

# Updates

## Let's Talk Parks Canada

National parks have been under scrutiny in the month of January as Parks Canada held one of the largest public consultations in years.

Parks Canada manages national parks, national historic sites, and marine conservation areas. As a conservation group in a landlocked province, AWA focused on speaking up for the health and integrity of national parks. Alberta's five national parks (Waterton, Banff, Jasper, Wood Buffalo, and Elk Island) make up an important part of the province's network of protected areas.

The *Parks Canada Agency Act* requires Parks Canada to convene a round table of people interested in the subject matter of concern to Parks Canada at least once every 2 years "to advise the Minister [of Environment] on the performance of the Agency of its responsibilities under Section 6." Those responsibilities include implementing policies relating to national parks and other federal protected areas, ensuring there are long-term plans for establishing systems of national parks and protected areas, and negotiating and recommending to the Minister the establishment new protected areas. What was new this year was that the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, opened up the consultation to all Canadians. This is a big undertaking, not least because the Act requires the Minister to respond within 180 days to any written recommendations submitted.

AWA was invited to attend a mid-January stakeholder meeting in Calgary. In our view, the consultation avoided directly addressing the performance of the Parks Canada Agency. We had hoped they would ask participants: "Is Parks Canada doing a good job?" They didn't. Instead, they asked us to address some of the significant problems the agency is facing like

environmental change, indigenous relations, and visitor experience.

Parks Canada's *State of the Parks Report* in January 2016 revealed that almost half of parks are in fair or poor condition. Indicators that Parks Canada evaluated are based on ecosystem type (i.e., forest, grassland, tundra). In all of Alberta's National Parks, five indicators were rated "good", seven indicators were "fair", and three indicators were "poor". Visitation numbers in all five parks have increased in 2015/16. However, comparing this Report to previous years is not "apples to apples" because the number of indicators has changed. The public can't also see behind the scenes on how the indicators were evaluated, leaving us with questions about scientific accuracy and public transparency.

Business pressures may be contributing to a greater difficulty in realizing ecological objectives. Language in the Agency's 2012-13/2016-17 Corporate Plan, for ex-

ample, could be interpreted as favouring commerce over ecology. It reads in part: "To mitigate its Competitive Position risk, the Agency continues to **enhance** the tools and training available to the dedicated teams of external relations and visitor experience professionals... Parks Canada will also mitigate this key corporate risk through proactive events and promotion of places and products available to visitors..." However, to mitigate a key corporate risk "Environmental Forces", Parks Canada "will **continue to implement**" improving ecological integrity indicators. (my emphasis) It appears that conservation may be taking a back seat to commercial growth. Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) reported in their own state of the Parks report that spending on visitor experience in 2015/16 was almost double conservation – that's \$202.8 million spent on visitor experience compared to \$99.3 million on national park conservation, and a mere \$15.9 million on national park establishment.

Since protecting the ecological integrity



*Special events, such as the Banff-Jasper relay, bring thousands to the mountain National Parks each year. AWA has argued in the past that such events are inappropriate activities in National Parks. These events disrupt wildlife and do not align with National Parks ecological integrity mandate. PHOTO: © AWA*

of national parks is the primary priority of Parks Canada we requested the Minister adhere to and strengthen this commitment. We urged the government to restore funding for science, bring back legislated environmental assessments, and improve interpretive and stewardship programs.

As wonderful as our national parks are – after all, they contain some of Canada’s best protected and representative natural regions – they’re far from perfect. They face a wide range of challenges and threats. Wood Buffalo National Park, for example, is threatened by upstream dam development. In fact, the Mikisew Cree has petitioned to list the park as a World Heritage Site in Danger and AWA agrees that the threats are real and must be removed.

The Banff townsite has exceeded its mandated permanent resident population cap of 8,000; still further development is being approved with its potential to in-

crease that population further.

In Jasper, the Maligne and Brazeau caribou herds, thought to number less than 10 individuals, are considered “functionally extinct” by scientists. Caribou in Jasper are known to be genetically different than in B.C. or elsewhere in Alberta. Losing Jasper’s caribou means losing critical genetics that may help boost the chance of recovery and reintroduction through the mountain parks. AWA has asked for consideration to be given to conservation in the spending priorities in National Parks. For example, the well-publicized “Jasper bike trail,” rumored to go through endangered caribou habitat, will cost **\$87 million**; meanwhile the federal government committed in 2012 to spend **\$4.5 million** over six years for the Banff, Jasper, Revelstoke and Glacier National Park caribou conservation strategy. These spending plans don’t do any favours for ecological

integrity. With figures like that, it’s hard to argue that conservation is a priority over adventure tourism experiences.

National parks and other Parks Canada sites face the worrying threat of climate change. While it is difficult for the Parks Canada Agency to change “external threats” if federal protected areas are managed according to the principles of protection, conservation, and restoration their resilience to change may improve. From reading the public’s comments on the online forum in January, I think most Canadians agree. Let’s hope the Minister will as well when she responds to the national conversation about parks.

You can read AWA’s submission at: <https://albertawilderness.ca/mrt-2017/>

- *Andrea Johancsik*