

Paying More for Less: Accessibility and Alberta's Natural Spaces

Research question: How might we ensure that Alberta's provincial parks are accessible to all?



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Background

Since the introduction of provincial parks in Alberta in 1930 with the enactment of the Provincial Parks and Protected Areas Act, Alberta's parks have become a benefit to society and a means to protect the natural environment. As Alberta's provincial parks are meant to be enjoyed by the public, ensuring their accessibility is fundamental. Recently, changes have been made to Alberta's legislation regarding provincial parks and public lands due to the increased tension between a growing population and environmental conservation (Hallstrom & Hvenegaard, 2021). These changes include the implementation of user fees in Kananaskis and the potential closure or transfer to private management of 164 parks, which have the potential to impact the public's access to the outdoors.

In 2020, Kananaskis had 5.3 million visits

an almost 30% increase from 2019 (4.1 million)

(Town of Canmore, 2021)

The Kananaskis user fee was due to the increasing number of visitors and the need to cover maintenance and other related expenses (Fluker, 2021). The visitation rate of Kananaskis in 2020 was over 1 million visits higher than Banff National Park (Town of Canmore, 2021).



In 2019, Albertans spent **\$10.1 billion** on tourism



\$2.3 billion of that was spent on Alberta-owned land



plus **\$376 million** spent on equipment and accessories for those trips

(TIAA, 2021)
(Government of Alberta, 2022)

What is accessibility?

Accessibility refers to how easily a site or service may be reached or obtained.

(Gregory, 1986, as cited in Nicholls, 2001).

Methods

The purpose of this research was to explore the issue of accessibility of Alberta's provincial parks and public lands through a systems lens. Secondary research from academic and non-academic sources, and policy analysis, alongside community engagement were used to recognize barriers visitors face, to explore the recent changes to the province's legislation regarding parks, and to identify areas for potential change.

Stakeholders in the issue



Government of Alberta, private investors, the public, and the environment and wildlife.

An important stakeholder group whose perspectives are often underrepresented when discussing the value of public parks are Indigenous peoples. This is reflected in the lack of academic research that includes this perspective; a study by Adkin et al. (2017) on public engagement for Alberta's public lands was the only to bring up the issue of lack of representation.

Barriers to Accessibility



Recommendations/ “A way forward”

Accountability & transparency

These are key to raising support for park user fees and increasing trust in the provincial government. **Where is the money from the fee going? Who is making those decisions?**

Park users want the revenues generated to go to areas such as conservation, park maintenance, visitor experience enhancement, and reconciliation efforts.

Maintenance

With the addition of a user fee, visitors have higher management expectations. Including the upkeep of parks, facility maintenance on trails and in campsites, increased signage, improved parking infrastructure, roadway maintenance, increased public transit options to key areas or trailheads, and increased initiatives for Albertans with disabilities or mobility issues to “open nature to all”.

Education

Additional funding towards interpretive programs and educational resources will help to increase responsible use and visitor experience. This includes the physical presence and visibility of Conservation Officers for both enforcement and education purposes to increase visitor knowledge and decrease environmental degradation (Lackey & Ham, 2003).

Reconciliation

Alberta Parks should increase the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and initiatives to support the recognition and respect of Indigenous rights.

Indigenous knowledge sharing through the addition of educational resources on the history of the parks from an Indigenous perspective with recognition that the parks were built on displacement. As well, creating resources and programming focused on traditional and cultural practices and language should be implemented throughout the parks. In regards to the Kananaskis user fee, to recognize the deep connections the Blackfoot / Niitsitapi, Tsuu T’ina, Stoney, Ktunaxa, and Michif Piyii (Métis) Nations have to the area a portion of revenues should go towards reconciliation efforts.

References

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