

recreation areas. The government decided it's not worth using your tax dollars to continue funding many of the provincial parks, natural areas, comfort camping areas, and recreation areas dotted across Alberta – most of which were established by Progressive Conservative governments. The government has decided it's time to either close them or privatize them. The latter is what the government really means when it describes its plans to make these areas “available for partnership opportunities or alternative management approaches.”

As Grace Wark noted in AWA's March 3rd news release (<https://albertawilderness.ca/news-release-government-plans-to-remove-164-sites-from-parks-system/>), the Ministry of Environment and Parks justifies this action in part because the 164 locations targeted are “mainly small and underutilized.” It didn't consult the public at all before taking the axe to these sites. It also calls into question the sincerity of the government's commitment to ensure that 17 percent of Alberta lands are protected and conserved by the end of **this year** (in 2018-19 Alberta's actual protected areas percentage was 14.7 percent). This target, set in order to achieve globally-agreed to biodiversity conservation objectives, was established by the Harper Conservative government.

In the longer term the apparent logic behind these actions is distressing for what it says about the societal values governments should privilege. First, the Minister's spokeswoman asserts this is about a long overdue modernization of Alberta's parks system. Since modernization has positive connotations to many, this decision therefore must be a positive one. To this point, Bob Weber of the Canadian Press quotes her as saying: “Government is subsidizing a financially struggling system year after year, while attempting to ensure maintenance, programs and services remain at a high level.”

J.B. Harkin, the first Commissioner of Canada's National Parks system, said the following more than a century ago: “National Parks exist for the people. They are the people's share of the natural beauty of the mountain, lake, and stream.” He didn't say they should only exist for the people if the people paid

enough in user fees so that the government could break even. In the user-pay world Minister Nixon advocates, this outlook on parks is in danger. If a provincial park or recreation area doesn't make enough money, it doesn't merit inclusion in the province's stable of protected and recreation areas – despite the taxes most of us pay to fund these and other services. The dollar and cost-recovery through user fees, not a place's natural beauty, are the trump cards in this world.

If these parks, natural areas, and recreation areas are being underutilized, there are other ways of addressing that issue. The tolerance of random camping, especially in the vicinity of established parks and recreation areas, robs these sites of clientele. As long as government accepts the belief of some Albertans that it's their right to set up camp anywhere they want, it's unlikely the use of designated campgrounds will increase.

As Grace pointed out, there wasn't any consultation about this major decision. Unfortunately, this may be a norm the government aspires to establish and follow. And, if consultation does take place, will it be widespread? When the government changed grazing fees, it only consulted the groups most likely to agree with their changes. Likely supporters got invitations. Those who might have suggested other options were left outside the door.

This is symptomatic of an unhealthy stealth and secrecy animating much of what we've seen so far from the UCP government. Looking ahead, is it the case that Minister Nixon plans to introduce a permit fee that would be used to finance the construction and upkeep of recreational trails on public lands? And what kind of trails – motorized, equestrian, or hiking trails – would be financed by this fee? Does the Minister plan to consult with Albertans about this idea? When will those consultations begin and who will be invited to those consultations?

The concern about stealth and the questions above don't arise from any news release from the Minister of Environment and Parks. They arise instead from a close reading of the February 2020 budget. There, Schedule 22 (page 219 of the 2020-23 fiscal plan) states that

## Another Punch to Parks

In the December 2019 issue of the *Advocate* we detailed the provincial government's plans for fulfilling its environmental stewardship responsibilities. Those plans were outlined in the UCP government's first budget, “A Plan for Jobs and the Economy.” The picture wasn't pretty; it was a punch in the gut. The October 2019 budget promised to reduce full-time staff in Alberta Environment and Parks significantly; it promised to cut spending on core ministry responsibilities.

The February 2020 budget does not pause those measures. In fact, this downsizing is accelerating. A further 49 full-time positions are estimated to evaporate in the 2020-21 fiscal year. The Ministry's operating expenses for 2020-21, targeted to be \$575 million last October, are now estimated to be no more than \$532 million – a further \$43 million cut. The Minister's 2022-23 target is now \$537 million, \$13 million less than the target of just five months ago.

In a related vein, the government used its latest budget to deliver another punch to your network of provincial parks and rec-

Environment and Parks plans to introduce a new trail permit, not in this budget year, but in the 2021-22 fiscal year. This \$30 fee would be designated for “supporting development, maintenance and longevity of recreation trails on Crown land.” So Minister Nixon, what’s up? When will you be announcing your consultation with Albertans about the trail permit system you’ve committed to in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 fiscal years?

*- Ian Urquhart*