

The \$87 Million Icefields Trail – Really??

As the bicycle racks outside of AWA's Calgary home suggest, AWA is a fan of bicycle transportation. But we're opposed to Parks Canada's proposal to build a 109 kilometre paved bicycle trail that would parallel Highway 93A from Jasper to the Wilcox Campground at the boundary of Banff National Park.

The estimated price tag for this project is an eye-popping \$87 million. You won't be surprised to hear that AWA feels these funds would be much better allocated if they went into the Heritage Resources Conservation Program. This is the program that, in the Parks Canada Agency's *2013-2014 Report on Plans and Priorities*, was said to include "maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity in national parks through protection of natural resources and natural processes..."

This whopping infrastructure commitment led me to crunch some numbers. I wanted to know just how much of the national Parks Canada budget was, is, and will be allocated to different programs. Those numbers confirm how justified AWA is to be

worried about the place of ecological integrity in the planning of the Agency's senior administrative and political leaders.

I was disappointed but not surprised to note that, over the years when the Conservatives enjoyed a majority government, the percentage of the Parks Canada budget devoted to Heritage Resources Conservation suffered. It fell from 23.4 percent in 2011/12 to 15.8 percent in the 2015/16 fiscal year.

But the Trudeau government doesn't seem interested in redressing this situation. In fact, the 2017-18 departmental plan for the Parks Canada Agency indicates that the Trudeau government is quite content to see this percentage continue to decline. By 2019/20 the Liberals intend Heritage Resources Conservation program spending to fall to 13.8 percent of total spending.

This further percentage decline comes despite the fact that Parks Canada Agency spending is projected to rise from \$1.036 billion in 2015/16 to \$1.312 billion in 2019/20. This is a 27 percent increase over four years, much more than what likely would be needed to keep pace with inflation.

If the additional resources aren't planned

for protecting and enhancing ecological integrity what will they be spent on? Much of it will be spent on infrastructure such as the paved Icefields Trail. Nearly 36 percent of the planned spending in 2019/20 by Parks Canada is intended to go to Heritage Canals, Highways and Townsites Management. This is a program dedicated to "the management of infrastructure for Canadians and provides opportunities for socio-economic benefits to adjacent communities." When the Government of Canada writes that "(t)his investment demonstrates the government's responsible stewardship of Canada's protected places" it's talking about the more than \$3 billion intended for highway improvements and other infrastructure projects. Bike trails too. It's not talking about ecological integrity.

Over the course of only eight fiscal years the Canadian government intends to increase the Parks Canada Agency's spending on infrastructure by a staggering 349 percent. It will increase from \$104.4 million in 2011/12 to \$468.5 million in 2019/20. Those eight fiscal years will see that type of spending grow from 15.4 percent of the Parks Canada budget to 35.7 percent.

Imagine what might be done for the eco-

