



Response to Draft #2

Alberta's Plan for Parks

December 22, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The Alberta Hiking Association (AHA) is an umbrella organization of hiking-oriented outdoor groups and individual hikers, formed in 2008, to (among other things) act as an advocate at provincial and regional levels for walkers, hikers, and snowshoers. These are the most popular recreational activities in Alberta's parks.

Many of our member clubs' activities take place within Alberta's provincial parks, and thus we are deeply concerned with the state of those parks. We participated in the technical review and the Minister's Forum (under the name of Hike Alberta) about the first draft, and our newly elected board of directors has circulated the second draft to member clubs and reviewed it. We thank the Minister for this opportunity to comment on the revised version from the point of view of Alberta hikers.

IMPROVEMENTS IN THE SECOND DRAFT

We are pleased to see the increased emphasis on the vital conservation role of parks, the inclusion of steps toward a process for increasing the number of parks to fill gaps in the parks system, the expansion of volunteer programs, increased involvement of Aboriginal groups, and identification of the need for policies for monitoring and enforcement. The revised vision statement is also somewhat of an improvement.

REMAINING DEFICIENCIES

MOTORIZED RECREATION

The revised report, like the first version, fails to distinguish between motorized and non-motorized access to off-road areas of parks. Indeed, in several sections it seems to encourage increased motorized access. We find this policy completely unacceptable.

We wish to emphasize in the strongest possible terms that there is no place for recreational motorized transportation in provincial parks and wildlands. Our members and those other

Albertans that we represent go into the off-road areas of the parks seeking undisturbed wilderness. Motorized off-road vehicles destroy what we seek in the backcountry. Any trail used by ATVs or off-road motorcycles is of no value for visitors on foot. Noise, dust, and fear of being hit makes those trails useless for walkers, especially those whose interests include photography, bird-watching or viewing wildlife. Even completely separate ATV trails destroy habitat and drive away wildlife. A minority of ATV users will disregard requirements to stay on trails and use them to get areas previously not accessible, greatly increasing habitat destruction. Any park area that is “shared” with motorized off-highway vehicles is no longer available for hiking.

Non-recreational uses of OHVs, such as trail construction and maintenance or rescue missions, are of course of much more limited impact and greater practical value, and we do not object to those uses. The use of low-powered scooters by the mobility-challenged on suitable paved trails is also to be encouraged. However, those of us who can walk should do so.

The *Alberta Recreation Survey 2004* states that 64% of respondents thought motorized off-road vehicles should not be allowed in provincial parks, and only 20% thought they should be allowed. Clearly, the majority of Albertans do not want off-highway recreational vehicles in provincial parks and wildlands. We find it incomprehensible that the plan for parks does not reflect this fact. There can be plenty of opportunities for OHVs on private land and on crown lands other than provincial parks and wildlands. For the revised draft to say that “for example, Albertans tell us they need . . . access to designated trails for off-highway vehicles” disguises the fact that the majority of Albertans do not see that category of access as a proper role for provincial parks. allowing increased motorized access also contradicts the vision statement.

REGIONAL PLANNING

While it is clearly important that local interests be consulted in developing parks policy, it is important to remember that many (in some cases most) users of provincial parks do not come from the immediate area. The hiking clubs that make up our membership organize hikes to all parts of Alberta, and have a stake in the planning for all parts of the province. Provision must be made for non-local interests to enter into planning discussions and decisions.

In addition, there is the danger that the overarching mandate of parks will be lost when planning is regionalized. Parks need to be planned and managed on a provincial basis.

PRIORITIES

At the Minister’s Forum, many participants stated that conservation of the natural environment should take priority over recreational use. As hikers, it is our experience that the natural environment must be conserved; otherwise, the quality of the recreational experience is drastically reduced. We accept restrictions to our relatively low-impact access when needed to preserve the environment. We feel that the planning policies must reflect the higher priority of conservation over recreation for natural areas in parks and wildlands.

MEASUREMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Measurement of achievement of goals must be frequent enough to provide useful feedback. Rather than the three-year reporting cycle in the revised draft, annual reporting, based on annual

measurement, is the minimum useful frequency for tracking changes in time to respond. Goals must be measurable and diverse, going beyond user satisfaction surveys to include biodiversity measures and measures of other environmental damage or repair. Considerations of the economic value of parks must include the immense value of the environmental services wildlands provide, such as the purification and storage of water, the prevention of erosion, the storage of carbon, and the production of oxygen.

RESTRUCTURING PARKS CLASSIFICATIONS

We are concerned that this process may lead to “lowest common denominator” simplification that would remove protections that some categories may have now. Any reclassification of an area should add, not remove, protections for the land and habitat. Revisions to legislation are also needed to provide for enforcement and monitoring. All the good intentions of planners and lawmakers are of no value if they are not enforced in the field.

Thank you for your consideration.

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on behalf of the Alberta Hiking Association
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