

Public lands, protected areas and a pitch for the simple things

By Grace Wark, AWA Conservation Specialist



Facing down the double-barrel of a new provincial Crown Land Strategy and the divestment of 164 of Alberta's parks, I seem to be spending increasingly more time pondering the purpose and distinctions between our provincial parks system and public lands.

In some cases, the definitions for parks and public lands could be used interchangeably. Either could be considered a “shared resource and a shared responsibility” or places to “inspire people to discover, value, protect and enjoy the natural world.” Both parks and public lands have significant front and backcountry offerings, can act as gateways into the wilderness, or places to seek either connection with others or solitude. Parks and public lands are found throughout Alberta's diverse and incredible landscapes and house the species and natural features that make our province special.

However, to say, as Minister Nixon has, that “not much is changing” as scores of parks are destined to be converted into public lands ignores the important distinctions that have made public lands and protected areas key management tools in the provincial landscape. There are, in other words, good reasons why governments in the past established both a *Provincial Parks Act* and a *Public Lands Act*.

When I participate in provincial planning processes, I'll often think about the differences in the management of and protections for wild lands, waters, and wildlife under each respective designation. From a conservation perspective, sites under the *Provincial Parks Act* have a much stronger legislative foundation for protection. Purposes like “the pres-

ervation of Alberta's natural heritage,” “the conservation and management of flora and fauna,” and “the preservation of specified areas, landscapes and natural features and objects in them...” enshrine conservation as the “prime directive” of the parks system. It's no accident that these purposes are listed ahead of outdoor recreation. And, when recreation is identified in section 3 of the Act as a purpose of parks, it's immediately followed by the government's commitment to ensure that parks provide “lasting protection for the benefit of present and future generations.” Conservation is privileged here.

Conservation's importance also is inferred when section 4 outlines the purposes of provincial recreation areas. These areas “are established, and are to be maintained, to facilitate their use and enjoyment for outdoor recreation by present *and future* generations.” The reference to future generations implies a duty or ethic of care that will be applied to those lands. They must be maintained in a way that doesn't deny their opportunities to future generations.

The *Public Lands Act*, on the other hand, speaks much less directly about conservation. While it does well to guide public land use, industrial dispositions and prohibited activities, the explicit commitment to conserving nature found in the *Provincial Parks Act* is noticeably absent. This isn't to say that conservation activities can't take place on public lands, but they exist in a multiple-use land management framework with no guarantee of their primacy. Industrial uses of the land may take precedence on public lands, uses that should not be allowed in a park.

One possibility under the “Optimizing Al-

berta Parks” decision is that if a new partner isn't identified to manage a site, it will transform into what we call “vacant public lands.” In technical terms, these are public lands not tied to any industrial dispositions (timber, oil and gas, mineral, grazing, etc.) that the public are allowed to access for recreation and random camping. In contrast to our parks, “vacant public lands” are largely unserviced and lacking in the recreation infrastructure supplied by the provincial parks system. They consist of not much more than dirt roads and trails and the occasional staging area.

This is a possible fate of at least some of the 164 sites, given that the initial “Optimizing Alberta Parks” proposal (as accessed through a Freedom of Information request by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) intended to divest only 45 sites to partners and deregulate the remaining 119 parks to vacant public land status. Although this detail was seemingly changed by the time the Minister went public with his parks announcement, this initial intent likely means that the Ministry is aware that they'll only manage to find partners for a limited number of sites and plan to deregulate the rest.

While we've heard repeated statements that access will still be provided to all Albertans on landscapes like these, I feel the Minister hasn't yet addressed how this change will impact the nature of that access. I feel that there may be a few practical considerations for how that access to public lands is enabled and utilized by the people who seek to recreate within Alberta's landscapes.

With that said, instead of offering a long-winded, jargon-heavy analysis of parks

and public lands legislation in Alberta, I would much rather offer a few of my own stories from exploring and accessing wilderness in my own backyard. What follows is a pitch for parks and the simple amenities they provide and how they have given me access to nature during some of the times when I've needed it most.

The simple things...

There was once a time during my childhood that I would physically recoil at the word "adventure." An "adventure" would be rolled out on days where my mum, a single parent looking for a way to spend the weekend with her kids, would be struck with a sudden inspiration to visit the mountains. Despite her best efforts, adventures became associated with cold hands, wet socks, sore legs, and, on the odd occasion, getting lost in the woods. This was the likely result of stubborn children who chose to wear sneakers and sweatshirts rather than boots and jackets during weekend outings. Still, a negative connotation stuck.

At this time in our lives, we weren't backcountry enthusiasts or avid hikers, but instead four people looking for a brief distraction from home. My father passed away in 2004, and in the days that followed it was hard for us to spend time in the city that held so many memories of him. So, we sought comfort from popular haunts like Johnston's Canyon, Troll Falls and even the short interpretive trails near Kananaskis

Lodge. These are places that more seasoned hikers may steer clear from due to their over-popularity, but are easy to locate and had predictable amenities such as washrooms, picnic tables, and parking spots.

In the early days of internet information sharing, we relied heavily on roadside signage, clear maps, and information centres to get us out and into the mountains. A well-marked trail was a necessity for my mum to convince me that we weren't going to go on another accidental detour through the woods. Retrospectively, choosing the more well-visited areas also meant that my family, lacking basic hiking essentials like GPS or bear spray, was likely safer than if we had ventured off the beaten path. And so, frontcountry sites and pullouts became our sanctuary, an escape from the city, and an opportunity to forge ahead and create new memories.

It wasn't until I was in university that I started exploring my local public lands. I was drawn west of Calgary to Waiparous and Mclean Creek. I began to create adventures of my own, rambling up rutted dirt roads and staking temporary claim to a small, undisturbed corner of land. Here, the pace of life would slow and I could take the time I needed to momentarily detach from homework assignments.

However, while distance from city and structure sometimes offered peace, it also bred chaos. Venture a few kilometres into public lands and you may notice the occa-

sional bullet hole or semi-demolished sign. On more than one occasion, I've heard straight-piped trucks or dirt bikes outside of my tent at 2 o'clock in the morning or the sounds of target practice off in the distance. Nights like those would occasionally send me back towards the comfort and polite decorum of provincial campgrounds and their reliable amenities and noise restrictions.

This isn't to belittle experiences on public lands outside of the parks system. It's meant instead to point out that there's a noticeable difference in how they're accessed and used. I like to think the basic services provided by parks are partially responsible for this.

I expect that the experiences I've described aren't unique. Many of us love and enjoy public lands for the escapes they provide and frontcountry parks for their structure and reliability. For families like mine, it was the simple things that made all the difference. A picnic table, a campfire ring or even a nearby outhouse might be the difference between staying home and getting out for the weekend. The simple things were the key to unlocking my own adventures, part of what helps keep our parks friendly, and ensure that anyone is able to enjoy nature.

I worry that if these changes to our parks system go through, we'll see fewer parks and parks amenities across Alberta's landscapes. If you care for the simple things as I do, I hope you'll consider writing Minister Nixon to make your personal pitch. 🍷



One needn't stray far off from the road to enjoy the beauty of K-County. Under the 'Optimize Alberta Parks' decision, 53 Kananaskis parks and recreation areas may soon fall under new management.
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