



Expanding the World Heritage Site Designation **Managing for Future Integrity Instead of Loss**

**OVERVIEW MAP
SHOWING THE AREA
BEING CONSIDERED FOR
WORLD HERITAGE SITE
DESIGNATION**

*Courtesy of Ali Buckingham,
Parks Canada.*

THE REALIZATION THAT WE HAVE done some very significant and positive things in terms of the management of land use that we haven't yet fully appreciated is a source of great hope for the future in the mountain West that is increasingly rare in our time. That hope was put into obvious relief in a global context for perhaps the first time through the United Nations International Year of Mountains in 2002.

The International Year of Mountains evolved out of the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, where it was realized that the health of the planet's mountain ecosystems was just as serious an environmental concern for humanity as tropical deforestation, desertification and climate change. It was concluded in Rio that many of the mountain ranges in the world were under real threat. Our extreme landscapes were literally being eaten alive. The International Year of Mountains was declared so that we could focus on these threats and what we might do to counter them.

The reaction in the Mountain Parks to the proposed UN Year was very interesting. Many felt that the celebration wouldn't be of much value because mountain ranges in Canada were not under the same kinds of threats as the mountain regions in places like the Andes or Himalayas.



POND NEAR KINBASKET LAKE

Parts of British Columbia that were part of Humber Provincial Park when it was originally formed remain ecologically intact, despite large-scale reservoir construction and extensive forestry activity. These areas would be excellent candidates for inclusion in an expanded World Heritage Site re-designation. *Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

Our country was too big, too sparsely populated and too wealthy to have the kinds of problems other countries had in their mountains. As we had been wise enough to protect large national and provincial park blocks and adjoining multiple-use forest areas in our mountain regions, the International Year of Mountains would simply be a celebration of our success in protecting mountain ecosystems. This, however, did not turn out to be the case. The biggest challenge faced by organizers during the International Year of Mountains in Canada was to get people to see what was happening right in front of their very eyes.

In examining the state of our mountain ecosystems against the backdrop of the pressures facing mountain regions all over the world, it became apparent that mountain ecosystems in Canada are no less threatened than elsewhere on the planet. We have resource development, settlement and human-use issues, tourism pressures, and problems with habitat fragmentation and loss. We have ecosystem health issues and problems with introduced species.

Just as elsewhere in the world, the people who live in our mountain areas are often obliged by the harsh nature of economic reality to suffer exploitation by lowlanders who apply political and economic pressures

in ways that compromise local connection to place and respect for the fragility of ecosystems. All this, we discovered, happens in and around our mountain national parks, which are the extreme landscapes to which we have afforded our highest level of protection and most intense management commitment.

In mountain areas outside national parks, our culture's appetites are eating up more than just the view. At a forum held in Jasper in 2000, representatives from every national park in western and northern Canada gathered to talk about the relationship between heritage, tourism and ecological health. It became apparent that the problems we face inside our parks are nothing compared to what is happening on and beyond their boundaries. There were few national parks, even in the remotest parts of the Arctic, that were not experiencing extensive oil and gas exploration or mining development on or near their boundaries. In some of the more remote parks, the number of people travelling for the purpose of resource exploitation is many times greater than those who visit for reasons of personal transformation or adventure.

Just as elsewhere in the world, the flow of history in Canada is leading toward a direction of reduced biodiversity and increasing cumulative human impact in all of this country's mountain ranges. We often save extreme landscapes only when tourism and adventure are deemed the most profitable human use, and then only after resource interests have eaten away at them first.

As has occurred elsewhere, the hysterical but largely unfulfilled prophecies of the extreme environmental movement has spawned a counter-movement within the industrial tourism sector. American-style public relations strategies are being employed widely by the tourism industry, especially in the mountain national parks. If you don't like the fact that a landscape has been slated for any kind of protection, or if you feel in any way limited in the activities you may want to undertake in a given area, you can create your own advocacy group to fight for and expand your rights.

The self-centred public relations of special interests have proven to be very dangerous to our hope of long-term sustainability. What kind of cultural landscape do we live in when all meaning and value is reduced to economic terms? You get a world in which wishes are often disguised as facts. You get a world of logical and rhetorical fallacy in which weasel words and special pleading define the future of our most cherished places. Combine this with a form of political correctness in which disagreement is confused with disrespect and you can justify almost

anything. In such social environments it is very easy to lose ethical and moral grounding.

Through the UN International Year of Mountains we learned that, our self-focus aside, there are realities out there that operate quite independently of how we want the world to work. Humans have now become a force rivalling nature itself, in terms of energy and material flow. There is now no place in the mountain regions of the world that have not felt the influence of human-induced landscape change. Habitat loss and species extinction globally are occurring at a rate unprecedented in history.

Our impacts are so great globally that many ecologists are claiming the only way we can avoid dramatic planetary ecosystem change is to actively manage all of our resources toward maximum biodiversity. Unfortunately, we don't know enough about the world's natural systems to do that. Nor, if we can judge the reaction to the Kyoto Protocol and attempts at creating similar accords in the wake of its failure, do we yet have the common will to successfully do so.

However, despite all the threats that were put into relief by placing what is happening in Canada into a global context, we discovered also that we possess opportunity in and around the Mountain Parks that others elsewhere no longer possess. Due to our decision in the past to protect important upland regions in the mountain West, we still have room to move.

It is not likely that the ecosystems of our mountain landscapes will collapse any time soon. But they are changing. But it is not just to prevent disaster that we need to consider the importance of the Mountain Parks to our future. This relatively intact system provides stability and buys us time to adapt to changes we are bringing about by our wide-ranging activities in and around the mountain West. We need to constantly remind ourselves that this expanded protected area keeps alive an ecological thermostat that may well be an important defence against future climate change impacts in the Canadian West.

One way to ensure we protect all future options is to expand the area of designation included in the Mountain Parks. We are not talking about creating any new parks here, but rather upgrading the status of what we already possess.

In a recent study, Conservation International defined wilderness as an expanse of ten thousand square kilometres or more, in which at least 70 percent of the area still bears natural vegetation. We possess more than twice that much ecological wealth in the Mountain Parks alone.



KANANASKIS-SPRAY

When Banff National Park was reduced in 1911 to roughly half its former size, one area that was taken out was the lower Spray River Valley.

The area was excised so Calgary Power could build a dam and power generation station to serve the growing electrical needs of the region. However, these areas have recovered over time from the logging, mining and electrical development that marred them a century ago, and could be reconsidered within the context of World Heritage Site re-designation.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

But this is not the only ecological wealth we possess. By combining our natural capital that has been banked in the form of buffer zones around the core park system, we can multiply the value of our protection investments.

During the initial consultation phase that resulted in the creation of the expanded Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site in 1990, Alberta Provincial Parks indicated they would be supportive of adding seventeen contiguous provincially protected areas to the designation. These areas, which include parks that buffer national parks along the continental divide, all possess a high level of ecological integrity similar and complementary to those found in the World Heritage Site. The total area of these additions would be over 960,000 hectares, representing an increase in area of about 42 percent, which is substantial enough to require a re-nomination. It has been proposed additionally that three adjoining provincial parks in B.C. also be considered in any re-nomination.

The prospect of adding additional mountain areas to the existing World Heritage Site designation has become more feasible with the recent designations of new parks and the upgraded legal protection

KARST CREEK

One area that has received inadequate attention in the management of protected areas, including the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, is the role that upland watersheds and aquatic ecosystems play in ensuring regional water supply security. Growing water scarcity is projected in all current climate change scenarios. The need to better protect upland water resources is reason enough in its own right to reconsider which areas might be included in an expanded UNESCO World Heritage Site designation.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.



for others, plus the approval of management plans with an emphasis on protection of the natural environment. As a result, the World Heritage Committee, at its 2006 meeting, passed a resolution encouraging an expansion of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site.

The expansion of the designation will demonstrate the global ecological value of what we already possess, so its economic value can be appropriately recognized. The broader designation also offers the opportunity to reposition ourselves in the global tourism marketplace. We may wish to use the expanded designation as a foundation for articulating and aggressively marketing interpretations of the important role the careful local management of ecologically stable national and provincial parks and protected places plays in moderating regional climate impacts, as a way of distinguishing the Canadian Rockies region in the world tourism marketplace. We may also wish to seek broader designation in the name of watershed protection, for the benefits in doing so will greatly reduce the cost of dealing with water quality in towns and cities downstream.

Re-designation could be accompanied by scientific research activities related to evolving ecosystem dynamics. Such research could be linked directly to public education that underscores a vision of the West we want. Increased public understanding of the economic value of properly functioning ecosystems would inform evolving public policy, and create a foundation for this country's second great landscape-based national public policy achievement. It may sound impossible but it isn't. History tells us a great deal about the power of mountain place to define identity



THE FOOTHILLS ECOREGION

Vast areas of the eastern slopes in the foothills ecoregion adjacent to the entire length of the current World Heritage Site are still in pristine ecological condition. Presently these domains act as buffers protecting the core of the World Heritage Site. Many of these areas, including the White Goat, Siffleur and Wilmore Wildernesses, are worthy of higher designation in and of themselves. Such designation need not mean an end to current human activities, including hunting and guiding.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

for the Canadian West. At the risk of repeating one of the central themes of this book too often, we have done it once. We can do it again.

There are other benefits to extending the designation. Without altering a single land-use regulation, the enlarged World Heritage Site will encompass a broader range of ecosystems and habitats, including the montane grasslands of the Front Ranges and Foothills on the east side, and wet-belt forests on the west slope of the Great Divide. The broader array of habitats and ecosystems will provide more resilience in the event that climate change causes latitudinal and elevational shifts of current ecosystem complexes. This would mean a greater likelihood of maintaining this region in the closest possible semblance of its original state.

With the exception of bison, which may yet be reintroduced, all the large mammal species that historically occupied habitats in the World Heritage Site are still present. All naturally occurring fish species are still present, as headwater streams provide remnant habitat for once-abundant species such as bull trout and west-slope cutthroat trout.

The extended designation will also speak very positively to the World Heritage Committee's criteria for preservation of integrity. Integrity is a measure of the wholeness and intactness of the natural and/or cultural

heritage and its attributes. Examining the conditions of integrity requires assessing the extent to which the property includes all elements necessary to express its outstanding universal value.

For all properties nominated under criteria of integrity, biophysical processes and landform features should be relatively intact. However, it is recognized that no area is totally pristine and that all natural areas are in a dynamic state and to some extent involve contact with people. Human activities, including those of traditional societies and local communities, often occur in natural areas. These activities may be consistent with the outstanding universal value of the area where they are ecologically sustainable. In addition, properties nominated under integrity criteria should have sufficient size and contain the elements necessary to demonstrate the key aspects of processes that are essential for the long-term conservation of the ecosystems and the biological diversity they contain.

The benefits of such designation, however, do not stop with ecosystems. Beyond the region's geological, biological and ecological significance is an entire domain of cultural significance that has yet to be brought into consideration, even within contemporary management frameworks that define current use of this far-flung group of protected places. These mountains are the headwaters of western Canadian literature and poetry. They are the inspiration for art, music and dance, and dozens of recreations that utterly define Western identity. These mountain landscapes are the source of our cultural inspiration and the image of what Canada is, in the world's imagination. They are the backdrop to everything we are and do in the mountain West.

Our final decision on what areas we would like include within this globally significant re-designation is pending. The high level of protection we afford these landscapes will ensure that the Western culture we created in response to the grandeur of the landscapes in which we live, continues to thrive and that we plan to establish our uniqueness through that culture. In telling the world that these places matter, we are announcing that where and how we live is central to our identity as Canadians. By deciding in favour of these broader designations, we will be announcing to ourselves and to the rest of Canada that we are on the threshold of creating a culture commensurate with place. In so doing we will be telling the world that we have made a clear decision on the kind of West we want. That world will then come to Canada on our terms, to see that West and to see how we created it.