



ALBERTA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Honourable Jason Nixon
Alberta Environment and Parks
323 Legislature Building
10800 97 Ave NW
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6
aep.minister@gov.ab.ca

April 16, 2020

Re: Optimizing Alberta Parks

Dear Minister Nixon,

The Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society is a non-profit organization representing over 400 wildlife professionals in the province of Alberta. Our mission is to inspire and empower wildlife professionals to engage in science-based management and conservation of wild animals and their habitats. We are affiliated with The Wildlife Society, the largest organization of wildlife professionals in the world.

We are writing in response to the Alberta Environment and Parks plan: *Optimizing Alberta Parks*. This plan involves the full or partial closure of 20 Alberta Parks sites and offers third-party partnerships or alternative management approaches for another 164 sites. A recent public opinion survey conducted by the market and social research firm Leger shows that 7 out of 10 Albertans oppose the closure or removal of these parks from the parks system. We are concerned that Albertans were not consulted on these changes to the Alberta Parks system. This represents a significant change to the Alberta Parks system, and we are concerned about how this decision was made and the potential impacts.

We understand that Alberta Parks undertook a comprehensive assessment of all 473 park sites to create this plan. As a science-based organization, we value the methods behind decision making. We request an explanation of the criteria used in deciding on the proposed changes and any models used in this assessment, as well as how data gaps were addressed.

In 2016, visitors to Alberta contributed more than \$8.5 billion to the provincial economy, supporting 19,000 operators and employing 127,000 people. This economic contribution outweighs the \$5 million savings generated by these cuts. *Optimizing Alberta Parks* seems contradictory to other efforts to double Alberta's tourism revenue in the next ten years. We are concerned that many rural economies will be impacted by this plan, depending on the gas, food, and other supplies that people purchase while heading out for a camping weekend at a local provincial recreation area. These rural economies will no longer receive the benefits of Alberta Parks related marketing and advertising, thus leading to declines in visitation.

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The Albertan Recreation Survey conducted by Advanis on behalf of Alberta Culture and Tourism in 2017 found that camping and hiking are the second and third most favourite activities among Albertans. Albertans prefer these activities in parks and are motivated by relaxation, spending time with family, and enjoying nature. Over half of Albertans believe among the important benefits of outdoor recreation are the opportunities for the preservation of Alberta's landscapes, plants, and animals. How was this research incorporated into Alberta Parks' site assessment?

Most of our members are frequent park and public land users, both for work and recreation. Through our local knowledge, we know many sites included in the plan are not underutilized; many are consistently full on summer weekends. Some sites, particularly along the eastern slopes in the Bighorn, Ghost, and Highwood, are extremely popular for Albertans seeking rustic camping, hunting, and angling recreation opportunities. While some Provincial Recreation Areas (PRAs) are popular and may be picked up by local businesses for partnerships, there are no guarantees that their future 'alternative management approaches' will not reduce public access or impact the availability of services, both of which will reduce the quality of the recreation experience. We assume that sites not picked up by local businesses would revert to Crown Land and we support your previous statements that these lands will not be sold.

Most sites in the list for removal or closure are Provincial Recreation Areas (PRAs), which are legislated through the Provincial Parks Act to "facilitate their use and enjoyment for outdoor recreation". We understand that conservation-related objectives take secondary priority in PRAs, and that these sites tend to be small with a campground or other recreational facility designed to provide access to surrounding Crown land. PRAs play an important role within the Crown Land matrix, however, as focused nodes of human activity. Ensuring that recreationists have a designated place to camp overnight reduces the ecological impacts associated with random camping. If these designated camping nodes are lost, we may see an undesirable increase of random camping across the landscape. Abundant random camping can result in an array of wildlife issues from habitat damage (e.g., people camping in wet areas with large vehicles), to inappropriate waste management (e.g., human waste and garbage left behind) and an increase in inappropriate recreational use (e.g., motorized recreation in water ways or on non-designated trails). These activities also can increase human-wildlife conflicts because people leave various attractants behind and have an increased presence in sensitive wildlife habitats. This reduces visitor safety and might increase costs as officers respond to complaints and deal with aggressive wildlife, particularly bears. While many Albertans are good stewards of the land, some are not. When Alberta Parks facilities were closed to reduce the spread of Covid-19, Alberta Parks reported an abundance of garbage and human waste left behind after one weekend. All sites on this list are important for community access to recreational opportunities, which is important for focusing human use at specific nodes of activity.

