

Alberta government placing Parks under same Ministry as Forestry

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AWA is greatly concerned by the Government of Alberta's decision to reorganize Alberta Environment and Parks into two distinct entities – Environment and Protected Areas; and Forestry, Parks and Tourism. This change places the *Provincial Parks Act* and the *Willmore Wilderness Act*, two important acts for the conservation of Alberta's wilderness spaces, under control of the Forestry, Parks and Tourism Ministry.

“Comments by Premier Danielle Smith have not been reassuring,” says Ruiping Luo, AWA conservation specialist, “Her insistence that forestry is the way that we open up our parks for ATV use and camping is distressing, showing a distinct prioritization of industry and recreation over protection and conservation.”

Alberta's Parks are for Albertans, now and in the future, to enjoy and care for. Environmental protection must be a priority, because parks lose their value when ecological values are degraded. Albertans cherish these areas and want to maintain them for generations to come. This was evident in 2020 when the Government of Alberta planned to remove 164 sites from the provincial parks system, a change that would have opened up these areas to industrial

development, and Albertans raised their voices in opposition.

The *Provincial Parks Act* states that Parks are established to preserve Alberta's natural heritage, conserve and manage flora and fauna, preserve important areas, facilitate enjoyment and "ensure their lasting protection for the benefit of present and future generations". Allowing forestry in parks is incompatible with these goals as it threatens ecological integrity, biodiversity, and wildlife habitat, and makes the landscape less desirable for recreation.

Many of Alberta's parks are in sensitive ecological areas and should not be opened for forestry or other development. For instance, Willmore Wilderness Park is a relatively pristine landscape, a rare occurrence in our province. Opening the area to forestry or OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) use would fracture and degrade the vulnerable landscape, and negatively impact the wildlife that live in the area, including caribou, wolves and grizzly bears.

Motorized recreation on forestry roads and other linear disturbances already causes damage in some parks, and emphasis should be placed on enforcement and damage mitigation of motorized recreation in these areas. Motorized recreation has a very high impact on the landscape compared to other forms of recreation, such as hiking and camping. Unsustainable levels of motorized recreation degrade the environment, lowering the enjoyment of these areas for other recreationists.

These Ministerial changes are also poised to generate a great deal of confusion. The Order in Council indicates shared responsibilities and conflicting roles across various Ministries, with multiple Ministries administering Acts or assigning specific sub-clauses within Acts to different Ministries. We are concerned that this change will make administration of these Acts more complicated and leave them open to interpretation from Ministers across multiple departments and jurisdictions. It will take conservation groups – and likely industry as well – time to understand all the consequences of these changes.

For more information: Ruiping Luo, AWA Conservation Specialist (403-283-2025; rluo@abwild.ca)



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