

Bow Valley Parkway: Parks Canada Puts Wildlife Ahead of Commercial Interests

In a bold decision, Parks Canada announced in December 2011 that it will be implementing seasonal travel restrictions on Highway 1A, the Bow Valley Parkway, between Banff and Johnston Canyon. The traffic ban on the 17-kilometre stretch of highway will begin in 2013 and will apply from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. between March 1 and June 25 each year. AWA congratulates Parks Canada for putting the interests of wildlife first on this section of highway.

The importance of this stretch of highway for wildlife was described by Kevin Van Tighem, then-Superintendent of Banff National Park, in a February 2011 article in the *Rocky Mountain Outlook*. “In early spring, as the sun warms south-facing slopes and montane meadows, the eastern half of the parkway becomes particularly important to wildlife,” wrote Van Tighem. “Winter-weakened elk, deer and bighorn sheep fatten on the new greenery before giving birth to another crop of offspring. Wolves return, cautiously, to denning areas to raise new pups. Grizzly and black bears escape the snowy high country to forage along the roadside and on nearby slopes.”

Past travel restrictions on this section of highway have been entirely voluntary and thus poorly observed. So, in 2010, a multi-stakeholder working group including scientists, businesses, and environmentalists, was established to pull together recommendations for how to improve on these voluntary restrictions.

Jim Pissot represented AWA on the working group and is delighted that the group’s recommendations were adopted. “This is very, very good news,” says Pissot. “Parks have been wrestling with this issue for fifteen years. But now they have taken the necessary measures to improve habitat security and enhance visitor experience and that is great news.”

Opposition to the travel restrictions came from some local businesses and business associations, which saw any new restrictions as having a negative impact on their operations. But other businesses, such as the Business Group of Professional Photographers and Videographers in the Bow Valley, saw things differently. While recognizing that any road closure would “have a severe, long-standing effect on our businesses,” the group still strongly supported the seasonal closure. “For those

businesses that are affected, like our own, we feel that this is something that needs to be done to protect the integrity of the centerpiece of Canada’s premier World Heritage Site.”

The travel restrictions are by no means perfect; they represent a compromise solution. AWA would have liked to have seen the travel restriction extended later in the morning. We also believe there is certainly a need for similar travel restrictions in the fall. And AWA is hopeful that the delay in implementing the restrictions – until March 2013 – will not leave the door open to backtracking on these commitments.

As Kevin Van Tighem put it back in February 2011: “Giving animals peace and security when, and where, they most need it is how Banff keeps its promise to the world: that this national park will always have ecological integrity.”