

# 82 Parks, 82 Stories:

## An Odyssey by Bicycle to Explore the Diversity of Sites on 2020's "Optimizing Parks" List



By Sean Nichols, *AWA Program Specialist*

**O**n a hot, dusty afternoon of July 28, I paused at the top of Range Road 100, about 7 km northeast of the town of Swan Hills, and surveyed the road ahead of me. The rough and badly eroded industrial track led down a steep hillside, and out across a broad valley. On either side, pumpjacks filled a landscape crisscrossed with cutlines and powerlines. Although the valley was several kilometres across, between the dust from the road, the smoke from BC's summer of forest fires, and the general haze, the vista became indistinct after the first few hundred metres and my eyes strained to pick out details. Near the bottom of the hill, a kilometre or two away, an oncoming truck, flatbed laden with equipment, BRAAAP'ed its presence as it worked up enough steam to tackle the rocks and cobbles of the ascent.

I grabbed a corner of the increasingly grimy dish towel I had tied to my handlebars and wiped the sweat off my brow. Somewhere down there, indistinct to my watering eyes, was Edith Lake Provincial Recreation Area, one of 164 parks and facilities that the Government of Alberta had proposed "optimizing" away early in 2020. Back at the AWA office, before setting out, I had read letters about this park sent to us from residents of the Swan Hills area, concerned about the potential loss of a beloved local fishing site. I was eager to finally see it with my own eyes.

I squinted again. Maybe it was that darker patch a little bit off to the left? Were those trees? The ragged road surface would be hell on my bike wheels and in the midsummer heat, the

climb back up particularly sweltering. Especially with the extra 50 pounds of bike, camping and camera gear I was dragging around with me. Of all the questionable backwoods digressions I could take, I didn't really want to go all the way down this hill only to discover I'd come to the wrong place.

Luckily, undertaking such a trip in 2021 offers many advantages that attempting the same would have afforded even 15 or 20 years ago. In 1997 when I cycled across Canada on my first such major trip, relying on my ability to interpret a paper map (and trusting in the accuracy of that map's lesser lines in the first place) had indeed led me down the occasional mistaken detour. On this day, however, I just pulled out my phone, waited for the GPS signal to pinpoint my location on my navigation app, and verified that the park I had bookmarked was in fact somewhere along the road ahead of me. Could a Provincial Park possibly be found in

the middle of this industrial madness? Computer says yes.

By now, the truck had managed to painstakingly lumber its way nearly up to my vantage point and the driver gave me a blast of the horn to shake me out of both my daydream and the middle of his road. I quickly dragged my bike out of the way, clambered on and began picking my way down the hill.

Fifteen precarious minutes later, having miraculously experienced no flat tyres or broken spokes in the descent (and having needed only to dodge a few more trucks) I arrived at the first confirmatory sign for Edith Lake that I'd seen in many miles. After a fashion, at any rate. On what had once been a government sign, the paint making up the standardised symbology and nameplate had long ago been sun-baked into invisibility. Instead, it was now overlaid by the rough scrawl from a local resident with a can of spray paint. In either case, the Edith Lake Provincial Recreation Area could be



New "User Maintained" signage at Edith Lake PRA. Photo © S. Nichols

reached by bearing left.

So, then. To the left, up a slight hill, around a corner, and without any further fanfare, I was at the park.

Or perhaps I should clarify. I was at a gravel parking area at the end of the road. A second sign greeted me, explaining that the Edith Lake site is now “User Maintained,” and that users are expected to pack out everything they packed in, including garbage, as there would be no trash pickup from the site.

Indeed, there would be no provincial maintenance of any sort here. No cleaning, no garbage removal.

Presumably no snow plowing in the winter, although I am uncertain whether that was ever done at this site. And no pumping out of the toilets.

This last point had been initially noted by one of the many people following my trip on social media, when I stopped at Brown Creek Provincial PRA, another site on the “Optimizing Parks” list, four days prior. At Brown Creek, a notably busier site, similar notices had been posted. In the case of Edith Lake however, the issue was rendered somewhat moot as any such facilities had been removed entirely. There were no toilets left at the park to be pumped.

Indeed other than the gravel parking area, the aforementioned signage, and a boat launch, there was precious little infrastructure remaining. A solitary fire pit, heaped to overflowing with garbage (directions on the sign notwithstanding), one picnic table, and what remained of a second. Most of this second picnic table had been hacked up for use as firewood, a few burnt ends poking out from under the heap of trash that was the fire pit.

Scattered around the parking area were an assortment of needles, speaking to the nature of the use that the campground continued to see.

The lake itself remained beautiful however. And its setting couldn't have provided more of a contrast to the industrial badlands I had traversed on the approach, being nestled in a few hectares of dark green, lush boreal forest. I could imagine that local residents of the Swan Hills area, if perhaps having less need for a campsite, likely continued to

use the park for its fishing opportunities.

I poked around the site, took a few photographs, noted its sorry state, and got back on my bike to tackle the long hot dusty climb back up out of the valley.



Edith Lake was the 76th of 82 parks that I visited on my bike tour spanning the month of July 2021: exactly half of the 164 sites indicated on the government's list. Although its state of neglect was the most extreme of all those that I called in on, its story was in several notable ways representative of the whole.

To survey all of those 82 parks would be to note two opposing observations: every park tells its own story, boasting features, a history and patterns of use that are indelibly unique. Yet at the same time there are many threads of commonality, many points of intersection where those individual stories join and echo the same repeated themes.

When I finally returned to Calgary following the end of the bike tour, it was with the realisation that the trip was ultimately a month-long exercise in reconciling those two truths.

It hadn't started out that way, at least not deliberately. Although on reflection there may have been a subconscious understanding of this aspect even from its earliest days.

Those early days would find me in December 2020 when we were all in the grip of the uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was working on a social media campaign to highlight the parks that the Government of Alberta had announced they were to delist. I was finding photographs of the parks, compiling data about them to use in our analyses, and reaching out to AWA members, Albertans, tourists and visitors, anyone I could find who had been to the parks and could tell a story, in their own words, about what their favourite park meant to them.

At some point in this process I came to the realisation that I myself had only been to maybe a half dozen of the parks under discussion.

I don't consider myself a slouch when it comes to my ability to get out into our

province and discover its hidden corners. But yet the fact was staring me in the face: I needed to collect photos and stories from other people partly because I had none to provide personally.

It seemed that even I, with the nature of my work at AWA and my penchant for travel, had been taking these parks for granted, complacent in the mere fact of their existence. It was little wonder, then, that the provincial government believed they would be able to get away with delisting them in one giant swipe of a pen, without much resistance. How many other Albertans might also be taking our network of parks for granted?

In this realisation lay the seed of an idea: I wanted to see these parks for myself.

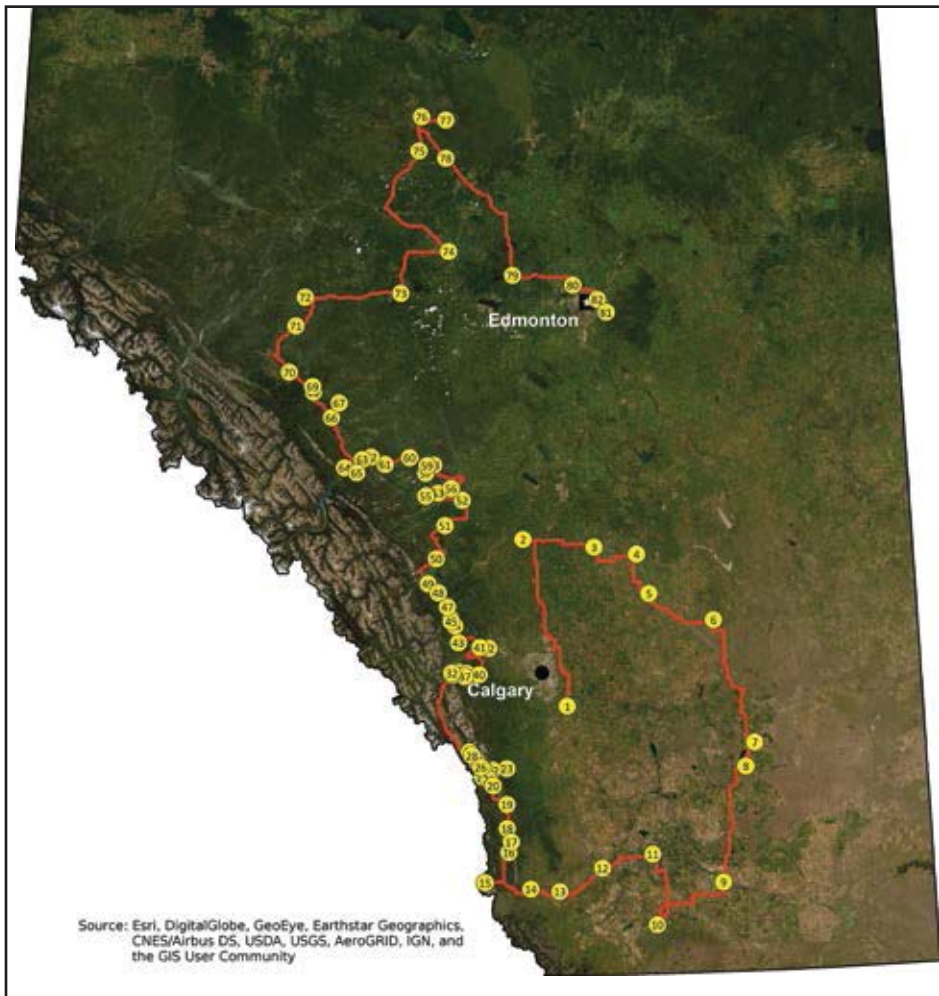
As I went through the list that I was preparing for our social media campaign, I could not help but be struck by the sheer magnitude of that list. It is one thing to consider the number “one hundred and sixty four.” It is quite another to be swallowed by the process of spending days upon days teasing out the features that define every one of them. Here is a park that is to be closed. And here is another. And here is another. And here is another. And another. And another.

After 163 “anothers”, one is quite overwhelmed. It becomes a blur. But a fascinating blur and one cannot help but to want to ground oneself; to find some way of making it feel less like a blur.

My initial plan, then, was a little on the ambitious side: I knew I wouldn't be able to get to all 164 parks in a month – they were laid out in such a way that there would be too much backtracking, and a few instances where I would have to bike several hundred kilometres out of my way to visit a single park. As worthy as they might have been, those were ones that were quickly struck from the itinerary.

But I'm no stranger to long-distance cycling, and had hoped that 3,800 km over the course of a month would be doable, allowing me to visit perhaps three quarters of the list.

What I had not anticipated, would be how much time I would end up spending at each park. Partly because



Map showing route and all the parks visited on the tour.

of the need to investigate the state they were in, and partly because so many of them were so captivating I didn't want to leave.

In the end, with a little bit of racing in the final days, there was 2,714 km on the odometer and at 10 a.m. on July 30 I pulled into Strathcona Science Provincial Park in Edmonton for a pre-arranged picnic lunch and meet-and-greet with several of the adventure's supporters. It was park number 82: I had made it to exactly half.



The approach to Strathcona Science Provincial Park, despite it being miles away from Edith Lake both literally and figuratively, bears more than a passing resemblance to the approach to the latter.

Lying along the southeast bank of the North Saskatchewan River and sandwiched between Edmontan and Sherwood Park, the park sits on land

carved out from oil refineries and petroleum processing facilities. Below the park is an abandoned coal mine.

Envisioned in the heady days of the late 1970s' boom when anything seemed possible, many of the facilities today are abandoned; shuttered and boarded up. Yet it is still an oasis of tranquility, wildness and greenery within that industrial landscape. Workers at the surrounding plants spend their lunchtimes at the picnic tables at the park, offering a welcome change from the fire and aluminium of the refineries.

This similarity speaks to one of the threads of commonality running through many of the sites on the closure list, and indeed many of our parks across Alberta.

They are all oases; areas of respite where the wilderness has the chance to establish a bulwark against the creeping industrialisation of the entire province. Visiting so many of these parks surrounded by coal mines, or oil wells,

or refineries, or windmills, or cut blocks, it is a repeated theme: there is no place—no place—in this province that is not in the footsteps of industry. This network of little parks and sites, some no bigger than a postage stamp, is all we have to hold back that tide.

When defending their decision to close these sites, the government of Alberta pointed out, ironically, that many of the sites were small. This may be the case, but as it stands, small is often all we have. Even though almost 15 percent of the province's land area is protected in some manner, most of that is by virtue of the national parks in the rocky mountain alpine, or the far northern boreal.

These are not a representative sample of Alberta's natural areas and biodiversity. Less than one percent of our parkland is protected, and only a little over one percent of our grasslands and foothills are protected. When one scans over the grasslands on a map of the province, it is close to impossible to even see any parks there. The 1.25% of the grasslands that are protected come as a scattered archipelago of tiny sites, often only a few hectares. They hardly even register at the provincial scale.

To close these sites would have been to do away with much of whatever network we have.

And to be sure, that network punches far above its weight when it comes to the ecosystem function that it supports.

When defending their decision to close these sites, the government of Alberta also claimed that many of the sites were under-used. Whether or not that is the case (more on this later), such a claim belies a fascinating, if unsurprising, myopia regarding the nature of the term "use."

What the government meant was that the sites in question do not always see a lot of "use" by humans. This does not remotely represent the level of use they see from birds, from other wild animals, from any number of plants and other species whose native habitat is being destroyed by industry or the monoculture spreading across Alberta.

The 79th park I visited, sixty kilometres northwest of Edmonton

as the avian species fly, is the former Gunn PRA, on the north shore of Lac Ste. Anne. This is one of a dozen or two parks whose facilities had been previously closed, and so found its way onto the list to be removed entirely from the provincial inventory.

As a former PRA, it naturally sees little ongoing use by human beings. There are no visitor facilities at all save for a gravel access road ending in a parking area. Yet visiting the site, surrounded by agricultural lands on one side, and gas stations & RV storage yards on the other, made it viscerally clear why it remains important to have these places.

Even if there are no extant recreational facilities, these “closed” parks remain oases of wildness and natural function in a disturbed landscape, just as much as the undeveloped Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves perform similar important functions.

Even if they no longer feature a campground or day-use area, they need to remain on the public roster, not surrendered to potential future development. It is not only *homo sapiens sapiens* that uses these sites.

When considering these parks I cannot help but be reminded of the array of islets and atolls scattered across the South Pacific Ocean. They are tiny, and sport a slim human population. Yet the entire region teems with a rich and diverse avian population, soaring across innumerable miles of open ocean before occasionally alighting on one of these dots to rest, recuperate and feed.

Without the islands, there are no birds.

Underlining this point, I recall the 6th park I visited: Little Fish Lake Provincial Park.

On July 9, I inched my way up a gravel hill just north of East Coulee climbing out of the Red Deer River Valley and onto the surrounding prairie. It was hot, without a speck of shade, and the road was gravel, frustratingly soft from having been recently graded. My road bike was not made for such conditions.

I eventually gave up and walked the last few hundred metres. At the top of the hill I got back on the bike and ground my way along the road heading



Little Fish Lake PP – breeding ground for the endangered piping plover. Photo © S. Nichols

east across the badlands of Special Area No 2. After an hour or so of this I was passed by a pickup truck; the driver slowed down and considered me with some incredulity before finally declaring that they didn't see many cyclists out that way.

Indeed they didn't see many people at all. I passed no other vehicle before finally arriving at Little Fish Lake Provincial Park, on the east shore of the eponymous lake.

The Park in question is 1.1 square kilometres, at the larger end of the grasslands protected areas. There's a campground there that was entirely empty on that day (although a local later told me it gets some “use” in the fall fishing season). I hung out and recovered in the shade beneath the scraggly trees for a while, the only person for miles around.

After a while I wandered down to the lake shore, and came across a sign informing me that the Park is the summer habitat of the piping plover. There are approximately 6,000 of these birds left in the world.



After leaving Little Fish Lake I headed south toward Brooks, where I spent the night.

The following day I stopped at the park

that, of all those on my tour, is probably the most different from those mentioned above.

Kinbrook Island Provincial Park is on Kinbrook Island in Lake Newell, a few miles south of Brooks. With 200 camping sites, several beaches, playgrounds, day-use areas and other facilities, it is a large year-round park that is a local favourite.

On this sunny summer Saturday, Kinbrook Island was full.

This is an understatement. Kinbrook Island was bursting at the seams, with every campsite in use, every parking spot full, every overflow parking spot full, people parked along the sides of the access roads and out along the highways. There were lineups dozens of people long to use the toilets and other facilities.

Kinbrook Island Provincial Park is primarily oriented toward human use, though it does also boast sizable wetland areas and bird-watching opportunities.

At \$40 per campsite per night, I cannot fathom a reason for this site to have ever been considered for closure, if the intent was to save money. There is no reason why this park shouldn't have been making money for the government. My experience there also raises questions about the claim that the parks are under-used, even acquiescing to the presumption that “use” only include human users.

As a child, I grew up in Singapore, a small island city-state with limited wilderness in the sense that we are privileged to know it here in Canada. Consequently any notion of camping takes on a rather different character than we may be used to, with camp outings (including tents and sleeping bags, to be sure) taking place in campsites in an urban park setting.

I have memories of “camping” in this sense in the East Coast Park, a small slip of land squeezed between the East Coast Parkway and the ocean, a few miles from the city centre. The park would be overflowing with other campers, picnickers and barbequeuers, enjoying an overnight experience only a few minutes’ drive from home.

My afternoon at Kinbrook Island Provincial Park was reminiscent of those childhood memories. I noted that many of the people enjoying their camping experience seemed to be first-generation Canadians, which is a reflection of the demographics of nearby Brooks. Parks such as Kinbrook serve an essential role as a welcome to new Canadians, and an introduction to the natural and wilderness resources we have on offer.

Thus the second thread of commonality uniting all the different parks I experienced: overwhelmingly they are used and beloved of local residents.

From local fishers in the Swan Hills area afraid of losing Edith Lake to local new Canadians in Brooks learning to enjoy Alberta’s wilderness at Kinbrook Island. Most of these parks aren’t going to grace the cover of international magazines drawing tourists from around the world. Most of them get regular (human) use by people from the same area: people who know and fiercely value what these parks have to offer.

On July 21, park number 52 was Mitchell Lake PRA, just southwest of Rocky Mountain House. I wasn’t sure what to expect from Mitchell Lake. Were it not for the list, I’d have barely known it was there. There is minimal highway signage and access is via a single-track dirt road through a cow field.

But after dodging the cow-pies (and the cows!) and passing through the



*Caption: Sean setting out from Benchlands on Day 14. Photo © H. Unger*

park gate, I suddenly descended a forested hill to find the road ending at an unexpected captivating, hidden lake. The campground there was small; it was clear that fishing is the park’s main draw.

And a draw it was – there were a good 10 vehicles that day in the parking lot at the bottom of the hill. It was obvious this was, yet again, a site that locals know well: one of those “best kept secrets” that often get touted but less often live up to the name. However by all indications, this one clearly did.

This is a story that was repeated time and again at so many of the parks I visited. All up the Trunk Road along the foothills of the Eastern Slopes I would stop at campsites and talk to people in their campers and tents. I would ask them where they were from and why they chose to come to that park. Very often I would be informed that they were local, that they had been going to that park for years and that it was a favourite spot. Many had stories of visiting the park with parents as a child. Several talked about bringing their children to camp at the same park. Some had heard of the government’s plan to close and delist the parks, others not. But nearly all agreed that to do so would be a terrible loss.



So what was behind the delisting plan?

All I have is conjecture. I offer a few more observations:

The 33rd and 34th parks I visited were the Old Baldy Pass Trail PRA and Stoney Creek PRA. They are located near the junction of Kananaskis Trail and Sibbald Creek Trail, at the north end of Kananaskis Country. The first of these is one of the few of the parks I had been to before, and holds a special place for me.

Over 15 years ago, shortly after I moved to Alberta for school, I attended a conference/workshop at the Barrier Lake Field Station. One of the day activities was a hike up Mount Baldy. This was my first hike ever in Kananaskis (or indeed Alberta).

The Old Baldy Pass Trail PRA exists solely to encompass the trail. It has no other facilities of any kind. It costs next to nothing for the government to operate or maintain. Why would it have been scheduled for delisting?

The “active logging” signs along the trail gave my cynical mind its first possibility. Was it because the government wanted to turn this area over to logging, and the trail was getting in the way? Yet... that makes no sense. Logging has been going on in this area for years. Indeed all of the eight parks



*An administrative mismatch – the facilities slated for closure at Stoney Creek PRA haven't existed for years. Photo © S. Nichols*

along the Sibbald Creek Trail were established as a joint project between the government and Spray Lake Sawmills — the forestry company holding tenure rights in this area.

In fact, the logging in this immediate area has ended and this logging road, if one reads the signs, is in the process of being reclaimed.

A clue came when I considered the second of these two parks: Stoney Creek PRA is the trailhead for the Old Baldy Pass Trail, and per the 2020 proposed closure list, its day-use area was to be redlined. However that day use area is long-gone. It was turned over to a group use site (and chained up behind a gate unless you have a reservation) many years ago. Signage indicating this dates back to at least 2008.

My only conclusion is that, whoever selected these sites for delisting has never been there, and knows nothing about them. There was no careful selection based on the individual reality of these parks; rather someone drew a big circle around them on the map and – knowing nothing about them – chose to delist them all wholesale.

Stoney Creek PRA was in fact hardly the only park for which the stated details of its closure did not match the situation on the ground. Several times I encountered a park where the plan was to delist and/or close some facility that

simply did not exist in reality. It became increasingly clear over the course of my trip that the decisions were being made in an office by staff or managers who were not particularly familiar with the parks in question, and unlike myself, had likely never visited them.

An interesting example of these discrepancies was at the Cow Lake NA (Natural Area) west of Rocky Mountain House, park number 56 on my itinerary.

I first arrived at the Natural Area to discover no signage anywhere, save the standard yellow placards in the bushes marking the NA boundary.

This in itself isn't that unusual;

Natural Areas often don't have directional highway signs. Although second-hand reports are that Cow Lake used to have signs to the day use area, possibly removed as part of the first wave of infrastructure removal that occurred when the closures were initially announced.

Either way, I was hardly deterred, and proceeded to the exact location of the day-use area that was slated for closure, as listed on the AB Parks website at 52.2944 N, -115.0296 W. And there I discovered no day-use area, but instead an oil and gas facility including a few pumpjacks.

Was this ever the site of the day-use area? Probably not – however per the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act (2000), such a facility is not allowed at all inside a Natural Area.

The one exception is if the facility predated the establishment of the NA. It is entirely possible that this was the case here. The second-hand reports referred to above indicate the facility did not predate the NA, however these cannot be confirmed.

What I did establish, was that a few kilometres around the lake to the west is an area that is marked by government signage as the Cow Lake PRA. Yet this is a PRA that doesn't exist anywhere on the Parks website. All that's here is a private campground; no day-use area, like the



*At Cow Lake NA – this facility shouldn't exist inside a Natural Area. Photo © S. Nichols*



*The end of the trip: Strathcona Science Provincial Park. Photo © S. Nichols*

one supposedly slated for delisting.

A half-kilometre on the other side, however, there is a day-use area, again unmarked by highway signage, which is inside the NA. This area encompasses a boat launch, picnic facilities, and so forth. This is most likely the day-use area that's been around for a while and was scheduled for delisting.

But with the various government websites all giving conflicting information, none of which is consistent with the situation in reality, questions are raised about the ability of decision-makers to make accurate assessments regarding the suitability of closing such a site.



Of course, the government of Alberta chose to reverse its decision and, at the end of 2020, announced that they would not proceed with the delisting.

Unfortunately this announcement, while broadly welcome, raises additional questions. If my observations last summer are anything to go by, the answers may be concerning.

Foremost is the question of what is now to become of these parks. Indicating what won't happen (being delisted) still leaves a broad set of options for what will happen. It is likely that there will not be a "one size fits all" future for them. As observed, despite threads of

commonality, each of the sites is different and invites a different potential policy.

Some may be left as-is. In the case of Natural Areas or other low-development and low- (human-) use parks this is likely appropriate. I have little doubt that those parks seeing heavy use, such as Kinbrook Island, Tillebrook Provincial Park, several sites in Kananaskis, and so forth, will likely see continued maintenance and investment. This is especially the case with the Kananaskis Conservation Pass introduced last summer.

Far more worrisome is the fate of the parks that lie in between. Parks such as Edith Lake, as well as several other parks I visited: Brown Creek PRA, Brazeau River PRA, Pembina Forks PRA, Lovett River PRA, Freeman River PRA, Chrystina Lake PRA, and any number of others. What I saw is a future where the park is left technically on the books, but all maintenance is halted and the government all but pulls out.

Such sites exhibited a variety of different states of deterioration, but all suffered from the lack of maintenance. All exhibited a noticeable increase in the level of garbage and increase in lawless behaviour. For the government to simply wash their hands of these sites may end up merely being a slow death rather than a quick one.

Of this, however, I am sure: the locals

will continue to use them. And so will the wildlife. Maybe a bit of wilderness reclamation isn't such a horrible thing.

Of one more thing I am sure: these parks will definitely suffer without anyone to champion them. They need people to speak up for them, to continue to let the government know that they are an essential part of this province's fabric.

I ended my trip at Strathcona Science Provincial Park on the Heritage Day long weekend. As I said at the time to those assembled there, it felt appropriate to do so, because I can think of no better example of the heritage we have as Albertans than our Parks system. It is a heritage passed to us by those who came before and who had the foresight to establish the Parks to begin with, and a heritage we can all commit to passing on to future generations.

So I have an ask to make: I am looking for people to make that commitment. I am looking for champions for these Parks, and all the others across the province. Specifically, I hope you will take the time to visit one (or more) of Alberta's Parks this summer. It may be one of the ones slated for delisting, or a different one. It may be one that you have visited before or one that is entirely new to you. Whichever it ends up being, I hope that you will get out this summer, find a Park that speaks to you, learn about it, and be ready to speak up if and when it is threatened. The more voices there are, the stronger our Parks will be. 🍓

*This bicycle trip was undertaken as a part of AWA's Adventures for Wilderness (A4W) program. The author will be leading a 2-day bikepacking tour for 10 people along the Cowboy Trail on the Canada Day weekend as part of the 2022 A4W calendar. To sign up, find out more, or discover other adventures taking place in 2022, please visit [www.AdventuresForWilderness.ca](http://www.AdventuresForWilderness.ca).*

*A full record of the bike tour, with photos and stories from each park, can be found at [www.AlbertaWilderness.ca/bike-a-thon](http://www.AlbertaWilderness.ca/bike-a-thon).*