

## *Invocation*

### **The Magnificent Seven**

#### **OVERVIEW MAP**

*Courtesy of Ali Buckingham,  
Parks Canada.*

#### **REGIONAL IDENTITY AFFIRMED THROUGH THE RECOGNITION AND RESTORATION OF PLACE**

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to make three bold new claims related to the history of Canada's mountain West. The first claim is that our greatest cultural achievement in the mountain region of Western Canada may not be what we have developed in terms of infrastructure, industry, commerce or human population growth. While we mark their development as central to history as we currently define it, railways, highways, towns and cities only partly define our contemporary identity. The mountain West is different from the rest of the country – and from most of the rest of the continent – in that it is not what we constructed out of the landscape that most deeply and enduringly defines us as a people. It is not what we built that truly makes us unique as a culture, but what we saved.

We have saved something in this part of the country that has been lost elsewhere in Canada and widely around the world. In the midst of fragmenting and developing the mountain West, we recognized there

were qualities of place here that meant something more to us than immediate wealth. Slowly and haltingly we undertook steps that would allow elements of the West we cherished to be preserved and protected. After discovering what we had, we began to put what we had started to destroy back together again in a semblance of its original pristine form. Now what we have saved defines us.

The second bold assertion this book makes is that in protecting the spine of the Rocky Mountains we have preserved ecological functions that will be of inestimable value in the future. Not only have we slowed the process of ecosystem diminishment and species loss that have so affected our continent since the end of the last Ice Age, we have kept alive an ecological thermostat that may well be an important defence against future climate change impacts in the Canadian West.

The third bold assertion is that in setting aside the protected areas that compose and buffer the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, we have recognized the fundamental importance of water to the Canadian West and the role that upland areas play as the principal watersheds of western North America.

This book argues that while our efforts to restore what we had damaged once we saw its great value are less well known than the history of development, they are no less important to our identity and our future. That we preserved so much of what makes the West so special is, in fact, what makes our Western identity unique. These efforts began quietly with the creation of individual mountain national and provincial parks clustered around the Great Divide of the Canadian Rockies. No one could have imagined at the beginning how remarkably important the creation of each element in this network would become.

The first of these small reserves, of course, was Banff. Created in 1885, it was our nation's first national park. It was followed in 1886 by Yoho and in 1907 by Jasper National Park. Mount Robson Provincial Park was created in 1913. Kootenay National Park came into existence in 1920 and was followed by Mount Assiniboine in 1922. Humber Provincial Park was created in 1941. World War II and its aftermath froze the creation of protected places until prosperity and the increased mobility brought about by the widespread availability of the automobile made it possible for more Canadians and their guests to see and enjoy what they had.

Once the pieces were saved, we soon saw that their collective value was far more than the sum of their parts. The idea of recognizing the planetary significance of the remarkable features encompassed within this national and provincial park network first found expression in 1981.

In that year the Burgess Shale in Yoho National Park in British Columbia was identified as one of this country's first UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In 1984 the four mountain national parks were, based on the remarkable geological features they protected, together granted UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. But that was only a prelude to a grander designation that was to follow. In 1990 the three surrounding British Columbia provincial parks were added under an expanded designation that coalesced into the Magnificent Seven, a group of seven contiguous national and provincial parks now recognized as one of the most remarkable and significant large-scale ecological and cultural reserves in the world. But once again it took time to fully understand what we have. It has taken nearly twenty years to realize that what we had created is one of the greatest collective expressions of the will to protect national heritage the world has ever witnessed.

What Canada has done in association with UNESCO and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature is cause for cautious optimism, something increasingly rare in our time. Though we may not have actually intended to, in just over a century we have managed somehow to take torn fragments of the larger Canadian Rockies ecosystem and put them back together again to recreate a grand tapestry of our natural and cultural heritage. From this act and its downstream consequences, we can learn much that we can share with the rest of the world.

No other country in the world has been able to achieve what we have done by way of this remarkable restoration. We have made ourselves whole as a culture by restoring the places that have in the past meant the most to our identity. We have done so by allowing jurisdiction to serve us rather than divide us. And yet, even today, not all of us fully realize just what this accomplishment means. Between 1885 and 1941, we caused what was at first a patchwork of tiny and isolated protected places to grow together to become a contiguous system that now encompasses 23,000 square kilometres of some of the most spectacular mountain landscapes in North America. Only now are we beginning to understand the importance of what we have preserved in terms of the watershed of the West. Only now are we beginning to imagine what this bold act says about our identity and our true prosperity. Only now are we beginning to understand what the Magnificent Seven might mean to our future.

Beyond its sheer scale, and the water it generates, perhaps the thing that is most amazing about the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks

World Heritage Site and its surrounding buffers is that it essentially encompasses only one biogeographical and cultural region. And what a spectacular region it is. Few who have visited it, and none who have lived in it, would disagree that it is one of the world's most remarkable places.

The Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site – or the Mountain Parks as they are called – encompasses four National Parks, three Provincial Parks, thirteen National Historic Sites and four Canadian Heritage Rivers. The Site encompasses 27 mountain ranges. Within it are at least 669 prominent peaks and hundreds of outliers and lesser peaks that remain unnamed. Within the World Heritage Site's boundaries are 12 major icefields, 384 glaciers and some 295 lakes. But it is the moving water that matters most. Within this combined reserve are a total of 44 rivers and 164 named tributaries. Only two of these rivers are dammed. If this were not enough, four of the greatest rivers on the continent are born here. These four rivers make the down-slope West habitable – for us and for the rest of the natural world. This book contends that, though the tourism potential of this expanded protected area is an important element of the Western Canadian economy, its role as a healthy watershed will be more important and more valuable to the future than we can even begin to imagine today.

Even the gaps that separate watersheds are important. This World Heritage Site encompasses 23 important mountain passes and at least 25 major airsheds. It encompasses three life zones and is home to more than 600 species of plants, 277 species of birds, and 69 species of mammals, including 13 different carnivores. One of these carnivores, the grizzly bear, is the symbol of the entire region. Its nature and habits embody what is truly unique about the mountain West and its culture. That such magnificent and wild creatures still exist within an hour's drive of Calgary, a city of a million people, demonstrates the iconic importance of the grizzly as a symbol of what is different about this region and the costs that locals are prepared to pay to sustain and celebrate that difference.

The relationship between the great bear and local culture has developed over more than 400 generations of human presence in the Rocky Mountains. Within the Mountain Parks are some 900 archaeological sites, dating from Early, Middle and Late Prehistoric times. In historic times the Mountain Parks were within the often-overlapping territories of at least 12 First Nations. Parts as well were the home of generations of Métis, the people of mixed European and Native blood who were the foundation of post-contact culture in the Canadian West.

At present there are four permanent communities within this World Heritage Site with a tightly controlled total resident population of fewer than 20,000 residents. These people live in the World Heritage Site for a reason: to operate and maintain these reserves and to serve and care for visitors. So famous are the Mountain Parks that they are the destination of more than 6 million visitors a year. But this number is deceiving. While a million people might walk down Banff Avenue in a year, there are valleys within this World Heritage Site that might be visited once a decade.

While most Canadians take the Mountain Parks for granted, this book argues that we should celebrate this accomplishment for what it means to us and to what it may mean to us and to the world as our populations grow and our climate changes. There is a great deal we can build on.

What we have created in the mountain region of the Canadian West is nothing less than one of the most expansive collective expressions of the will to protect national heritage the world has ever witnessed. In terms of upland watershed protection, it may also prove to be one of the best land-use decisions in Canadian history. We are quickly learning that ecology *is* economy. We are also learning that what we saved, might in the end save us.

The nature of our western mountain-protection achievement invites Canadians to think in different terms about how we might live in association with the remarkable landscape we have allowed nature to bring back into existence in our time. Realization of the dimensions of our accomplishment may also suggest that an opportunity exists now to work consciously toward creating a culture and an economy commensurate with the grand nature of the landscape we have preserved.

With each passing day we learn more about the value of ecological services nature provides to us free that would be beyond our means to provide for ourselves. It is now estimated that healthy ecosystems provide clean water and other natural benefits for less than one percent of what they would cost us to generate on our own. We may soon discover that our decision to preserve our upland watershed in the Rocky Mountains may ultimately allow nature to offer us the best deal it has offered humanity since agriculture: the gift of true sustainability.

This great reserve forms a baseline of understanding about the West that puts into relief what existed in the past so that we can appreciate the value of what we possess – and possesses us – now. In this region, it is still possible to use the past as an immediate foundation for planning

for the future. Such latitude no longer exists in much of the rest of the world.

Recasting our history against the backdrop of such an extraordinary inter-generational public policy achievement allows our culture room to move in a time when natural systems everywhere are under great stress. We have not spent all of our natural capital. The fact that we have saved important functioning elements of our natural and cultural history allows us latitude others do not possess in choosing the future we want. What we have saved keeps the door open to the most important of all cultural options: the opportunity to create a new and inspired vision of what kind of West we would like to create for ourselves and for our children. But the West – and the world – is changing quickly. The door to the future we want is not likely to remain open long.

When we are unsure about what to do with our future, we should go to the mountains. By letting them speak to and through us, we affirm who we are and who we might become at our future and ultimate best. These mountains remind us that we don't have to accept diminishment and loss of landscapes and ecosystems as a condition of growth and prosperity as others have accepted elsewhere. These mountains remind us of what we can do for ourselves and for the world by honouring and protecting the places that mean the most to us. We should go soon and often to these mountains to be reminded of the wisdom of our great achievements, for change is heavily upon us and there is much we must do if we wish to create a sustainable society worthy of place in the mountain West.

Imagining and then creating the West we want may seem an impossible task. I hope, however, that this book will inspire a heightened realization of what is possible based on what we have already achieved. History tells us we can employ the power of mountain places in service of defining a unique Western Canadian identity. By caring about our mountains we have learned how to create the West we want.

**ROBERT W. SANDFORD**

Canmore, Alberta

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