

Foreword

What World Heritage Status Means for the Canadian Rockies

SHORTLY AFTER HRH PRINCE PHILIP officiated at the unveiling of the plaque at Lake Louise to commemorate the inscription of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks on the World Heritage List, several reports appeared questioning the event. A *Calgary Herald* editorial asked, “Does this mean we are ceding control over our national parks?” (26 September 1985). Subsequent letters to the editor wondered if this meant that the parks were to be renamed and all development in the parks halted.

Confusion as to the meaning of inscription on the World Heritage List is found all over the world and clearly an educational shift is needed to explain it. What is the World Heritage Convention?

Some resources, both of nature and human culture, serve as bridges between the past and the future. Their importance to humankind transcends artificial and transitory boundaries devised for political reasons; they are relevant to all cultures and societies. Such resources do not “belong” only to the nations in which they are located or to the people who live in the twenty-first century. They are a part of the heritage of all of humanity and the legitimate inheritance of future generations, and as such their stewardship should be a matter of global concern.

These are the noble ideals enshrined in the World Heritage Convention, or as it is more properly known, the International Convention for Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The adoption of this convention in 1972 united, for the first time, concern for international recognition and protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage. It placed this concern within a permanent framework that provides a legal, administrative and financial basis through which to implement the convention.

At the time of this writing 186 countries have become signatory to the convention and 878 properties have been placed on the select World Heritage List. Of these some 679 are cultural sites, 174 natural, and 25 of mixed designation. Canada at present has 15 sites on the World Heritage List, nine for reasons of exceptional natural qualities and six for extraordinary cultural heritage. These include L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site and Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland; the old town of Lunenburg and Joggins Fossil Cliffs in Nova Scotia; Miguasha National Park on the coast of the Gaspé Peninsula and the Historic District of Old Québec in Quebec; Dinosaur Provincial Park, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, Wood Buffalo National Park and the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks in Alberta; SGAang Gwaii in British Columbia; Nahanni National Park in the Northwest Territories; and Kluane/Wrangell-St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Atsek, which border Alaska and Yukon Territory; and the Rideau Canal in and around Ottawa.

Canada also has nine sites on the Tentative List for World Heritage Sites. These include Áísínai'pi (also known as Writing-On-Stone) in Alberta, which has the largest concentration of rock art on the Great Plains of North America; Atikaki/Woodland Caribou/Accord First Nations in Manitoba and Ontario, which is regarded as the quintessential Canadian Shield wilderness preserved in a landscape that speaks to the traditional lifeways of the Anishinabe; and Grande-Pré in Nova Scotia, the emotional and spiritual centre of the Acadian people. The list also includes Gwaii Haanas, the home of the Haida and old-growth coastal rainforests, diverse marine life and remarkable biodiversity, and Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island (also known as Qikiqtaruk) in the Yukon, which protects remarkable mountains, boreal forests, tundra and wetlands in the context of living Aboriginal adaptation to extreme environments. Also being considered is the Klondike in the Yukon and British Columbia, the most comprehensive and intact of all the cultural landscapes that illustrate life before, during and after the world's

great nineteenth-century gold rushes; Mistaken Point in Newfoundland, which possesses the world's earliest record of multi-cellular life in ancient oceans; and Quttinirpaaq National Park in Nunavut, which testifies to the earliest evidence of human occupations of the northernmost tip of North America. The list ends with Red Bay National Historic Site in Labrador, which is the most complete and best-preserved example known of a sixteenth-century Basque whaling station in North America.

A growing number of the world's most outstanding natural areas have been granted World Heritage status. These include well-known places such as the Galapagos Island, Iguazu Falls, Great Barrier Reef, Serengeti and Sagamartha (Mount Everest) national parks. Other not-so-well-known World Heritage Sites include Srebarna Nature Reserve in Bulgaria, Kahuzi-Biega National Park in Zaire, the Willandra Lakes Region in Australia and Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras.

There are also three properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger, all in Africa. There is also a second list of areas where the very reason they were designated as World Heritage Sites is under threat. It should also be noted that not all properties nominated are inscribed. Of thirteen sites proposed in 1984, just before the mountain national parks in Canada were designated, only seven natural site submissions were eventually approved.

The above, however, does not answer the question of what the Convention means. By ratifying the World Heritage Convention, Canada and the other 185 signatories accepted five basic principles of the Convention:

1. To hold in trust for the rest of humanity those parts of the World Heritage that are within its boundaries;
2. To support other nations in discharging this trust;
3. To exercise the same responsibility to works of nature as to the works of humankind;
4. To grant its co-signatories the right to observe the degree to which it is meeting its obligations under the Convention;
5. To adopt protection policies backed by legal, scientific, and financial measures to ensure that the integrity of World Heritage properties is maintained.

A state that is party to the Convention does not give up sovereignty over World Heritage Sites but it does recognize the special responsibilities it has to the international community toward the perpetuation of the values of the site.

Each state adhering to the Convention is required to make an annual contribution to the World Heritage Fund. The Fund is used primarily by developing nations to strengthen management of their World Heritage properties (e.g. for training, planning, equipment). In this sense the Convention is a mechanism for sharing global heritage responsibilities, which in turn provides developing countries with a material incentive to protect their outstanding natural sites.

Why were the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks put on the list? The nomination document submitted by Parks Canada was processed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), evaluated by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and submitted to the Eighth World Heritage Committee meeting in Buenos Aires in November 1984. The Committee agreed that the site was of “outstanding universal value” and met three of the four criteria for World Heritage status (one is sufficient for approval). It was then formally inscribed on the List with the request that the adjacent provincial parks, Robson, Hamber, Assiniboine and Kananaskis, also be considered for inclusion as part of the site. British Columbia later pressed successfully for inclusion and Robson, Hamber and Assiniboine were added to the designation in 1990.

In making its recommendation on the national parks nomination, IUCN noted that the combination of natural features and superlative scenery in the four parks, Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho, were unsurpassed in the Rocky Mountain region. The integrity of the property was examined and also described in the statement: “Inside the boundary of the parks there are a number of localized sites that have been significantly modified to tourism or transportation purposes. These are contained within the defined intensive use development zones and are subject to elaborate environmental impact assessments. Over 90 percent of the site remains as undisturbed natural wildland.” While new pressures exist today, that percentage was correct in 1990.

What are the implications for the Rocky Mountain Parks in terms of this designation? First, a World Heritage status confers prestige as one of the world’s most outstanding natural areas. Increased publicity and tourism have been experienced in most sites, but this is unlikely to be significant for the Rockies. In many cases World Heritage status has led to increased budgetary appropriations and stimulated increased conservation measures.

Second, World Heritage status means increased protection in terms of Canada’s obligations under the Convention. As a result, any threat to

the integrity of the site is of international, not just national, interest. The best-documented case where World Heritage status has “saved” a site from inappropriate development is the Western Tasmania Wilderness National Parks. It has also served as leverage to convince the Yugoslavian government not to construct a dam in the Durmitor National Park World Heritage Site.

Third, World Heritage status does not mean restrictions on further development unless the integrity of the property itself is jeopardized. As noted, more than 90 percent of the property is largely undisturbed and it is unlikely that IUCN (who report on stewardship to the World Heritage Committee) would consider minor developments within the context of the zoning and management plans to be inconsistent with the reasons for which it was inscribed on the List.

Fourth, World Heritage status should provide a stimulus for a broader perspective on the Canadian Rockies whereby the national and provincial parks included within the designation are planned, managed and used as one natural unit.

Finally, World Heritage Status provides moral suasion and plays an important educational role in raising public awareness of Canada’s international role and responsibilities in conservation. By making a public commitment before an international forum to give special status to the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks, Canada has affirmed and reinforced the principles of this unique instrument of international cooperation for conservation. It is in the spirit of these principles that this groundbreaking book aims to celebrate the importance of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site to Canada and to the world.

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