

The Alberta Parks Clearance Sale:

Wiping Out Memories

By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



The Alberta government plan to divest, downgrade or deconsecrate 184 of the province's Parks and Recreation Areas is bold, imperious and tone-deaf. This scheme targets "small, underutilized" Parks and their facilities for the ostensible rationale that this decision will save money. It is an ironic twist, given the desire to increase tourism (and tourism dollars) to bolster an otherwise failing economy. If tourism is a new provincial pot of gold what sense does it make to divest ourselves of the "pots"—the provincial Parks and Recreation Areas that add to the destinations of interest? It seems a more prudent strategy would be to extoll the diversity of choices available for recreational users, rather than to cut choices.

We have been here before with this perverse ideological bent that recreation, based on Parks facilities, is an unnecessary luxury to be dumped in economic downturns. During the infamous Klein cuts many Parks facilities were privatized. The net impact of that short-sighted decision was the erosion of services, widespread user dissatisfaction, declines in use, failure to maintain Parks infrastructure and, a huge public rebuilding cost to bring facilities back to acceptable standards. How that decision saved us money remains unanswered. One might think even a casual review of history might provide pause to the current thinking.

Parks on the list of the damned touch people in every part of Alberta. They form an interconnected network to experience all that is Alberta, and are envied by many other jurisdictions. Yes, some of these are

small and uncrowded — those are two of their virtues, not a reason to dump them. They are viable alternatives to those popular (and overused) Parks that fill up immediately when the reservation line is opened.

Others on the hit list are extremely popular, contradicting the stated assertion all

are underutilized. The metric for decision making is either flawed, suspect, or both.

What is missing from this cold-hearted, clinical economic evaluation of Parks performance is the human aspect. These places figure prominently in Albertans' (and others) memories, forging an al-



The Oldman River as it emerges from the Gap in the Livingstone Range. Three provincial recreation areas along the Oldman River will be removed from the provincial parks system. They are among the 164 sites that will then "be available for partnership opportunities or alternative management approaches."

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legiance with the outdoors. Some were places where a kid first spent a night outdoors, tingling with fear at all the ominous night sounds. Later these spots were the avenue for interacting with wildlife, catching a fish and gaining some rudimentary appreciation for wilder landscapes. Many became the go-to sites for escaping noisy, busy cityscapes and the stresses of work responsibilities to experience fresh air, quiet and relaxation. For those of us no longer gainfully employed these are a cheap holiday choice, especially mid-week, to sample more of Alberta.

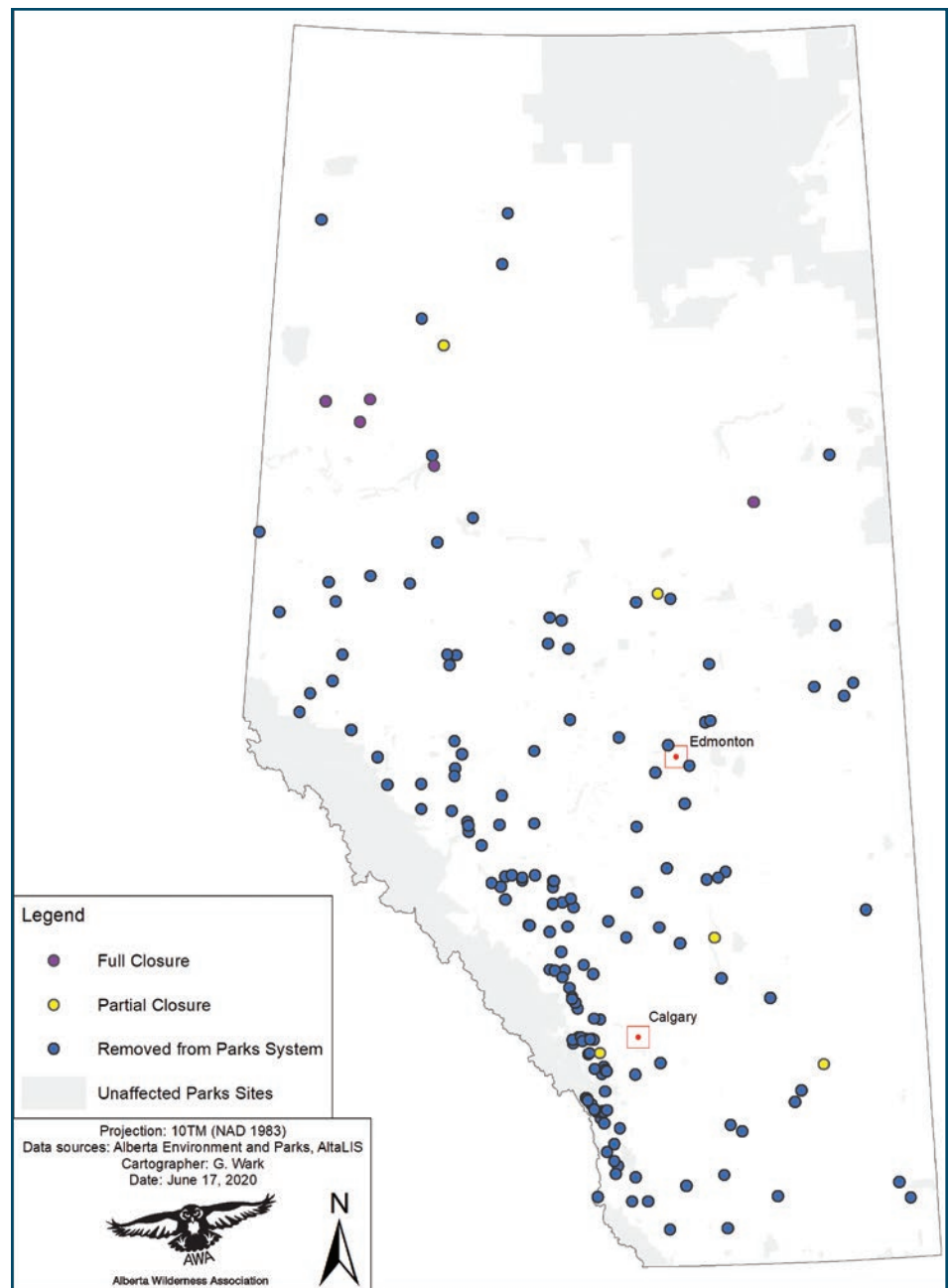
There are memories from these places that time does not erase. Memories warm you up from the inside, like hot chocolate on a frigid day. But they also tear you apart, like learning of the loss of a place that inspired, motivated and educated you.

In a deep pool, beneath an immense logjam I saw my first bull trout. I didn't know then it was a bull trout; I was to learn that much later. Precariously perched on that logjam, peering into the deep water, that baseball bat-shaped fish, with white leading edges on its fins made an inescapable impression on me.

This occurred on a family picnic on the Tay River, a small tributary of the Clearwater River, west of Caroline. The little picnic site later morphed into the Tay River Provincial Recreation Area. I had snuck off from potato salad and chicken sandwiches coupled with boring adult conversation, to scramble out on that logjam.

The context is still clear—the logs had collected on an outside bend, pick-up stick fashion, I suppose from a previous flood, maybe several. Some of the logs were white with age, the bark sloughing off them; other trees were fresh and you could get a good grip on them. Clambering out on this precarious perch I could stare down into a mesmerizing abyss beneath my feet, as the stream swirled and disappeared under the logjam.

Had my mother caught me there, words would have been spoken, followed with an obligatory swat or two. I suppose I would have been about ten and at that age



Proposed Closures and Removals from the Provincial Parks System. On June 23, 2020 the government very quietly announced it would keep 17 of the 20 parks originally slated for closure open this summer "because we want to give Albertans more opportunities to camp and connect with nature over the summer as we all recover from the COVID-19 pandemic." Apparently, such opportunities aren't needed if and when Alberta recovers from the pandemic. PHOTO: © G. WARK/AWA

the scale of water depth, danger and adventure were far out of proportion to adult sensibilities, especially maternal ones.

But I swear, that bull trout was as long as I was tall, or nearly so, it seemed to me. On that I am clear after nearly 60 years. I dropped my only lure, a Len Thompson red and white, down to dangle it in front of its nose. My parents frowned at the idea of lure redundancy, having more than one hook in the tackle box. It was expected

that a lure was to be protected, stewarded and, if lost, retrieved. It was a gamble to present it to this fish since it took some maneuvering to get it down through the labyrinth of logs. The fish didn't take the bait, saving both of us considerable grief.

A picture of that bull trout still hangs in my mind, unclouded by the passage of time or the trivialities of living. The memory remains vivid and still resonates. Without the little provincial picnic area on

the Tay River that experience would not have happened. The current site on the Tay River is on the list to be outsourced, privatized or otherwise stigmatized. If it is cut loose, it is unlikely that someday, another kid will peer through a new logjam and be inspired by another bull trout. No guarantees exist that a privatized, for-profit site, or worse, a closed one, will offer those chances.

In 1970 a friend and I spent a couple of weeks following the Forestry Trunk Road from Nordegg to Coleman. We fished, hiked and camped, using Forest Service campsites as our bases. Memories (but sadly few photographs) include campsites on the North Ram, Elk Creek, Wildhorse Creek, Fallentimber Creek, Cataract Creek and Livingstone Falls. All of these are now due for some type of political malvolence, verging on extreme prejudice.

It was a low budget trip, partly through a lack of resources and mostly through poor planning, especially in the grocery department. We ate a lot of trout, and bartered trout to unsuccessful anglers to round out our diet. Many campsites harbored wild strawberries, raspberries; some had blueberries. We staved off scurvy with our wild fruit harvests. There was a sense you could live off the land—with the occasional handout of bread, peanut butter and wieners. None of these sites were crowded, but it was also a time when random camping was discouraged.

My explorations were facilitated by the Forest Service campsites (later to be integrated into Provincial Recreation Areas). From those bases I was able to gain an understanding of Alberta landscapes, especially the foothills and mountains. The angling experience provided a tutorial on the fish populations of the Eastern Slopes, which was to come in handy as I took on my career aspiration of being a biologist. In retrospect, those small campsites showed how recreation could be effectively managed. This was to change over the next decade with Dogpatch-like mobs of recreational vehicles randomly hogging nearly every grassy glade and accessible

stream bank.

The Narrows is a channel joining Buffalo Lake to smaller waterbodies and wetlands on the southwest corner of the lake. It was there I began my career as a biologist. I worked on the northern pike population of Buffalo Lake, trying to solve a perplexing puzzle of where the fish spawned. A fish trap in the Narrows channel allowed us to capture pike, tag them, and then follow their movements. This all happened in the spring, immediately after ice out. The aspen woodlands at the Narrows resounded with a cacophony of bird song, from returning migrants. Geese, sandhill cranes, great blue herons, every possible puddle duck and chorus frogs added to the harmony. For a young biologist this was nirvana.

The site became The Narrows Provincial Recreation Area, more upscale, more facility based. This was all necessary to deal with the uptick in use, to control vehicle access on the edge of the wetland and to provide some rules, anathema to some users. The Narrows is yet another site proposed for some retrogressive status.

Changes to Park status, divestment, privatization or abandonment will have some

consequences. I believe those consequences are predictable. Standards will change, rules will be watered down or disappear, and these will cause many to reconsider whether these places are safe destinations, especially for family use. Those sites turned over to “partnership” agreements will be subject to different business models, more expensive for users, with a shift from the original intent of a Parks site.

A very real concern is that many sites will revert to party spots, subject to bad behaviour, indiscriminate shooting, random camping, no toilet facilities, unregulated off highway vehicle use, vandalism and rampant disregard for any rules. There is the sense from the Minister of Environment and Parks that an ad hoc approach to the management of former Parks sites will produce a superior outcome to the current situation. The Minister thinks all Albertans will be good stewards of these places after all of the rules and enforcement disappears. This is delusional.

This will lead to increased conflict with wildlife and between user groups. That will require more management presence after the fact to clean up the mess. Who will bear this cost—the Alberta taxpayer.



There isn't any eleventh reprieve for the Elk Creek provincial recreation area and fish pond.
PHOTO: © L. FITCH

In fact, several of the Parks sites on the list were examples of this, until local authorities asked for Parks status to be applied to deal with the issues.

In the fullness of time, if these draconian parks cuts happen, many Albertans may muse that once we had a provincial parks system and it worked very well. Long forgotten will be the infinitesimal and largely illusionary cost savings of the cuts. People will remember though the lost opportunities for outdoor recreational activities spread over all of Alberta. There was variety and one could, as part of the same system, experience the grasslands, the foothills, the mountains, the parkland, the boreal, and even a sliver of the Canadian Shield. There were lakes and streams, prairie grasslands, aspen woodlands, the brooding mixed-wood forest, the crags, the piney odor of lodgepole pine to revel in. One could see grizzlies, mountain sheep, warblers, cutthroat trout, cactus,

and calypso orchids.

Because these were provincial Parks and Recreation Areas Albertans knew that the same standards applied to all. You didn't need a membership or a platinum credit card. The sites were clean, the toilets maintained, the garbage picked up and water was available. The cost of camping was affordable regardless of your family's financial realities. Interpretive materials, hiking trails, firewood and picnic tables were often standard features.

Yes, it was basic, but of a known quality. There was also a consistent set of rules for users—quiet times, restrictions on pets, where fires can occur—all designed to enhance recreational experience and safety as well as protect the site facilities, wildlife and vegetation. Often, patrols by Parks staff with enforcement capability occurred.

Generations of Albertans have fond memories of park use embedded in their psyches. I certainly do! Parks not only

satisfy our recreational needs, but also provide nature appreciation, improved physical and mental health, a better understanding of the diversity of Alberta and, for local businesses, sales of gas, groceries and beer. It seems evident to me that the proposed clearance sale on provincial Parks and Recreation Areas indicates the architects of this know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.

Provincial politicians need reminding, from time to time, that memories are strong about the role of Parks in the lives of Albertans. People will remember politicians who were builders and those who were dismantlers. Those remembered fondly will leave legacies— not liabilities. The proposal to dramatically gut the provincial parks system is an avoidable liability. ▲

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Given a stay of execution by Environment and Parks Minister on June 23rd, the government still seems intent on closing the Tolman Bridge campgrounds in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park in 2021.