

A Tale of Two Banffs

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

+++++

It was the first of parks; would it become the worst of parks? Was it the age of wisdom and integrity or of avarice and short sightedness? Was it the epoch of ecological integrity, or was it the epoch of overarching commitment to commercial tourism? In short, will the Banff of the future be anything like the Banff National Park of the past?

After dealing with the plight of peasants demoralized by French aristocracy in advance of the revolution, Charles Dickens would have had a field day documenting how adherents to Banff's traditional and authentic park values are being demoralized by the Park's catering to commercialism, mission drift, and flirtation with frivolity over substance.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

It is obvious that we have two "Banff" entities in the Bow Valley. Each entity was born at the founding of Banff National Park. Each claims a degree of popular support. They share a history of antagonism as well as cooperation. A reconciliation of their conflicting values, needs and expectations is essential if Banff National Park is to reach its full potential as Canada's first and premier national park. We hope this reconciliation would favour the legal requirements and timeless values of our national park system. And we think this is possible.

The first entity, Banff National Park, is committed to "ecological integrity" as its "first priority" (as mandated by Parliament) and to informing, influencing and involving visitors to achieve its mission. The second entity, comprising local businesses, offers important visitor services and is committed (according to their own published statements)

to "generating revenue" and "economic growth."

The priority values of Parks Canada and of local businesses are not identical, yet need not be totally incompatible. Most businesses are not opposed to maintaining ecological integrity within the park; and Parks Canada need not stand in the way of profit-making enterprise. But the history of interaction between these "two Banffs," with the conservation community as an additional player, is marked by conflicts that limit the potential of our Park for all stakeholders.

In this context, Parks Canada's recent decision to allow summer use at Norquay is most troubling. Twenty-two years ago, Parks Canada, on behalf of all Canadians, approved a binding agreement that provided certain benefits to Norquay in exchange for foregone summer use. Parks Canada's actions to prevent subsequent Norquay owners from pursuing summer uses have been upheld by federal courts. Twenty-two years on, Norquay still enjoys those benefits. Yet the benefits that once flowed to the park and the Canadian people were put up for grabs. And Parks Canada encouraged Norquay to claw back those benefits. Whose interest does Parks Canada serve?

Parks Canada supports its decision by concocting a novel "overarching commitment" to guide its Norquay decision and, plausibly, all future decisions in Banff National Park. But there is absolutely no foundation in the Canada National Parks Act for any "overarching commitment" to commercial tourism as alleged in the Norquay guidelines. In fact, this contrived "overarching commitment" is contrary to the legislated priority mandate to maintain or restore ecological integrity in our national parks.

In my opinion, the Norquay decision marks a "reconciliation" that favours more narrow business interests at the expense of broader public interest, clear legislated mandates, national park values, and even agency integrity. No, this is not the preferred direction.

Can profit-oriented Banff co-exist with park-oriented Banff? It can. In fact, there is ample evidence that Canadians and other visitors prefer a natural national park to contrived commercial amusement. Former Superintendent Kevin van Tighem pointed the way in his warning to senior Parks Canada staff:

Mostly we are hearing **concerns about**

crowding and commercialization, plus predictions that these sorts of initiatives risk pushing some of our ecological integrity accomplishments backwards. ... It does seem that **people are looking at this place as being defined by its wildlife and nature, its alpine beauty, its mountain culture and its wilderness adventure** – and worrying that we could be drifting from those defining elements. ... If they think Banff has gotten strange or is becoming an unpleasant place to be, they can just go somewhere else. If that is the case, then further confusing our brand identity with things that people don't associate with their concept of a park experience could cost us further loss of market share, **not gain us increased market share.** (*December 28, 2009 memo to senior Parks Canada staff regarding public consultation and comments on the 2010 park management plan; emphasis added*)

We are convinced that success requires more understanding, appreciation and innovation from the business community and less capitulation, backsliding in the face of legislation, and mission drift from Parks Canada. Many aspects of business operations in Banff already foreshadow what a more collaborative future might look like. And, while it needn't ensure business success, Parks Canada can refrain from pointless and arbitrary regulations that may unnecessarily hobble Banff businesses.

Consider recent record visitation to Yellowstone National Park, where visitors are attracted – not by contrived commercial gimmicks, golf tournaments, triathlons, dragon-boat races and vie ferrate – but by unadorned geysers, grizzlies, wolves, scenery and Yellowstone-only opportunities. We also can look to Waterton Lakes National Park, where special events celebrating spring wildflowers and bugling bull elk attract and inspire visitors.

Enthusiastic visitors, rewarded by authentic and inspiring opportunities in Canada's premier national park, will meet the expectations of both Parks Canada and Banff's business community. And, as we now appreciate the wisdom and foresight of the initial founders and protectors of Banff National Park, our grandchildren will honour our commitment to the timeless values of Canada's first national protected area.

Jim Pissot, Wild Canada Conservation Alliance