

Class Barriers to Wilderness

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Humanity's footprint on the landscape comes in many forms, whether through resource extraction, migration, settlements, agriculture, recreation, tourism or the networks of roads, power lines, and pipelines (collectively known as linear disturbance) which connect all of these activities together. Our growing population, combined with an economic system focused solely on increasing profits to the detriment of all else, means that our footprint continues to expand across the landscape. The proliferation of human development has meant that our truly genuine wilderness spaces are shrinking or have disappeared entirely, and the few that remain are becoming ever more remote or inaccessible to the majority of the public who are concentrated in urban centres.

Environmental and/or conservation organizations such as AWA seek to protect and conserve our remaining wilderness areas by promoting awareness and encouraging action in others. We seek to halt and reverse losses to wilderness and biodiversity in the hopes that current and future generations will be able to enjoy the benefits of nature for nature's sake, rather than solely as resources destined for extraction and the production of wealth. However, I think that some of us who work within western, settler-colonial, environmental organizations can often overlook one very important aspect of wilderness conservation, the question of who is granted access to the wilderness spaces we seek to protect? The marginalization of our wilderness areas combined with the marginalization of certain segments

of the working class means that natural areas can often become inaccessible to certain demographic groups who could – and rightly should – benefit from them just as much as anyone else.

So much of our remaining wilderness in Alberta is scattered across the province and/or confined to remote areas that are less accessible to the corporations who benefit from resource extraction, or where development is explicitly restricted. On one hand, this remoteness provides a benefit to those ecosystems and the species that rely on them, because they are granted an isolated refuge or paradise away from the onslaught of capital. However, the isolated nature of these places also creates many barriers to entry for those who cannot afford the time and equipment necessary to get out to those areas for leisure. Being hard to reach is a benefit for conservation, but it also limits opportunities for people to recreate in those areas and experience the beauty of undisturbed (or less disturbed) wilderness.

If we use back-country hiking as an example, there are so many requirements before a person even begins their adventure, including, but not limited to: acquiring the necessary equipment, preparation and training to survive potentially hostile environments, transportation to and from the trailhead (i.e., automobiles and fuel costs), and being granted extended time away from work to allow for lengthy outdoor pursuits. All of these requirements have costs associated with them, whether financial costs necessary to purchase or rent equipment, or the cost of lost income while taking time off work. Borrowing equipment, carpooling, and resource

sharing is one way to reduce the burden of these hurdles, however that also necessitates being part of a community that has outdoor experience and/or access to these resources as a group, which isn't the case for everyone. If back-country hiking isn't your forte, other activities aren't much easier or cheaper on the wallet. Cycling, mountain-biking, sailing, climbing, skiing, fishing, paddling, camping and a whole host of other outdoor activities are just as costly if not more expensive than just simply going for a walk in the woods.

One way to avoid the heavy costs of participation is for people to make use of inner-city, or near-city parks, but that's only if you happen to live in a municipality which prioritizes these types of spaces. In Calgary, we are quite fortunate that we have Fish Creek Provincial Park, Weaselhead Flats, Griffith Woods, and Nose Hill Park within our city limits, but their mere presence doesn't guarantee their accessibility to all Calgary residents. Communities neighbouring these urban wilderness spaces often have more expensive real estate for those looking to live nearby, making it difficult for people with lower incomes to access these parks without adequate transportation. It's also worth noting that Calgary's urban sprawl continues to put pressure on wilderness areas bordering our city as new communities are developed without a second thought given to native ecosystems and biodiversity – as we are seeing with Ricardo Ranch. This only serves to highlight how our cities have failed adequately to integrate natural spaces into urban planning and development. Given the tremendous

health benefits – both physical and mental – of time spent in nature, our cities and those who shape them should do a better job at providing access to nature for people from all walks of life.

It can be extremely difficult to convince people of the benefits of time spent in nature without providing them with first hand experiences that don't come at a cost to their income and therefore quality of life. A sense of attachment to a specific place can help people to truly understand all that we could possibly lose. Having the time, money, and freedom to get outdoors has unfortunately become a privilege for the relatively wealthy in our society, a luxury that many of us take for granted. Without a firsthand experience with nature, how can we – as environmental activists – hope to convince others of the importance of our actions? How can we expect working people to dedicate their time, energy, and money towards protecting the environment when they are often too busy fighting for their own survival and trying to make ends meet? Wilderness access and conservation should not be restricted solely to middle-class suburbanites who can afford it.

Bringing this back to a local context, there has been much debate over the rollout of the Kananaskis Conservation Pass (also known as the K-Country Pass) in recent months. The pass was introduced by the Government of Alberta in the Spring of 2021, with the stated intent of shifting the financing of provincial parks onto user fees rather than taxpayers. AWA spoke out against the introduction of this pass because it creates a barrier to those with less disposable income, as we believe that all Albertans should have equal access to our province's wild spaces – that's part of the reason public lands exist in the first place. The current provincial opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) stated in June 2022, that they intend to remove the K-Country Pass if elected in the upcoming provincial election. According to party leader Rachel Notley, the NDP intends to fund provincial parks from general tax revenue as done previously so that parks are available to “all Albertans regardless of the money they have.” On the surface, this reversal seems like it would be a

positive shift for Albertans who intend to visit Kananaskis on a regular basis. However, the removal of the conservation fee still fails to address the other barriers we have discussed such as transportation, equipment and time away from work. The fee becomes essentially meaningless if someone has no way to get out to Kananaskis and experience the region.

Discussions around access to wilderness also need to address the intentional harm that's been done to Canada's (and the world's) Indigenous Peoples, who lived both on and with the land in relative harmony for millennia until the arrival of European settlers. These communities have faced successive attempts at genocide under the guise of assimilation, and have been denied access to many of their traditional lands to the benefit of multi-national corporations and the colonial nation-states that enable their destructive operations. If we are going to recognize the rights of all people to access wilderness, we have to include those who traditionally occupied these lands and who rely on it for both subsistence and socio-cultural practices. It's paramount to the survival of these communities and to conservation efforts more broadly.

Colonial conceptions of wilderness have perpetuated the false idea that humanity is somehow separate from – rather than an integral component of – nature. We play a key role in the global ecosystem, and the actions of settlers have created a significant imbalance wherever colonization has occurred. Life under exploitative capitalism has created a scenario where working people feel a desire or need to escape from civilization, to get away from the city and back into the wilderness during our brief moments of free time. But if our capitalist society is so great to begin with then why is it something that elicits a desire for escape?

There is a growing body of scientific evidence supporting the notion that time spent in nature is good for both our physical and mental wellbeing. A study published in 2016 by Chong, Ikei, and Miyazaki summarized the physiological benefits of nature therapy. Nature therapy is a set of practices which are intended to achieve preventative medical effects

through exposure to wilderness (or other natural stimuli). Individuals who are feeling stressed or anxious have been shown to relax during and following exposure to nature. This state of relaxation then elicits improved immune system function in the participant, which helps to prevent illness and/or disease. Therefore, nature therapy is a powerful form of preventative medicine which promotes health through exposure to natural environments. From this information, we can assume that wilderness experiences could benefit the health of society at large, but only if nature is made accessible to all people. If time spent in nature is only accessible to those with certain resources (i.e., free time, wealth, knowledge of the area etc.), then those health benefits become just another luxury afforded to some people and not to others. We need to understand wilderness access as an issue of equity.

Backcountry activities have become normalized as outdoor leisure pursuits where people have an opportunity to reconnect with the natural world and better understand our place within it. Unfortunately, these natural spaces are often inaccessible due to their remote location or costs associated with access, which creates a barrier to those without sufficient resources. This has resulted in a situation where outdoor pursuits are more often a privilege for the affluent, rather than a right that's guaranteed to everyone. Resource extraction has pushed our wilderness spaces to the margins for the production of wealth, which means that the wealthy are now better able to access wilderness than others. AWA believes that the environmental movement and organizations within this movement – ourselves included – need to remain cognizant of this class barrier in all of the work that we do. We need to ensure that those who have been (and continue to be) most marginalized by our society are recognized and centred in our conservation efforts so that wilderness not only persists, but persists in a more equitable manner than is often the case. Wilderness is for everybody. 🌿