integration into urban venues and introduction of content into school curricula..." (2008) Visitor Experience "facilitates opportunities for visitors to enjoy memorable, high-quality visitor experiences, through the provision of programs, services, infrastructure, facilities and interaction with Parks Canada personnel." (2007)

Several conclusions might be drawn from the data in Table 1. First, in the last several years Parks Canada program spending grew nicely. Give the recession credit for this increased spending; in the 2009/10 and 2010/11 fiscal years money for infrastructure projects (twinning the Trans-Canada highway in Banff National Park and spending \$217 million on visitor facilities) gave a temporary boost to spending. Resource conservation and ecological integrity only would appear to gain indirectly, if at all, from this temporary windfall.

Second, looking out to 2015/16, the

planned spending trend is grim. Parks Canada's latest corporate plan projects spending in that fiscal year to amount to just under \$535 million. This returns and reduces Parks Canada program activity spending to what our politicians devoted to our national parks system in 2005/06. Remember again that the effects of inflation are not considered in the Table's data. In real, inflation-adjusted terms, planned spending in 2015 on the national parks system is likely to be significantly lower than it was in 2005.

Third, if the next five years deliver the cuts anticipated in the most recent Parks Canada corporate plan, the Visitor Experience program will fare better than the Heritage Resource Conservation program. This will solidify a pecking order that, in budgetary terms, was clearly visible by 2007/08. In budgetary terms, Visitor Experience, not Heritage Resource Conservation, is the agency's most important program activity.

The data about full-time equivalent staff positions presented in Table 2 confirm this conclusion about the relative ranking of Parks Canada's programs. Between 2005/06 and 2009/10 the Visitor Experience program was the only one in Parks Canada to increase its complement of staff. It will retain most of those positions moving ahead.

The preservation and protection program, by contrast, only will recoup some of the human resources it lost between 2005 and 2010. In 2015 this

program is projected to be operating with 12 percent fewer staff than it could count on in 2005. Ironically, the non-core programs dealing with managing townsites and highways are expected to have more staff at the end of this period than at the beginning.

Some senior Parks Canada officials may cry foul at this sort of comparison. They may reprise language we have heard before: "The maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity is the first priority for the national parks." (2002) This reprise is tired and disingenuous. When it comes to dollars and people, the lifeblood of all public services, successive Liberal and Conservative governments have not "walked the talk" about ecological integrity.

This criticism is not meant to denigrate the importance of public appreciation or high-quality and memorable visitor experiences. Who, in their right mind, would suggest those are terrible objectives? The point is that new resources must be channeled towards making a genuine, not symbolic, commitment to the "prime directive" regarding ecological integrity.

What Program Activity Data Don't Tell Us

The program spending and staff data introduced above certainly don't tell us everything. Focusing on Parks Canada's program spending may put blinders on

us; it may encourage us not to look at other ways in which the agency spends its budget and allocates human resources. Corporate or Internal Services is one function that a program focus might overlook. These services are department or agency-wide services and include many groups. In Parks Canada they include groups such as communications, legal services, financial management, and human resources.

Internal Services needs to come out of the shadows because of the impressive growth in these sorts of expenditures as well as the staff who make them. Ten years ago Parks Canada devoted 382 FTEs to, and spent \$50.6 million on, providing these agency-wide services. Parks Canada planned to spend \$81.6 million on these services in 2011/12 and have them delivered by the equivalent of 488 full-time staff.

Imagine what improvements we might have been able to make to ecological integrity in Canada's national park system if this had been the fate of the resource conservation envelope. A 167 percent increase in conservation funding and a 28 percent increase in conservation personnel might have taken us further down the ecological integrity road than we are today.

Looking at expenditures for existing programs also doesn't provide the answer to a vital question. Where is the money coming from for new parks? The Conservatives have celebrated and have been congratulated for adding more than 133,000 square kilometres to our national parks system. How can a projected cut of \$79 million from Parks Canada's program spending between now and 2015/16 (a cut of 13 percent) be reconciled with the need to supply the services and staff demanded by this impressive expansion? Will dollars be taken from the budgets of existing parks, crippling them further? Will we be left with a much larger but more mediocre system of parks as we divide a shrinking pie among more and more hungry, deserving mouths?

Doing Less With Less and Further Corporatization

The expenditure/staff picture painted above has had serious impacts "on the ground." We should not be surprised to learn that some activities linked to

Table 2: Full-time staff equivalents (FTE) by Program Activity, Actual (2005/06 - 2009/10) and Projected (2010/11 - 2015/16)

	Heritage Establish.	Heritage Res. Cons.	Public Apprec.	Visitor Experience	Townsite/ Transport.
2005/06	131	1,449	744	1,517	290
2006/07	129	1,520	764	1,453	338
2007/08	116	1,481	268	2,119	331
2008/09	111	1,499	360	2,461	340
2009/10	90	1,236	379	2,093	260
FTE net gain/(loss) 05/06-09/10	(41)	(213)	(365)	576	(30)
2010/11	92	1,283	293	1,962	333
2011/12	92	1,272	294	1,951	325
2012/13	89	1,272	293	1,951	323
2013/14	89	1,272	293	1,951	322
2014/15	89	1,272	291	1,951	322
2015/16	89	1,272	290	1,951	322
Projected FTE net gain/(loss) 05/06-15/16	(42)	(177)	(454)	434	32

Sources: see Table 1



Soaring
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ecological integrity have been axed in order to meet budget shortfalls. Cathy Ellis reported in the *Calgary Herald*, for example, on a 12 percent cut to Banff's scientific research and monitoring budget in 2009 (from \$529,000 to \$469,000) as part of the Park's efforts to eliminate a deficit.

Nor should we be surprised to hear current and former employees of Parks Canada contend that backcountry law enforcement/monitoring and trail

that Parks Canada's senior managers should have seen "that the elimination of protection where it is needed most – along the park boundaries – will lead inevitably to the destruction of wildlife and the resources it was intended to protect."

When it comes to trail maintenance the backcountry also has been put on the backburner. For example, in Jasper the trail operations budget is such that most trail maintenance operations focus on

"Over the last few years, we have put in place an ecological integrity monitoring program, which is internationally regarded as one of the best of its kind. Over the next four to five years, our objective will be to focus on restoration of ecosystems in our national parks."

- CEO Alan Latourelle, April 2, 2009

maintenance in the national parks have become very pale shadows of their former selves. Former wardens have spoken out about the damage they feel the drastic reduction in the warden service has done to the resource protection mandate. Dale Portman, one such alumnus, told *Canadian Geographic*

high-use trails. This has meant that trail crews essentially have been decimated, that primitive and wildland area trails receive less maintenance, and that more than a dozen primitive trails have been dropped altogether from Jasper's official trail network.

These examples may offer further

material to place in the "business values have overtaken conservation values" file. The proposed expansion of the Marmot Basin ski area demonstrates how this value shift may skew priorities when it comes to what Parks Canada does with its shrinking pot of resource conservation dollars.

Parks Canada money is being used to help pay for the costs of two research studies associated with Marmot's proposal. Members of the public objected to sharing the costs of this research. Why, they asked, should taxpayers bear the burden of helping to pay for this company's research?

Parks Canada defended their commitment to assist Marmot with what I would call "motherhood and apple-pie" language: "Parks Canada recognizes that the value and benefits of the studies are broader than the planning needs for Marmot Basin. The knowledge gained will widen our understanding of mountain goats and caribou in the Park and have potential applications for broader management practices."

This exchange raises a more fundamental question. Where did these research projects figure in Parks Canada planning before the Marmot Basin proposal was announced? Was this research in the vicinity of Marmot a high priority for Parks before the proposal?

Read what the Jasper Environmental Association reported about what Parks Canada's scientists thought about Marmot's proposal. The Association wrote that those biologists concluded the proposed exchange would not be "a 'substantial environmental gain' because of the adverse effect it would have on the threatened woodland caribou and other wildlife."

Scientific staff say don't do it; Parks pays for more research on the issue. If this isn't an example of corporate values influencing research and policy positions I don't know what is.

Do Our Politicians Care?

Many of you will be familiar with polls showing that Canadians are very fond of the national parks system. This is encouraging. But it doesn't mean elected officials take that view to heart and vigorously defend national parks. The sad reality, reflected in the budget data above, is that they are not very good defenders of the system. Further

evidence of this malady may be found by reviewing the questions MPs raise either during Question Period in the House of Commons or in the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. In the House they don't challenge ministers; in Committee very few hard questions about the national parks are directed towards ministers or Parks Canada's CEO (yes, CEO...even in the United States, that flagship of capitalism, the head of the National Park Service is not called a CEO).

An example of this situation arose in the Standing Committee in 2009. CEO Latourelle made the claim about ecological integrity noted above. No committee member asked him about this claim; he received no praise, no criticism, nothing but silence. He was asked just two questions, very soft "good news"

ones from a Conservative MP, during his time before the Committee. If I were the Parks Canada CEO, or his minister, I might think there to be no political urgency when it comes to Canada's national parks. The political class, through its silence and failure to hold ministers and officials accountable, helps to ensure we will endure business as usual when it comes to the national parks system. This situation is the norm when it comes to the prominence in Ottawa of Parks Canada and the heritage treasures for which it is responsible.

Conclusion

According to Parks Canada, "Learning Experiences" is the theme for October during Parks Canada's centennial year. I certainly learned a great deal in researching this look at

what Parks Canada has been and will be standing on guard for. When I first went to the Government of Canada website I was greeted by the spectacular beauty of Moraine Lake in Banff National Park. More often than not when I refreshed that webpage I was treated to other magnificent images of Canadian wild places and wildlife.

I wish our federal politicians treated our national parks with the respect shown by their webmasters. I wish they would hurry up (because time is of the essence) and turn a webpage's symbolic enthusiasm for national parks into substantive commitment. I wish we all would think about how we can get the political class in this country to show they value national parks as much as their electors do. 🇨🇦



Mountain Park Irony: RVs that contribute to glacial retreat are important to sustaining visitor numbers in the parks.

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