



Countering Dispossession

Saving Our Unique Mountain Culture

WHILE IAN SYME HAS GOOD REASON to be pleased with the long history of achievement of the national parks service in the Canadian Rockies, there are developments occurring on the boundaries of the World Heritage Site that have everyone who lives in the region concerned, at the most fundamental level of relationship to place.

Human population movement has become so rapid and commonplace that it is easy to forget how stationary people used to be and how connected to place we once were. But the lingering attachment we have to where we were born is not something we can easily dismiss. When Europeans first arrived on the Great Plains and in the mountains of the Canadian West, the experience was so alien and the landscape so confronting for many it was as if they were landing on the moon. It took generations for settlers to become at home in this new place. The process required closing a circle of experience, livelihood, and story that resulted in the gradual creation of a history, a specific literature of place, and finally the creation of art that affirmed connection to place. As Ronald Rees suggested in his landmark book *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home*, this creates an ideal past and nostalgia for earlier, less complicated times in our lives and in our history.¹ This

nostalgia often has as much to do with an unsatisfactory present as it does with how a former way of life has been idealized in memory. More and more this appears to be true in communities in and around the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks.

Settlers in the mountain West today must suffer the difficulty of coming to terms with the circumstances and climate of an utterly new place, just as their ancestors did. Fitting in and becoming a local takes time and, just as on the plains, there appears to be a process by which newcomers come to terms with their emerging identity in the Rockies. In a very general way the process is similar to the one Rees describes. Experience of a new and sometimes dangerous landscape, and the trials of making a living, spawn personal stories. Stories coalesce into legend that, in time, becomes the foundation of local history. History in time spawns literature. Literature, in turn, begets art and art confirms the experience of place. It is a clumsy process in which there are many false starts and wrong turns. In time, however, we interlopers gradually apply enough persistence and patience to the project of localness to complete the self-reinforcing cultural circle that allows us to claim the difficult and often dangerous Rockies as home.

Since the Mountain Parks were designated as a World Heritage Site in 1990, we have recognized that we could make our commitment to understanding, appreciating and experiencing where we live the foundation of a sustainable future in the Canadian West. The American philosopher Wendell Berry once claimed that you can't know who you are unless you know where you are. In other words, a sense of belonging to a place matters to our identity as individuals and as communities, and to our economy. In the world of comfort and distraction that has replaced the natural world, however, sense of place is harder to find and harder to keep. Real grounding in place is vanishing from our culture. It is this grounding, however, that we must protect if we are going to make where and how we live the basis of our tourism future.

Though it can help a great deal, you can't acquire or keep a sense of place by just reading about it. To be truly open to the uniqueness of country you have to involve yourself in it physically. Acquiring grace in the mountains is often as much a matter of "letting go" as it is a matter of conquering the country or conquering your own soul. Though he was not a mountaineer, one of the most articulate spokespersons on how we can be transformed by place in the twentieth century was T.E. Lawrence.



A SUNDANCE LODGE

Sacred mountain places still exist for Native peoples. At places like the Kootenay Plains, the Stoneys actively engage in important ceremonies such as the annual Sundance ritual. There is no reason why these places and activities cannot be embraced within an expanded World Heritage Site designation for areas that presently surround the existing mountain parks.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

Better known as Lawrence of Arabia, Thomas Edward Lawrence was an Englishman who possessed what he called “an English love of desolate places.”² In his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence describes becoming so exhausted, so thirsty and so sun-baked that he could no longer hold his will on his ambitions or his mission. His ego drained out of him. He became will-less and cultureless with exhaustion and hunger and thirst. And at the moment when he could no longer apply his fierce intellect to his task, something amazing happened to him. In a moment of sublime openness, the desert in all its light and wind, in all its timelessness and unity washed over him. He could no longer resist the eternal beauty of the wind and the sun. In an instant the desert changed – and so did he.

Many people have had similar experiences in the Rockies. You find yourself too physically tired to keep the wilderness at bay. You arrive at a point where all you can hear is your own deep breathing, your heart thumping and the hissing silence of the world. When these sounds subside, you begin to hear again, but you start listening for other things. When the great engine of cultural homogenization we carry around

inside us runs out of gas, there is a profound moment when we can be overwhelmed by light and wind and sun. Suddenly we see nature, not as something alien but as a unified whole out of which we have emerged.

You can call the acquisition of a sense of place a mindset change. You could call it a paradigm shift or a transcendence of thought and perceptual form. It has also been called epiphany, or aesthetic arrest. Provided that the great engine of cultural homogenization doesn't start up again too soon, the epiphany can last. If it does, a staggering realization sometimes forms inside us. It is the realization that we are not the centre of everything, that all of nature is holy, too.

It was epiphany of this kind that Aboriginals sought in vision quests. It is this kind of epiphany that today makes ordinary people give up everything they are doing in their lives to move to the mountains and be part of them. It is epiphany of this kind that is at the heart of an inspired sense of place. It is our desire to share such epiphany that makes it worth living in and visiting these mountains.

The American writer Wallace Stegner was among the first in North America to call the nostalgia created in our own minds by the landscapes in which we live "a sense of place." Sense of place, as defined by Stegner, was composed of three essential elements.

The first is unique geography. A person can only appreciate a sense of place where they lived if they see the geography of where they lived as special. As I have said so often, it is hard not to feel that way here. The geography of the Rockies leans in on you, it is hard to ignore. Even unseen in darkness and storm, the mountains exert a presence. This presence is sometimes subtle, but it can be profound. Often people don't know the physical landscape is reaching into them and making them locals, by gradual association if not by choice. But if you stay long enough you see it.

The second is a remembered and celebrated history. This history is most often personal or family in nature. You have to have a history in that place. Perhaps you remember the first time you were overtaken by the smell of pines. Or perhaps you recall the excitement and fear that accompanied your first encounter with a bear. You remember the stream where you caught your first fish. History starts with us as individuals and then radiates outward toward others. We find our place in local history and then become a mooring for others to do the same.

The third step in coming home to place is related to how personal history merges with the larger history of a community and region. It is the application of personal history to contemporary meaning. In

reaching this stage in the adoption of place, you suddenly see yourself as part of a continuum in the life and experience of the community in which you have chosen to live. You are part of that continuum and it is part of you. You see how you live reflected in where you live. Suddenly geology and topography have relevance. Suddenly you see why ten thousand years of Native presence matters. You understand the impact of the coming of the railway, not just on your community but also on your life. You see history as a continuum that not only includes you but also affects how you and your neighbours live in your time.

The establishment of this relationship often requires the skilled storytelling of elders, or the informed and enthusiastic interpretation of archaeologists, historians, naturalists and artists. And behind all of these we find the guiding hand of community leaders whose role it is to employ public policy to quietly alter the DNA of place in order to create community adaptability to changing circumstances over time.

It is in recognition of all of these people that I propose a fourth element of a refined appreciation of where we live be added to Stegner's list. Every real place possesses a cast of genuine local characters. These are people steeped in the geography, history and meaning of place, who become crystals around which aesthetics are articulated and passed on through time. It is these people who have made sacrifices that have made them truly worthy and utterly representative of where they live. These are people of such unique character that you immediately want to emulate their sincerity and connection to what is truly meaningful about where they live. In these people, sense of place has become a form of grace. The moment you meet them you want to be like them.

To be truly open to the uniqueness of country you have to involve yourself physically in it. Sense of place is only established when a relationship to a specific landscape or culture captures you and makes you a local by choice. Living in the mountains, we are still close enough to the roots of our past that we may yet hear the siren call of the great lone land. But as urban lifestyles continuously accelerate, people increasingly desire the monumental in nature without having to spend hours or days to find it in the landscape or in themselves. Even a landscape compromised by logging or mining is a relative wilderness for someone who comes from Toronto, Tokyo or New York. People are flocking to natural and semi-natural tourism destinations and resort communities because the urban places they live in are becoming more and more crowded. In many cases, the urban invasion is making the places they flock to uninhabitable, too. Pleasant tourism terms like "amenities migration" do

not accurately portray what's happening, particularly in the mountain West. The wealthy everywhere in the world are, in fact, becoming a first wave of environmental refugees seeking the highest quality of life in non-urban environments. Many of the last best places are under siege.

When the original character of place is gone, and when the presence of more and more people makes it harder for those who come to enjoy that character, the kind of people who come change. Marketing no longer stresses place, but instead focuses on material culture. Shoppers replace hikers and these shoppers justify more shops. Now that a local grounding in place is gone, the tourists hurry on. They have no reason to visit places that are as compromised as what they already have at home. They just pass through on their way to the next last best place.

In Canada, we have a habit of leaving places when they no longer suit us. We realize our world has changed when we can no longer relate to ourselves by way of where we live. Instead of staying and defending what is important about where and how we want to live, we pack up and leave. Banff was good once. When it changed, people who cared about place and community moved to Canmore. Now that Canmore has changed, people who seek place are looking at Golden. People in Golden are looking at Fernie and Nelson. We seem to be always searching for what we can't have or keep. Wherever we go, we bring with us the problems we were trying to escape.

We have to expect our communities to change. In fact, we need them to change. But growth doesn't have to mean diminishment and loss.³ It is possible to balance tourism and use with ecosystem protection. We can save where we live, but only if we love it and are not afraid to act on that love. The American writer Terry Tempest Williams feels our culture is teaching us "to hoard our spirit so that when a landscape we care about is lost, our hearts are not broken because we never risked giving our love away."⁴ The onslaught of public relations and aggressive self-interest in our society has made us fear and suspect our deepest feelings of connection within us. "By bottling up our cravings and our love and confining them within," Williams writes, "we keep ourselves docile and loyal and obedient and we settle for or accept the inevitability of loss of what is at the root of our connection with place."⁵ It is time to argue that loss is not inevitable, for we have the means to stop disposing ourselves of the qualities of place that mean the most to us.

Given the uncertainty of our global environmental and economic circumstances, now might be a good time to reconsider what kind of West we want. We have one of the few places in the world where it is



WATER

The Rocky Mountains are the water towers for the entire North American west. While landscape and ecosystem protection will always be important elements in the management of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, how we manage our water resources will become more and more important over time. By protecting our upland watersheds we protect our water supply. We have saved our mountain parks, perhaps now they will save us.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

still possible to create a culture that is utterly worthy of place. True sustainability is still possible here. But we have to stand up for it. In making our stand for where and how we live, we must reach into our hearts for the deepest expression of what our landscapes and local culture mean to us. We have to find words for our epiphany; and then find the courage to stand by them. The epiphany that is place in the Rocky Mountains is defined geologically by the flow of water and culturally by the flow of history. Perhaps it is time to revalue both.

WATER AND THE MOUNTAIN WEST

EVEN THE MOST CASUAL traveller will observe that, despite their superficial similarities, each of the parks that compose the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site are different. The unique nature of each of the protected areas is the basis of the different way of characterizing the biogeography of the Mountain Parks that is presented in this book. This book contends that it is slope and not the artificial boundaries associated with protection status that most truly defines the unique character of each of the protected areas that together comprise the headwaters province that we know as the Great Divide. The west slopes of the Rockies are very different from the east slopes, in terms of

weather and climate, and therefore in terms of biodiversity. The north slopes of this great continental watershed divide are different again from what we see and experience further south. This leads to the notion that perhaps we should reconsider the way we categorize the individual geographical elements that compose this great World Heritage Site. Instead of simply noting that they are found in either British Columbia or Alberta, we may wish to group the Mountain Parks by commonalities of watershed and direction of river flow, for these criteria more than any others are at the heart of their similarities.

These mountains are the water towers of the entire western half of our continent. If we truly want to understand this place we have to realize that, at its very foundation, the Rockies are all about slopes and divides. With this in mind, one way to re-contextualize the Mountain Parks as a biophysical and cultural unit is to examine it in the context of watershed. In this light, the Magnificent Seven can be reordered into three regions: the North Slope from which waters flow into the Arctic Ocean; the West Slope from which waters pour ultimately into the Pacific; and the East Slope, down which water splashes into rivers that flow into the Atlantic Ocean at Hudson Bay. This ordering has the advantage of mirroring perfectly substantial differences that happen to exist in ecosystem composition on each of these three slopes, and also allowing us to return to perceptions of the mountain West that existed before our direct physical experience of the landscape was interrupted by new forms of straight-line travel like the train and the car.

We may even ultimately wish to extend this idea in the direction of re-thinking the geography and culture of the mountain West, for it is a region defined less by political boundaries than by watersheds. Each of the protected areas that compose the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site has been defined by what water is and what water does in its own unique geological and geographical circumstances. This is very easy to see in Banff National Park, where warm water from deep within the earth became the foundation of Canada's national park system.