

The Proposed Jasper Bicycle Trail: Mythbusters



A portion of the old highway between Jasper and Lake Louise that could be developed for bicycles. PHOTO: © J. SEATON

Recent media frenzy about the sudden announcement of a \$65.9 million bike trail, dubbed the “Icefields Trail,” in Jasper National Park has left environmental groups and the public confused.

Little is known about the project, but recent media articles have revealed some details of Parks Canada’s plans: the trail will eventually run from Jasper to Lake Louise, new paving will be required for its construction, and the completion date of the project is March 2019. When appointed to cabinet, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada Catherine McKenna’s mandate letter instructed her to “Protect our National Parks by limiting development within them...,” “Enhance protection of Canada’s endangered species...” and “restore robust oversight and thorough environmental assessments of areas under federal jurisdiction.” AWA is seriously concerned about many aspects of this project. Here’s a clarification of AWA’s position on the issue.

Myth: AWA is opposed to all trails. AWA is opposed to people going into Parks.

Reality: AWA is not opposed to trails. Well-sited trails that reduce impact/disturbances on wildlife and provide safe recreation experiences for visitors should be enjoyed. All of us at AWA love getting out in nature, and that’s hard to do without trails! The size, location, and sensitivity of the area are all factors to consider when deciding whether a trail is appropriate.

Myth: Won’t the bike trail just go along the Icefields Parkway?

Reality: At this point, the route hasn’t been determined. There would be little ecological impact if the trail was an added lane on the highway, like the Banff-to-Canmore Legacy trail. However, there are rumors this project will go along an old road, which hasn’t been used for decades and nature is reclaiming.

Myth: A bike trail will be more environmentally friendly since it will reduce vehicular traffic on the Icefields Parkway.

Reality: A bike trail will likely not reduce the amount of vehicle traffic in the mountain national parks, at least in the short term. The route from Lake Louise to Jasper, where this trail is rumored to go, is 233km with enough elevation gain to frighten even a seasoned cycle touring group. Parks Canada has said the trail will be accessible, and will be mostly flat. See next Myth.

Myth: A new bike trail will be safer.

Reality: It’s not so simple. Certainly, a trail such as the Banff-to-Canmore Legacy trail reduces the risk of bike-vehicle collisions, while keeping out of critical areas that wildlife need to move. On the other hand, a trail that is far away from the main roadway increases the chance of carnivore-cyclist conflicts (read: spooking a sow bear with cubs on a bike = NOT GOOD). Unfortunately, both people and wildlife prefer to travel where it is easiest: valley bottoms. The easiest place for a trail is also the best habitat for bears, ungulates, and everything they feed on. To think about this further, we would also need to obtain statistics on bike-vehicle collisions on the Icefields Parkway, to see if cycling is currently unsafe on that road. A newly paved shoulder or bike lane adjacent to the highway would assist cyclists in staying to the side safely, away from vehicles, while still providing an enjoyable experience.

Myth: Parks Canada is telling me there will be no net environmental impact, so I shouldn’t be worried.

Reality: We certainly hope this trail won’t have a negative environmental impact. However, Parks Canada or ENGOs won’t know the impacts until an Environmental Assessment (EA) is completed. EAs are a tool to determine the environmental impacts of a

project, and if there are any, what mitigation measures will be done to protect the environment. Sometimes, EA recommendations are ignored in favour of promoting economic growth or securing political support. Sometimes EAs are rejected as incomplete. The Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) and environmental groups like AWA are watching to ensure an EA is done properly. It’s Parks Canada’s job to implement any mitigation measures that an EA determines appropriate.

Myth: This trail is not related to anything else going on in the National Parks.

Reality: AWA has documented increasing commercialization and development pressures in the Rocky Mountain National Parks, including expansion of the Lake Louise ski area, proposals for hotels near Maligne Lake, and other developments such as the Glacier Skywalk and a canyoning (rapelling or climbing in canyons) business right in the habitat of endangered black swift and threatened moss species. These are privatizing park experiences and prioritizing ‘visitor experience’ over conservation. AWA believes that visitor experiences and ecological integrity can co-exist, by increasing interpretive experiences and effectively protecting the wildlife and habitats that brings millions to the parks each year.

Myth: The 66 million dollars has already been allocated to this project, so it’s too late to care.

Reality: We trust a final decision hasn’t been taken yet. We think more thought needs to go into spending priorities in our National Parks. It’s no secret that Parks Canada’s budget for ecologically-focused activities have suffered in recent times. Is spending \$66 million on a new bike trail a good investment when compared with what the Rocky Mountain National Parks need with respect to wildlife management, educational interpretive programs, and maintenance of existing infrastructure? This venture says to AWA that there is a need to think more carefully about what the balance should be between spending taxpayer dollars on visitor experiences and spending those funds on conservation objectives.

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