

# Conservation forecast for the Rocky Mountain parks:

## partly *Sunny* risk of *Thunderstorms*



BY IAN URQUHART

Last year the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) asked the University of Alberta's Dr. Elizabeth Halpenny, a member of the World Commission on Protected Areas, to evaluate the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site. The request was made under the umbrella of the IUCN's Conservation Outlook program. The program is gathering conservation outlook assessments "to fill the current knowledge gap on natural World Heritage Sites and provide a global overview of their state of conservation." The assessments gather data on the state and trend of conservation values, the threats to those values, and the effectiveness of protection and management strategies and actions.

Dr. Halpenny, along with PhD candidate Dee Patriquin, consulted widely and completed their Rocky Mountain Parks outlook assessment last December. The assessment is presented as a series of worksheets. The first identifies the World Heritage values found in our Rocky Mountain treasures; the second describes and assesses threats to those values; the third assesses the state of protection and management; the fourth worksheet assesses the current state and trend of World Heritage values in the Parks; the fifth offers an overall conservation outlook assessment; the sixth, and final, worksheet detailed the assessors' views of the key conservation problems affecting the Rocky Mountains World Heritage Site.

Most members of our conservation community won't be surprised to learn that the biodiversity and the "exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance" of the Rocky Mountain Parks figures prominently in the list of heritage values. For me, that list also reminded me of

something I'd forgotten – the outstanding geomorphic and physiographic features found in the parks (ie. the Burgess Shale and glaciation).

With respect to assessing threats, Halpenny and Patriquin identified 22 current

mer use at Mt. Norquay, and front country development in Field helped to justify the severity of the commercial/industrial expansion assessment.

Turning to potential threats in the future they see climate change remaining as a very high threat. It's joined in this respect by "visitation management goals." Here the concern is largely that the government aspires to increase the number of visitors to national parks while it slashes Parks Canada's finances and staff (for details on the 2012 cuts to Parks Canada see the February issue of *WLA*).

The assessment regards "changes in traditional ways of life and knowledge systems" as potentially a high threat. Here the potential severity rests in "mandate conflict;" future Parks visitors are thought more likely to want front country, not back country, experiences. This may intensify the clash between core park values such as ecological integrity and the interest in increasing numbers of visitors.

What conclusions did the authors reach about the overall severity of threats to the Rocky Mountain Parks? Combining current and potential threats together they concluded that the threat level is high. They seemed encouraged by the presence of recent management plans, plans that identified necessary actions. But climate change appears to be a game-changer. They wrote:

"Climate change will have significant negative effects on site values and integrity. The ability to manage these changes is extremely limited." These circumstances are aggravated by budget and staff cuts that "could affect the ability to detect and manage future threats and effectiveness of



*Majestic Bull Elk, Athabasca River, Jasper National Park.*

PHOTO: © C. WEARMOUTH

threats to World Heritage values. Climate change was the only current threat they felt merited "very high threat" status; invasive species, dams/water management, and commercial/industrial expansion within and outside the parks were "high" threats. Brewster's Glacier Walk, expanded sum-

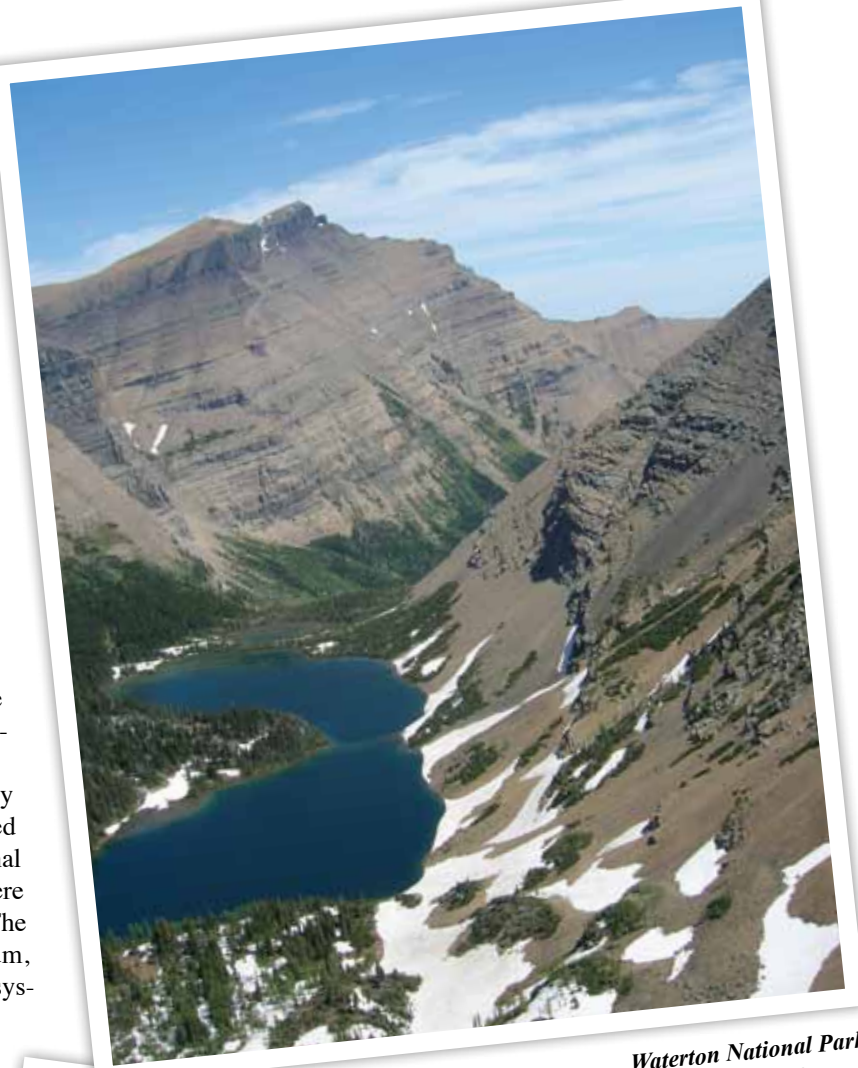
current management actions.”

When it came to assessing protection and management the authors assigned ratings to fifteen protection and management topics. Five categories were used: highly effective, mostly effective, some concern, serious concern, and data deficient. The serious concern rating was only assigned to one topic – sustainable finance. Cuts plus relying on visitor fees/increased visitation to finance Park operations have a double-barreled potential to affect negatively park values. It’s apparent though that this serious concern about sustainable finance also figures importantly in placing other topics – research, monitoring, staff training and development, management effectiveness, and management system – into the “some concern” category. Starving Parks Canada of financial and personnel resources looms large in the overall assessment of protection and management. “Funding challenges and pressure to supplement revenues through visitor use fees will be an on-going pressure for park managers,” Halpenny and Patriquin write, “affecting operational, research and monitoring and resource management programs. In the short-term, some programs may receive insufficient support, potentially placing resource values at risk.”

Are there examples of best practices in the Rocky Mountain Parks? The authors thought so. They singled out citizen science monitoring projects in Banff National Park as one such example. Collaborative partnerships were highlighted as a best practice in Jasper National Park. The partnerships identified were the Jasper Aboriginal Forum, the Foothills Research Group, and the Yellowhead Ecosystem Group. Efforts in Jasper to engage Canadian youth such as the Jasper Youth Summit on Sustainability also were highlighted as an example of best practices.

The IUCN Conservation Worksheet next considered the current state and trend of World Heritage values. Overall the authors concluded that these values are standing up quite well; they assigned an overall rating of “low concern.” These values likely would have received an overall rating of “good” had it not been for concerns about biodiversity (for example, as reflected in the status of woodland caribou, grizzly bears, wolves, and pikas in the region).

The conservation outlook portrait drawn here is one classified as “good with some concerns.” According to the authors the public record is one where World Heritage values have consistently been a focus of management plans in the Rocky Mountain Parks. This generally positive assessment does not mean that there aren’t important conservation issues that need further attention. The worksheet ends with a list of key conservation issues in the parks. Topping that list is “consistent management direction with ecological integrity as a core mission.” We would echo that view but urge the IUCN to make one small, but crucial, editorial change. Ecological integrity should be seen “as THE core mission.” 🌲



*Waterton National Park.*  
PHOTO: © H. UNGER



*Sentinel Pass, Banff National Park.*  
PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS