

Please Complete Alberta's Recreation Survey...as Flawed as It May Be

By Ian Urquhart



Early in my academic career I encountered an important, long-lasting observation about the politics of polling in Richard Johnston's *Public Opinion and Public Policy in Canada*. There Johnston argued we should understand public opinion to be a pliable political resource. Public opinion is a resource governments and other political actors try to shape and mobilize in order to successfully attain and exercise power and influence. One reviewer suggested that Johnston saw polling as an exercise in formulating "potentially popular ways of regarding issues, which is itself part of the continual struggle to structure choices and to control political agendas."

Governments of all political stripes use surveys either to try to shape and mold our views or to legitimize courses of action they want to take. Alberta Progressive Conservative governments used surveys this way; so did the Notley New Democrats; and Kenney's United Conservative Party government is following the same script.

AWA asks you to complete the government's outdoor recreation survey found here. (<https://www.alberta.ca/sustainable-outdoor-recreation-engagement.aspx>)

The government has advertised the survey as the first initiative by the government to consult Albertans about its "Alberta Crown Land Vision." Those who care about our parks system really don't any options here – we have to participate.

But, there's also no doubt this survey is part of the government's efforts to shape public opinion in order to further its policy agenda.

The UCP and User Fees

In the 2019 provincial election the UCP's "Alberta Strong and Free" platform signaled the party's support for increasing user fees as part of its approach to environmental conservation. But, the platform implied these fees would be limited; it suggested that user fees only would be applied to off-highway vehicles. The UCP promised "a mandatory \$30 trail permit fee to Off-Highway Vehicles (OHV) and camping trailers to pay for restoring and creating OHV trails and preventing damage in Alberta's great outdoors, and to hire additional enforcement officers."

The 2019-23 business plan for the Ministry of Environment and Parks foreshadowed "a trail fee to restore and create trails" – language very similar to the OHV-centric phrase used in the election platform. The 2020 budget announced that a trail permit fee of \$30 will be levied in the 2021 and 2022 fiscal years. It is projected to raise \$4.5 million per year. But, the platform's clear commitment to levy this fee only on OHVs and camping trailers wasn't affirmed in the budget.

Earlier this year, the government started to explore the public's reaction to the more general adoption of user fees in Alberta's provincial parks. I thought then that the government's woefully unrepresentative survey should make any respectable pollster shudder and argued that more user fees were not a good idea (September 12, 2020 opinion piece in the *Calgary Herald*: <https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-more-user-fees-in-albertas-parks-is-a-bad-idea>). I also argued that the government should ask all Albertans what they

think of user fees.

In the future perhaps I should be more careful what I ask for. Towards the end of November, Environment and Parks unveiled what it has billed as its "first initiative under government's approach to modernizing Crown land..." This is the outdoor recreation survey AWA asks you to complete. As an aside, there's some irony in the government's decision to use the phrase "modernizing Crown land" since the phrase "Crown land" may be regarded as antiquated. The term "public land" is the more modern one as reflected in the fact Alberta has a *Public Lands Act*, not a *Crown Lands Act*.

Structuring Your Responses...Sometimes with Misinformation

While this broad consultation is better than the half-baked approach taken earlier this year, it is still a classic example of a survey designed "to structure choices and to control political agendas." How does it structure your choices and control the political agenda? In the first place, the public wasn't consulted at all about the government's guide for its survey – the Alberta Crown Land Vision. That vision is the Minister's vision; it is imposed on Albertans from on high. Albertans didn't have any opportunity at all to tell the government what is central to their vision of what public lands, our lands, should look like.

Second, the first section of the survey is about partnerships. Partnerships with local governments and private sector actors are an idea the Minister of Environment and Parks is firmly wedded to. They are a giv-

en in his view of how recreation on public lands must be managed. To this end, you are not asked if you're in favour of or opposed to partnerships. Instead, the survey asks you what you think are "the best ways for partnerships to contribute to providing the kind of experiences and services Albertans want to see." This is how the structuring of public responses proceeds.

Third, the section "Funding for Recreation" opens with a lengthy preamble. The preamble intends to condition respondents to view user fees as the obvious or normal choice for funding recreation on public lands. It uses the assertion that user fees in Alberta currently are "fairly limited" as a springboard to suggest how out of step Alberta is with other provinces. The survey massages your mind here. It's encouraging you to see user fees as the normal, perhaps in the minds of government spin doctors the modern or common sense, way to fund recreation on public lands.

The preamble states that "most other provinces and states have access fees to their provincial/state parks." This is likely true but these access fees are very different from the ones the survey soon will ask you about. Fees elsewhere generally are gathered through a vehicle pass system like that employed in our National Parks. They very seldom apply to the things you might do in a park other than camping. While most other provinces insist on vehicle passes to enter provincial parks the survey makes it very clear that the Alberta government is committed to a very different approach to user fees here.

This key message – that other governments rely on user fees – is fundamentally suspect in crucial respects; in part, it promotes misinformation. The preamble asserts that annual trail passes in New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island are among the fees other Canadian jurisdictions collect to support recreation management. (my emphasis) This is simply untrue. None of these governments have annual trail passes or charge annual fees (other than vehicle licence/registration fees) for trail use on public lands. In these four provinces, trail permits are issued by

off-highway vehicle and not-for-profit associations. The preamble misleads in another way. With the apparent exception of PEI, OHV users don't have to purchase annual passes – day, three-day, and weekly passes are also trail permit options. Not only then does the government survey try to condition our response but that conditioning effort is based on inaccurate and misleading information. Take the preamble as truth and you will proceed to answer the survey based on a distorted portrait of reality.

Another message in this section is: "Government has committed to implementing a fee system to better support the costs associated with recreation on provincial Crown land." This is true. Without any consultation at all government has decided we need user fees.

The survey then asks you to disagree or agree with the idea that collecting user fees is "the right approach for enabling sustainable recreation opportunities on provincial Crown land." The very slender silver lining here is that at least the survey is honest enough to give you the opportunity to disagree. But, given the survey's previous encouragement to see user fees as "normal" is a right-minded soul, meaning a person of sound views, likely to disagree?

Now that the government has put you firmly on the "if we're normal we need user fees" path, the survey goes on to structure the choices you can make with respect to the factors that should guide the fees the government is committed to introducing. Ability to pay? Type of Activity? Intensity of Use? You're asked to rank these factors.

It then asks you to prioritize how funding (presumably from user fees) should be spent. For example, is protection of the environment a number one priority or a number seven priority? The next question essentially asks that, since we're going to have user fees, how should we pay for them? Annually, daily, multi-day? Do we want to charge people from outside the province more? What about free days?

The last section of questions is defined as optional. It asks you to identify what types of activities you do on your public lands,

what types of public lands you spend time on, how often you use public lands for recreation, your age group, your gender, your annual income, and who you work for/affiliate yourself with. Frankly, I don't think it's the government's business to know many aspects of my personal life.

Make no mistake about it. This consultation is very flawed if you expect that a government consultation on outdoor recreation shouldn't try to steer you towards the government's preferred direction. That said, I don't think Albertans who are concerned about the future of public lands in this province have any choice other than to participate in the survey. So, please visit the government's website and weigh in, as best you can, on what you would like to see the future of recreation on public lands look like. **The deadline for the completing the survey is January 15, 2021.**

Points Made in AWA's Response to the Survey

For your information here are the points AWA made in its formal response to the survey. Please consider using points you agree with in your own survey response:

- 1.) Question 1 – Partnerships: they must incorporate conservation objectives and follow the *Provincial Parks Act*; they should be limited to providing maintenance/operational services for campsites in provincial parks and provincial recreation areas; they should not have any responsibilities on other public lands (such as Public Land Use Zones); partners must collaborate and take direction from Alberta Environment and Parks; partners should be held to performance measures that include those conservation objectives; we are concerned that partnerships through mechanisms such as Delegated Administrative Organizations will lead to the privatization of public lands (authority for trail management in the provinces lauded by the survey effectively is delegated to trail associations).

- 2.) Question 2: AWA strongly disagrees with seeing collecting more user fees as the right approach to enabling sustainable recreation activities on public lands.
- 3.) Question 3 – Other preferred tools or approaches that should be utilized? More taxpayer dollars should be devoted to enforcement and campsite infrastructure. Measures – including fines – must be introduced to manage random camping on public lands.
- 4.) Question 4 – where should fees be applied and on what activities? All three factors listed are “most important,” none are “least important.”
- 5.) Question 5 – other factors to consider? Ecological values such as species at risk, watershed integrity, and landscape thresholds must trump trail development. Remember here that the UCP declared in its platform that OHV user fees would be devoted to “restoring and creating OHV trails.” (my emphasis) Environmental assessments of proposed trails must be conducted to ensure these ecological values are respected.
- 6.) Question 6 – Ranking priorities for funding: number one is protection of the environment. The other two in AWA’s top three were enforcement to promote public safety and amenities and services.
- 7.) Question 8 – anything else to tell us about outdoor recreation in Alberta? Low impact recreation should be prioritized. This is the form of recreation that is most likely to be sustainable. This priority also is suggested by a 2017 survey conducted for Alberta Culture and Tourism. That survey reported that approximately 53% of households participate in day hiking, 10.3% participated in cross-country skiing, and 14.7% participated in motorized recreation. ❄️

Winter Streams

By Bliss Carmen

Now the little rivers go
Muffled safely under snow,

And the winding meadow streams
Murmur in their wintry dreams,

While a tinkling music wells
Faintly from there icy bells,

Telling how their hearts are bold
Though the very sun be cold.

Ah, but wait until the rain
Comes a-sighing once again,

Sweeping softly from the Sound
Over ridge and meadow ground!

Then the little streams will hear
April calling far and near, —

Slip their snowy bands and run
Sparkling in the welcome sun.

Dust of Snow

By Robert Frost

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

