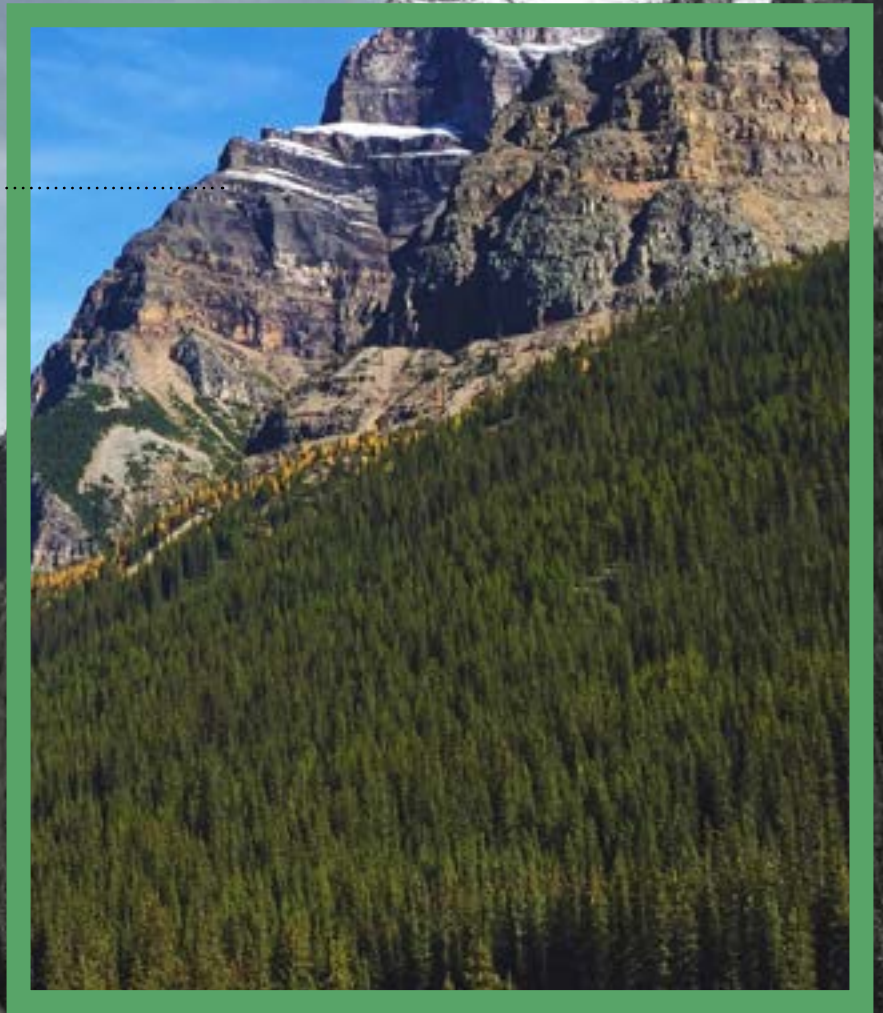


PROTECTING CANADA'S NATIONAL PARKS A CALL FOR RENEWED COMMITMENT TO NATURE CONSERVATION





**Front cover: Canadian
Rockies.** *Photo Ezra Jeffrey*

Pages 2–3: *Photo Bill Pennell*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Photo Courtney Milne

Previous page: Great Blue Heron.

Photo BGSmith/Adobe Stock

For almost a decade CPAWS has observed a significant shift in Parks Canada's approach to managing our national parks, away from their legislative first priority of protecting nature, towards a more tourism and marketing focused agenda which is putting wildlife and wilderness in our national parks at risk.

National parks are places where people can enjoy and appreciate protected nature in ways that leave them "unimpaired" for the benefit of future generations of Canadians. To fulfil this promise, Parks Canada is tasked with carefully managing our national parks to ensure their ecological integrity is protected first and foremost.

Unfortunately, in the past few years, CPAWS has noted the following trends in Parks Canada's management of our national parks:

1. More behind-closed-door decision-making, with less public engagement, and a growing disregard for public feedback in decisions;
2. An increasing focus on tourism, marketing, increased visitation, supporting non nature-focused recreational activities, and revenue generation, without adequate attention to the implications this might have for the parks' ecological integrity; and
3. Decisions being made that contravene existing policies and legislation specifically designed to limit development and protect ecological integrity in our national parks.



Lake Louise, Banff National Park, AB. *Photo James Anderson*

CPAWS is encouraged by commitments made by Canada's new federal government to limit development in our national parks, re-focus on protecting their ecological integrity, re-invest in science-based management, ensure open and transparent decision-making, and work more collaboratively with stakeholders and the public. Eight months into their mandate, we have seen two important decisions that begin to deliver on these commitments – the cancellation of the giant Mother Canada statue proposed for Cape Breton Highlands National Park, and the strengthening of legislation to better protect the ecological integrity of the Rouge National Urban Park. However, there is much more to be done to safeguard the future of nature in our parks.

This report highlights a number of systemic problems in how our national parks are being managed that we believe must be overcome for our new government to fully implement their commitments.

1) Limiting development

In the late 1990s and early 2000s three independent expert review panels recommended stronger protection measures for our national parks in response to pitched public battles over commercial development in Banff National Park, and stresses facing parks across the country. However, in recent years, a series of new developments have been approved that contravene the policies and regulations that were specifically put in place to limit development, and that ignore public opposition.

For example, in 2012 Parks Canada approved the construction of the “Glacier Skywalk” in Jasper National Park, which took a public viewpoint and turned it into a private pay-

Bald eagle.

Photo Markus Thompson





Moose with calves.

Photo Peter Mather

for-use theme park-like development, in spite of enormous public opposition. In 2014, the Agency granted concept approval for commercial accommodations at Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park, despite the fact that it is prohibited by the park management plan. Then, just before the federal election was called in 2015, a massive expansion of the Lake Louise ski resort in Banff National Park was approved, even though it requires removing land from legally protected wilderness to accommodate the demands of a private business to expand. In the 2016 federal budget, funding was put forward for a mysterious \$66 million paved bike path through endangered caribou and grizzly bear habitat with no prior public discussion or environmental review.

Together these developments in our Rocky Mountain National Parks pose a serious threat to sensitive wildlife and wilderness, and are out of step with Parks Canada's legislative responsibility to prioritize ecological integrity in all aspects of park management.

One of the rationales Parks Canada has put forward to justify these new developments is that visitation has been dropping and new "attractions" are needed to entice people to our parks so they remain "relevant" to Canadians. However, the data we examined tells a different story. Overall national park attendance has held relatively steady over the past 15 years, and any major drops in visitation occurred just after global security and economic crises like the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the global economic downturn in 2008. In the past two years since the Canadian dollar has dropped in value, visitation to already crowded Banff National Park has increased by over 20%. Evidence suggests that national parks are still very "relevant" to Canadians. In fact, polling shows that Canadians continue to value our national parks as one of the top four symbols of Canadian identity along with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, health care and the flag, and this has not changed for decades. Evidence also shows that Canadians value unspoiled nature and wildlife above all else in their national parks. Holding firm to policies and regulations that limit development is critical to protect nature, and reflects the public interest in protecting our national parks.

2) Re-focusing on ecological integrity and restoring science funding

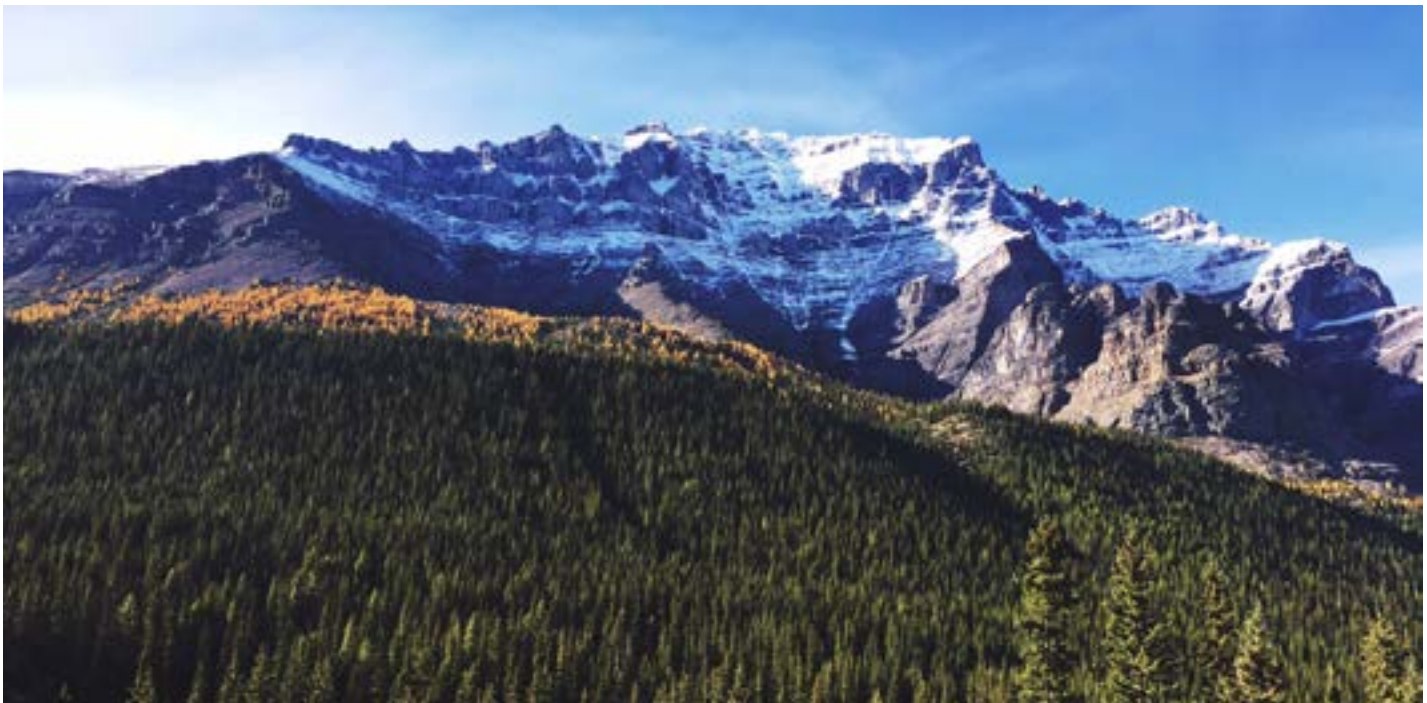
Parks Canada's last publicly available report on the state of our national parks indicates that less than half of national park ecosystems measured were in 'good condition' and that 41% of park ecosystems had not yet been assessed. More than one third of assessed ecosystems were in declining health. Clearly much more work is needed to measure the state of park ecosystems and to maintain or restore their ecological integrity. Yet, in response to 2012 budget cuts, Parks Canada disproportionately reduced funding for conservation work, which has resulted in a 31 percent reduction in the Agency's conservation and science staff. In contrast, over the same time period staffing in the visitor experience program grew by 9 percent. As of 2015/16, only 13% of Parks Canada's spending on national parks was dedicated to conservation. This raises serious questions about whether the Agency is implementing the *Canada National Parks Act* which says:

"Maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity, through the protection of natural resources and natural processes, shall be the first priority of the Minister when considering all aspects of the management of parks."

Adding to these problems, the legal requirement to conduct environmental assessments on projects in national parks was lost when the previous federal government repealed the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* in 2012. Since then we have observed less rigour, quality and transparency in environmental reviews in national parks.

Public reporting on the well-being of national park ecosystems has effectively disappeared, with no new park-specific State of Park reports being posted publicly since 2012. Parks Canada is now out of compliance with its legislative requirement to report to Parliament every two years on the state of all our national parks, with the last report having been tabled in 2011. Meanwhile, a 2012 omnibus bill changed the legal requirement for public review of park management plans from every five years to every ten.

Rockies. Photo Ezra Jeffrey



Parks Canada's program objectives have also shifted. In 2008/09 the Agency conducted an internal "program renewal" process with no public involvement. This resulted in major changes to the Agency's vision and "program outcome", minimizing the conservation focus of both. As of 2009, Parks Canada's vision makes no mention of nature conservation or ecological integrity despite this being the first priority by law for managing our national parks. This fundamental shift in management focus continues to drive actions on the ground in national parks today.

The previous federal government was reluctant to reach beyond strict areas of federal jurisdiction. Yet the science is clear that successfully conserving nature in parks requires managing them as part of the broader landscape. We highlight an immediate opportunity around Gros Morne National Park, a World Heritage Site in Newfoundland and Labrador, to pursue regional collaboration, working with local communities, the provincial government and others to implement UNESCO's recommendation to create a buffer zone around the park that would protect it from industrial development threats.

3) Open, transparent decision-making

Opportunities for Canadians to have their say in decisions about our national parks have diminished in recent years. Public consultations on development proposals have become limited to a few weeks of geographically restricted consultations, often after years of behind-closed-door discussions with private developers, and often after decisions have already been made internally. In many cases, like the Lake Louise Ski Resort expansion and the Glacier Skywalk, proposals have been approved in spite of strong public opposition.

Public accountability measures like the Minister's Round Table, which is legally required every two years under the *Parks Canada Agency Act*, have become tightly scripted events, focused almost entirely on how to increase park visitation, with no attention paid to nature conservation in recent years.

Arctic ground squirrel,
Nahanni National Park
Reserve, NWT.

Photo Alison Woodley



4) Conclusion and Recommendations

If Parks Canada continues to allow more development in our parks, and focuses on marketing, increased visitation and revenue generation with inadequate regard for nature, wildlife and wilderness in our parks will be whittled away, and we will fail to deliver on our commitment to pass along our national parks unimpaired to future generations. It is time to re-focus on conserving nature first and foremost in our national parks.

This does not mean keeping people out of parks, it means making sure that the collective impact of people enjoying these special places does not jeopardize their wildlife and wilderness. It requires strictly limiting development; re-focusing on ecological integrity, science, monitoring and public reporting on the state of park ecosystems; and restoring open and transparent decision-making.

CPAWS outlines seventeen specific recommendations for the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change to shift the focus of national park management back to the legislative first priority of protecting nature, and to deliver on the new federal government's commitments:

IMMEDIATELY ACT TO LIMIT DEVELOPMENT INSIDE NATIONAL PARKS BY:

1. Cancelling approvals of the massive Lake Louise Ski Resort expansion in Banff and the Maligne Lake resort proposal in Jasper;
2. Halting the \$66M bike path proposal for Jasper and re-directing these funds to conservation priorities such as endangered caribou, ecological monitoring, and public reporting;
3. Re-affirming the commitment to no increase in development footprint in Banff and Jasper;
4. Assuring that regulated wilderness areas will not be changed to accommodate new infrastructure development;
5. Maintaining the existing development and population caps in the Town of Banff and other park communities.

RE-FOCUS ON ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY BY:

6. Establishing an independent expert review panel to examine the growing disconnect between Parks Canada's programs and the legislative direction that ecological integrity is the first priority in all management decisions, and to make recommendations for how to close this gap;
7. Implementing the commitment to re-invest \$25M per year in science-based management of parks, to fully implement the national parks ecological integrity monitoring and reporting program, and support protection and restoration activities;
8. Restoring the legal requirement to conduct the highest standard of environmental assessment in national parks;
9. Restoring the requirement that all national parks staff, regardless of their role in the organization, participate in an ecological integrity training program so they understand the Agency's legislative responsibility, and their role in helping to implement it;

10. Directing park staff to actively re-engage in the management of the greater park ecosystems, and as a first example, immediately work with with the NL government, local communities and tourism businesses, to implement the UNESCO World Heritage Committee's recommendation to establish a buffer zone around Gros Morne National Park;
11. Revoking the 2009 internal Parks Canada vision statement and strategic outcome, and committing to engage Canadians in any future program renewal;
12. Restoring the legal requirement for management plan reviews from every 10 years to every 5 years;
13. Opening up state of park reporting to external peer review and ensuring system-wide reports are tabled in Parliament on-schedule every two years, and all reports are publicly available online.

RESTORE OPEN, TRANSPARENT DECISION-MAKING AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN OUR NATIONAL PARKS BY:

14. Restoring the Minister's Round Table to its original intent as a public accountability mechanism;
15. Appointing a national parks advisory committee to the Minister to provide on-going advice on managing the parks, including on maintaining or restoring ecological integrity, and ensuring effective public involvement in decision making;
16. Appointing advisory committees to Superintendents in national parks, similar to what exists in the Bruce Peninsula National Park;
17. Committing to listening to and better respecting Canadians' views on national park management and policy development.



Hiker in the Rockies.
Photo Kalen Emsley

About CPAWS

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) is Canada's only nationwide charity dedicated solely to the protection of our public land and water, and ensuring our parks are managed to protect the nature within them. Since 1963 we've played a lead role in protecting over half a million square kilometres – an area bigger than the entire Yukon Territory! Our vision is that Canada will protect at least half of our public land and water so that future generations can benefit from Canada's irreplaceable wilderness.



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