



# Western Canada's Provincial Parks

## How does BC measure up?



Mount Robson, located in east central BC near the Alberta border, is one of BC's best known provincial parks. Unfortunately, years of funding and staff cuts are undermining the ecological integrity of the park. Photo by Leslie Degner.

### British Columbia's Parks: Paradise Lost or Environmental Legacy?

People in Western Canada know we live in a special part of the world. From the mixed-grass prairies of Manitoba, to the rainforests of British Columbia; from the Rocky Mountains of Alberta to the Athabasca sand dunes in Saskatchewan – the diversity of our natural landscapes contribute to a quality of life that is second to none.

For over 100 years we have worked to protect our special places, building provincial parks systems that are truly world class. Visiting a park allows us to reconnect with the natural world:

to dip our toes in a cool clear stream or take a walk in the forest. Wilderness gives us aesthetic pleasures, but behind the roar of a river, the hoot of an owl and the hum of a bee, it is providing us with the stuff of life.

Forests purify our water, clean our air and help protect us against global warming. Bees pollinate our crops and healthy wetlands protect us against flooding. Known as "ecosystem services", these benefits also include the provision of natural medicines, seed dispersal, soil retention, waste decomposition and the regulation of disease outbreaks.

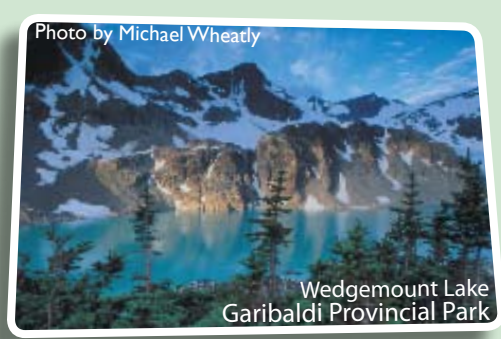
Given the environmental uncertainty we currently face it is more important than ever to take steps to

ensure a future with healthy ecosystems. One of the best ways we can do that is to stand up for our parks and protected areas. Safeguarding our protected areas is a smart decision not only from an ecological perspective, but also makes sense economically. Our provincial parks generate over a billion dollars annually to local economies throughout Western Canada.<sup>2</sup>

*British Columbia has over 800 parks and protected areas, but there are just 10 full-time park rangers to safeguard 13,090,000 million hectares.<sup>1</sup>*

Today, from BC to Manitoba, there are over 1500 provincial protected areas covering 22 million hectares. These figures sound impressive, but in

reality our parks are struggling under a barrage of threats. Logging, cuts to staff and funding, weak laws, encroaching privatization and government indifference are eroding our protected areas, putting into jeopardy the future of our parks.



In an era of increasing uncertainty about our natural world, whether it is climate change, overpopulation, pollution or endangered species, the importance of protecting the environment and the services it provides grows. Today, Canadians realize we simply cannot afford to take our environment for granted. At the beginning of 2007, amid news of warming temperatures, shrinking glaciers and chemical contamination, poll after poll confirmed that the environment has become the key issue for Canadians – topping health care, poverty, crime and tax relief.



Read on to see how BC's parks compare to neighbouring jurisdictions. Find out about the threats to your parks system and what you can do about it.

Left: Grizzly bears are threatened by loss of habitat, degraded fish streams, hunting, and poaching — all of these should be addressed in our parks system. Above: User-fees have been introduced as a patchwork solution to the gross mismanagement of our parks.

# How do BC's Provincial Parks Measure up?



## National Parks

Compared to Western Canada's provincial parks our national parks system is almost a paragon of virtue. The legal protection of our national parks is stronger than provincial legislation, and unlike its provincial cousins ecological integrity is promoted within the mandate of Parks Canada. The development of natural resources within park boundaries is also prohibited. Parks Canada needs to meet its mandate to establish a national park in each of Canada's 39 natural regions. Establishing a national park in the South Okanagan Similkameen, one of Canada's most endangered ecosystems, would be a good first step. Funding and staffing levels are still recovering from earlier cuts but there have been positive, increases in budgetary expenditures in recent years.

Staff and Funding = **C**  
 Legal Protection = **B**  
 Amount of Protected Area = **C-**

## British Columbia



British Columbia has a lot of protected areas compared to the other western provinces, but unfortunately the BC government isn't standing up for our parks. The operational budget for BC Parks is the same as it was in 1994 when the parks system was half the size it is today. Park rangers are an endangered species here. Despite a government promise to hire more rangers in 2005, there are just 10 permanent full-time rangers to protect BC's parks system. The government has further eroded an already weak BC Park Act to facilitate private development, including resorts, within park boundaries. Unfortunately when it comes to its protected areas BC talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk.

Staff and Funding = **F**  
 Legal Protection = **F**  
 Amount of Protected Area = **B**

## Alberta



Alberta's provincial parks are better funded than most, however the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Northern Alberta points out that their park legislation is amongst the weakest in Canada and doesn't protect parks from industrial, commercial and recreational activities. Astoundingly, the Alberta government can also eliminate a park with no public notice. Although Alberta has over 500 protected areas many are too small to adequately preserve endangered flora and fauna, something that is critically important given that Alberta has no endangered species legislation. This criticism is offset to a small degree by the fact that Alberta has a larger national parks system within its boundaries. However, much improvement is needed before Alberta gets a passing grade.

Staff and Funding = **C**  
 Legal Protection = **F**  
 Amount of Protected Area = **D**

## Saskatchewan



Saskatchewan sits at the back of the class along with Manitoba by allowing logging and mining within some of its provincial parks. Moose Mountain Park is also open to oil and gas development. Other provincial parks in Saskatchewan are heavily fragmented by roads and cottage subdivisions. Saskatchewan's protected areas are too small and fragmented and many important ecosystems such as the boreal forest and Great Sand Hills are under-represented. Park rangers are few and far between and staffing for parks could be increased. If Saskatchewan wants to improve its grades it must strengthen its park legislation to forbid industrial activities and expand its protected area system.

Staff and Funding = **C-**  
 Legal Protection = **F-**  
 Amount of Protected Area = **F**

## Manitoba



Manitoba is one of the bad boys on the block when it comes to its provincial parks system. Not only does logging and mining occur within park boundaries, their Park Act expressly allows it. Amazingly, logging is permitted within the habitat of the endangered woodland caribou in Nopiming Provincial Park. Tembec, a large logging company, has cutting rights to 62 percent of Nopiming's total area. Manitoba needs to stop dragging its heels and expand its small and fragmented parks system. It also needs to institute much needed changes to strengthen its Park Act before it can remove itself from the back of the pack. Staffing levels and funding, as with most Western provincial parks are in the suboptimal level, leaving a parks system that largely has to fend for itself.

Staff and Funding = **D+**  
 Legal Protection = **F-**  
 Amount of Protected Area = **D**



## BC's Parks System - A Comparison

Sources for this table can be found online.<sup>13</sup>

	National Parks	BC	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba	Washington State
Number of parks	42 National Parks*	852	504	196	97	120
Hectares protected	27,000,000	13,090,000	2,700,000	1,400,000	3,955,200	105,222
Annual Budget	\$532,000,000	\$33,000,000	\$46,000,000	\$20,000,000	\$22,627,200	\$61,000,000
Dollars per hectare	\$19.70	\$2.52	\$17.03	\$14.28	\$5.72	\$579
Staff	4,200	179	432	252	312	610
Staff per hectare	1/6,428	1/73,128	1/6,250	1/5,555	1/12,677	1/172
Park rangers (Full time equivalents)	425	64	105	18	58	235
Rangers per hectare	1/63,529	1/204,531	1/25,714	1/77,777	1/68,193	1/144
Ranger per park ratio	2.1/1	1/13.3	1/4.8	1/10.8	1/1.7	1.95/1
Visitors (annual)	28,000,000	18,300,000	8,500,000	2,400,000	5,171,078	38,000,000
Ranger per visitor ratio	1/65,882	1/282,937	1/80,952	1/133,333	1/89,157	1/161,702

\* Includes 152 historical sites plus two marine conservancies

## BC's Endangered Parks system

British Columbia is renowned for its natural beauty, rugged wilderness and a parks system that covers 13,090,000 hectares. BC's parks have something for everyone. You can canoe the sparkling lakes at Bowron Lake Park, nestled in the Cariboo Mountain Range; experience the famous Adams River salmon run at Roderick Haig-Brown Provincial Park in the Interior; relax and watch the northern lights at Liard Hot Springs Park; back-country ski at Silver Star Park; or walk the miles of sandy beaches at wild Cape Scott on Northern Vancouver Island. From lush rainforests to remote beaches, from grassland meadows to grizzly bear sanctuaries our parks are crown jewels benefiting British Columbians throughout the province.

Although BC leads other provinces in the amount of protected areas, in many other aspects our parks system is reeling under a litany of staffing and funding cuts, encroaching privatization and decades of government disinterest.

In 1994 there were 363 'full-time equivalent' (FTE) staff at BC Parks.<sup>4</sup> Today, with a parks system

that has doubled, there are approximately 200 FTE staff.<sup>5</sup> When you look at the number of BC park rangers, the numbers are even worse. In 2007 BC had just 10 full-time permanent park rangers – one park ranger for every 1.3 million hectares.

Although more part-time rangers are hired in the summer, amounting to 64 positions, we are still far behind neighbouring jurisdictions such as Alberta, which has nearly double the number of park rangers and Washington State which has 240 positions.

BC's operational budget for parks is equally abysmal. BC's parks contribute almost \$170 million to the provincial tax base but the operational budget for our parks system is only \$33 million.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast Alberta, whose provincial parks system is much smaller, has an operational budget of \$46 million, and Washington State, whose state parks system is just 105,222 hectares, has a park budget double ours.<sup>7</sup>

Privatization of parks is another major concern. Although the public has repeatedly said they don't want to see our parks privatized or commercialized, in 2003 the BC government, with no public consultation, put parking meters into 41 popular parks. Last summer, in another surprise announcement, the provincial government tendered bids for the development of 'private for-profit' roofed accommodations, including hotels and resorts, within 12 provincial parks.

The public backlash against both parking meters and lodges was swift and overwhelming. Visits to parks with parking meters went down by one million annually, and by 2007, amidst revelations that the parking meters had

missed their revenue targets by over 90 percent, the BC government quietly halved the parking fees.<sup>8</sup> Private lodges and resorts in parks were equally poorly received. After facing intense media coverage and withering public criticism, only three private development proposals were submitted, none of which have yet proceeded. Further plans to expand the roofed accommodation program have been halted.

Additional threats lurking on the horizon include proposals to extend park-use permits to 30 years for private companies from the typical current terms of one to five years, and the proliferation of new and proposed private hydro projects.

Right now Run-of-River Power Inc., a private corporation, is planning on building eight private power projects on tributaries to the pristine

Pitt River just outside of Maple Ridge, east of Vancouver. Aside from trepidation about the environmental impact of the development, there are additional concerns because the company wants to put transmission towers through Pinecone Burke Provincial Park.<sup>9</sup> This proposal could be permitted through the provincial government's "Provincial Park Boundary Adjustment Guidelines." The guidelines, approved in the summer of 2006 and anticipated to be passed into law in 2007, could allow industrial developments in parks if the government deems the projects to be in the "public interest".

Since 1911 British Columbians have worked together to create one of the most spectacular parks system in North America. Just as it required vision, wisdom and community spirit to create our protected area system, so too will these attributes be needed to protect BC's parks for future generations.

According to a recent BC government survey, 93 percent of British Columbians believe it is important or very important that provincial parks preserve wilderness.<sup>10</sup>

British Columbia leads all other provinces in Canada through the protection of almost 14% of its land base. However, many of our parks over-represent alpine areas, low biodiversity "rock and ice," designed to have little impact on the province's powerful logging industry.



Photo by Michael Wheatley



Lack of funding and staff are degrading our parks



Photo by Jaqueline Windh



Duffey Lake Provincial Park

# Our Parks are more than just Protected Areas ...

## Climate Change

Climate change has already started to impact the earth's web of life by melting glaciers, increasing wildfires, triggering pest infestations and causing extreme weather events. Healthy ecosystems are not only important for cleaning our air and purifying our water, but they also mitigate climate change by serving as "carbon sinks," absorbing carbon dioxide, one of the primary greenhouse gases causing climate change.

## Habitat and Biological Diversity

Loss of habitat is the primary reason why more than 80% of British Columbia's 1300 species at risk are endangered. Wildlife such as burrowing owls, western bluebirds, mountain caribou and northern spotted owls are in danger of disappearing from BC due to the loss of the meadows, forests and grasslands they call home. Parks play an important role in the prevention of extinction and the maintenance of biodiversity by preserving healthy ecosystems. Unfortunately, many of our parks, due to their small size and lack of interconnected areas, are in danger of becoming "islands of extinction," where wildlife are unable to disperse and ecosystems slowly degrade because of the fragmentation of the surrounding landscape.

## Economic Benefits

British Columbia's parks provide a wealth of ecosystem services, but they also contribute hundreds of millions of dollars annually to local towns and cities across the province. According to a government report released in 2001, BC's parks system contributes \$521 million to our Gross Domestic Product, with "over one-half of the benefits occurring outside of the Lower Mainland and Victoria regions."<sup>10</sup> Despite this large monetary contribution the operational budget for BC Parks is just \$33 million, the same as it was in 1994 when our protected area system was half the size.<sup>11</sup>

## Recreation

Provincial parks provide recreational activities for both young and old, urban and rural, outdoor adventurer and occasional visitor. Whether swimming, canoeing, fishing, hiking, camping, bird watching or roasting marshmallows over an open fire, provincial parks offer an array of activities for people throughout the province. Parks give us a way to get away from the hustle and bustle of the everyday life – to turn off the computer, switch off the TV, leave the cell phone at home and reconnect with nature.



Mount Robson Provincial Park  
Berg Lake  
Photo by Michael Wheatly

## REFERENCES

- 1 According to government figures provincial parks in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba generate over \$1 billion annually. For BC figures see: British Columbia. Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. Economic Benefits of British Columbia's Provincial Parks, 2001. Online: [http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic\\_benefits\\_bcparks\\_sept\\_2001\\_report.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic_benefits_bcparks_sept_2001_report.pdf) Information for Alberta provincial parks can be found online: [http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/all\\_about\\_us/budget/Parks.pdf](http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/all_about_us/budget/Parks.pdf). For Saskatchewan see: Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan Environment. Saskatchewan Provincial Parks – A Legacy for the Future. Report. Sept 2005. Online: [http://www.se.gov.sk.ca/saskparks/docs/documents/All\\_Brochure\\_200592691251.pdf](http://www.se.gov.sk.ca/saskparks/docs/documents/All_Brochure_200592691251.pdf)
- 2 BC Freedom of Information request obtained by the Wilderness Committee, February 2007, revealed there were only 10 full-time permanent park rangers in British Columbia for the 2006-2007 season, down from 26 park rangers in 2000-2001. More seasonal rangers are hired during summer months bringing the number of rangers in 2006-2007 to 64 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs), down from 94 FTEs in 2000-2001. In 2003 the BC provincial government promised to hire up to 50 new rangers.
- 3 British Columbia. Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. Economic Benefits of British Columbia's Provincial Parks, 2001. Online: [http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic\\_benefits\\_bcparks\\_sept\\_2001\\_report.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic_benefits_bcparks_sept_2001_report.pdf)
- 4 British Columbia. BC Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks. Annual Report 1996.
- 5 BC Freedom of Information request obtained by the Wilderness Committee, February 2007, provided FTE position information for BC Parks staff.
- 6 Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. "BC Parks still \$50 million short." Press Release, January 28, 2003. Online: <http://cpawbc.org/press/20030128.php>
- 7 The biannual operating expenditures budget for Washington State Parks is \$123 million, amounting to \$61.5 million annually. Online: <http://leap.wa.gov/leap/Oversight/histotot.pdf> - page 7. The operational budget for Alberta's provincial parks for 2007-08 is approximately \$46 million. The 2006-07 budget was \$43.7 million. Online: [http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/all\\_about\\_us/budget/Parks.pdf](http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/all_about_us/budget/Parks.pdf)
- 8 In a freedom of information request released to the Wilderness Committee in 2006, BC government documents revealed the net revenue from parking meters ranged from \$50,000 to \$250,000 during the three years the meters had been in operation. In 2003 a government appointed panel, the Recreation Stewardship Panel projected the meters would generate \$4-6 million annually in revenues. Online: <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/esd/recpanel/final-report.pdf> - page 54
- 9 Large high voltage transmission lines are needed to carry electricity from hydro generating stations to transformer substations. Transmission towers can range from 20 to 50 meters in height, and are located in "right of ways" (cleared tracts of lands averaging 40 to 80 meters in width).
- 10 British Columbia. Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. Economic Benefits of British Columbia's Provincial Parks, 2001. Online: [http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic\\_benefits\\_bcparks\\_sept\\_2001\\_report.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/research/economic_benefits_bcparks_sept_2001_report.pdf)
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- 12 British Columbia. BC Stats. BC Parks Household Survey 2005. Provincial Report Final – 2006. Online: [http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/publications/household\\_survey\\_report\\_2005.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/publications/household_survey_report_2005.pdf)
- 13 Please visit the online version on this paper for references: <http://www.wildernesscommittee.org/campaigns/publiclands/parks/reports/Vol26No06>



Garry Oak Meadows  
Vancouver Island



Photo by Graham Osborne

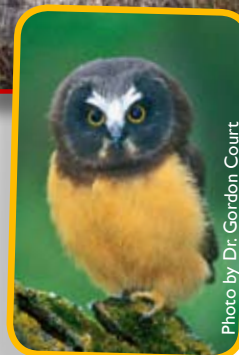


Photo by Dr. Gordon Court

## BC's Provincial Parks: Now and for the Future

British Columbia's provincial parks are an environmental legacy worth protecting. If you love our parks take a moment to write to Premier Gordon Campbell and let him know how you feel.

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Legislative Buildings  
Victoria BC, V8V 1X4  
Email: [premier@gov.bc.ca](mailto:premier@gov.bc.ca)  
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