

# “It ain’t so, Madam Minister, is it?”: The Castle Parks

Baseball fans who appreciate the history of that game likely know about the Black Sox scandal – the allegations the Chicago White Sox threw the 1919 World Series. Legend has it that a young fan, outside the courthouse where the trial of the “Black” Sox players took place, went up to his disgraced hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson, and asked: “It ain’t so, Joe, is it?”

It’s a question I hope Minister Phillips will answer in light of quotes in the *Pincher Creek Echo* last October from Peter Swain, the Regional Director of Parks in Alberta’s South Region. His comments should raise a red flag for anyone concerned about what the government may think is compatible with its stated objective to “fully protect” the Castle area.

I think the Regional Director’s most troubling comment was this one: “This would be the only provincial park that actually has OHV use as a primary use.”

Why is the comment troubling? It’s troubling for both procedural and substantive reasons. The procedural concern questions the sincerity of the department’s public consultation process. The comment appears to have been made on October 7, 2015, less than two days after the government’s consultation window on the Castle Parks closed. If the Regional Director was prepared to say then that OHV use would be a primary use in the Castle provincial park what was the point of the government’s 30-day consultation process? That process invited Albertans, through a remarkably poorly designed survey, for their input on what activities should and should not be allowed in the new Provincial and Wildland Parks.

From the perspective of process, I also have to wonder what local conservationists in the Castle region think about the

Regional Director’s statement. Did they imagine their many hours of collaboration would lead the government to go where no previous government had gone before – to endorsing OHV use as a primary use in a Provincial Park? I can’t believe they expected to ever see such a statement from a senior government official or that their commitment to consultation would deliver such a declaration.

Substantively, the comment is troubling for the lack of understanding it suggests about the relationship between recreation activities and the first two purposes of parks outlined in the *Provincial Parks Act*. Those purposes are: “the preservation of Alberta’s natural heritage” and “the conservation and management of flora and fauna.”

The *Pincher Creek Echo* article says the Regional Director joked that the *Parks Act* says “thou shalt doeth of recreation.” In the Castle Parks the government is breaking new, troubling ground when it comes to what this commandment means. People will be allowed to do all of the activities they’ve historically been allowed to “doeth” on these public lands.

Such a view – that all recreation activities promote the preservation and conservation purposes of parks as outlined in the *Parks Act* – is dead wrong. One hopes it doesn’t have much support among Alberta’s public servants because it’s so blinkered, so mistaken. It’s a view where only industrial activity threatens ecological integrity. AWA’s longstanding work and research in the Bighorn have shown year after year the damage irresponsible OHV use does to the land. To suggest that full protection of the Castle is compatible with a recreation activity such as OHV use turns a blind eye to that record.

Christyann Olson, AWA’s Executive Director, had the opportunity to meet with Minister Phillips in March. Christyann’s sense was one of cautious optimism that the Minister has not determined there will be OHV recreation in the Castle Parks and that she is more than aware of the precedents at risk, the risk to critical wildlife and prime protection zones, and the requirements under the westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat order.

I hope that’s the case and that the Minister will tell Albertans soon that the statements from last fall don’t reflect her government’s current policy preferences for the Castle. Please Madam Minister, tell Albertans it ain’t so. Tell them the Regional Director was mistaken in saying that OHV use would be a primary use in the Castle Provincial Park. Tell them there’s one aspect of the history of Alberta’s provincial parks you treasure and want to leave intact for future generations – the belief our provincial parks shouldn’t be places for hunters and OHV riders to enjoy themselves. If you’d like a venue for such a welcome statement *Wildlands Advocate* would be delighted to publish it in our June issue.

-Ian Urquhart, Editor