

A “Fully-Protected” Castle: A Bridge Too Far?

Our goal looked so close. With a bold plan we could reach it in only a matter of a few months. All our allies and much of our energy and resources were devoted to realizing the goal by Christmas. But, a determined opposition combined with unwarranted assumptions and dubious decisions were our undoing. We failed.

This is a cryptic summary of Operation Market Garden, the Allies’ effort in September 1944 to end the Second World War before the dawn of 1945. This heroic failure was dramatized in the film “A Bridge Too Far” – a reference to a bridge in Arnhem, Netherlands, a bridge the Allies couldn’t capture.

I worry that the fully-protected Castle the government promised in September 2015 is destined to be, like the bridge at Arnhem, a bridge too far for this government to secure. It seems with each passing week that Premier Notley’s government is stepping further and further back from the substance of the promising headline her Minister of Environment and Parks delivered 18 months ago.

For months now the decisions from headquarters have been, at best, perplexing or, at worst, daft. Take the March 10th release of a revised draft Castle management plan for you to comment on. It comes in the middle of the public consultation process [on the original draft plan](#). Why revise the original plan before all the comments on the original plan are in? What reputable polling or consultation guide recommended this?

The extent to which Alberta continues to ignore the scientific imperative on the Castle issue is perplexing or daft...you decide. It’s sadly ironic for at least two reasons. First, during the legislative debates over climate change, opposition members in

the legislature who ignore the science were called “ideologues” by the government. Shouldn’t this same characterization apply to those who oppose a fully-protected Castle? Shouldn’t the government follow its interpretation of the scientific imperative?

Second, the government’s draft management plan baldly, bluntly states that science demands a total and immediate ban on OHVs in the Castle parks. It reads: “off-highway vehicle use at current or substantially reduced levels is incompatible with conservation goals of the parks.” The FAQ section about the plan states: “(O)ff-highway vehicle use is not scientifically supportable in the Castle Provincial Park and Castle Wildland Provincial Park.” If you’re still not convinced read the reports from Global Forest Watch Canada. The science is unequivocal. OHVs should be banned immediately and totally from the Castle parks.

How has the government implemented conservation science so far? For six weeks it looked like the government would immediately ban all OHVs south of Highway 774 in the parks. Premier Notley announced this on January 20th. Her Minister of Environment and Parks reversed this decision. OHVs have the government’s blessing to continue to operate on designated trails during a three to five-year period in the parks.

Other omissions and additions to the revised draft management plan should raise our concerns too. The government will work with OHV users (the more mindless of whom chanted “lock her up” at the Premier during her January press conference) to prioritize the trails to phase out over the next five years “based on environmental and other criteria.” No mention there of conservationists; no mention there of what “other criteria” entail.

Also, the original draft plan clearly stated that the reclamation of illegal trails and the restoration of designated trails would be restored “for non-motorized use.” Poof. The reference to non-motorized use is now gone from the revised plan.

If what we’re witnessing is perplexing or daft from the perspective of conservation science maybe it makes sense according to politics. Bad politics. The government must believe there’s some political credit to be earned by “just” telling OHV users that their days of using Castle parks are numbered. Would an immediate ban of OHVs in the Castle be any more unpopular among the very small minority who use these machines than phasing them out? And, the New Democrats have to be dreaming in 3D if they think people with deep-enough pockets to shell out \$15 grand for a “Sportsman” ATV are going to join the coalition needed to secure their re-election in 2019.

A more politically-astute position would be to take the principled, scientifically-sound, ground. Ban OHVs today from these parks. That’s the position more likely to garner the continued and new voter support in places such as Calgary and Edmonton the Premier’s party will need to have real hope of re-election in 2019.

-Ian Urquhart, Editor