

Paying More for Less:

Accessibility and Alberta's Natural Spaces

KAITLYN SQUIRES • CATAMOUNT FELLOWSHIP • APRIL 2022



Land acknowledgement

Mount Royal University is situated in the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) and the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Siksika, the Piikani, the Kainai, the Tsuut'ina, and the Iyârhe Nakoda (comprised of the Wesley, Bearspaw, and Chinikee First Nations). The traditional Blackfoot name of this place is "Mohkinstsis", which is also home to the Metis Nation. Since this project's focus was on Alberta's provincial parks, it is important to acknowledge that all of the parks are located on Treaty land (6, 7, and 8), as well as the legacy of colonization in which the parks system was created.

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METHODS

This report aims to explore the issue of accessibility of provincial parks and public lands in Alberta 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. To engage the broader community on the issue a community conversation was hosted and an online survey was distributed on social media platforms.

A limitation of this report was the limited amount of research available on this topic due to the recent nature of the legislation changes. Through the process of this research project, some of the gaps in the information available were addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Provincial parks are established to “[preserve] Alberta’s natural heritage and ecological integrity, as well as for the benefit and enjoyment of current and future generations” (Government of Alberta, 2017, para. 1).

Since the introduction of provincial parks in Alberta in 1930 with the enactment of the *Provincial Parks and Protected Areas Act*, renamed the *Provincial Parks Act*, Alberta’s parks have become a benefit to society and a means to protect the natural environment. According to the Act, provincial parks are established to “[preserve] Alberta’s natural heritage and ecological integrity, as well as for the benefit and enjoyment of current and future generations” (Government of Alberta, 2017, para. 1). The parks system in Alberta comprises 4% of the province’s total land base (473 parks). As Alberta’s provincial parks are meant to be enjoyed by the public, ensuring their accessibility is fundamental. **Accessibility refers to how easily a site or service may be reached or obtained** (Gregory, 1986, as cited in Nicholls, 2001). In terms of parks, accessibility is the relative opportunity for interaction or contact with such an area (Nicholls, 2001). 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 have the potential to impact the public’s access to the outdoors. How might we ensure that Alberta’s provincial parks are accessible to all?

Implementation of user fees

The first region to be affected by these new changes was Kananaskis Country. According to the Minister of Environment and Parks Jason Nixon, the addition of user fees in Kananaskis was due to the increasing number of visitors and the need to cover maintenance and other related expenses (Fluker, 2021). **In 2020, Kananaskis had 5.3 million visits, according to traffic counting statistics; an almost 30% increase from 2019 (4.1 million)** (Town of Canmore, 2021). The visitation rate of Kananaskis in 2020 was over 1 million visits higher than Banff National Park (Town of Canmore, 2021).

Visitors are now required to pay for a day or annual pass, \$15 or \$90, respectively. According to the Government of Alberta (n.d.), each pass purchased helps pay for services and facilities, conservation, and public safety. During the initial implementation of the pass, it was not enforced, so those who did not purchase the pass were not penalized (Government of Alberta, n.d.). Enforcement has not yet begun, but when it does vehicle license plates will be scanned and those who do not comply will receive a warning or fine up to \$150 (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

There are pass exemptions available for certain groups, including First Nations peoples with status, low-income Albertans in a provincial support program, residents of the Kananaskis Improvement District, businesses or organizations working under government issued authorization, and ATV users (Government of Alberta, n.d.). Métis peoples are not eligible for the exemption. According to the Government of Alberta (n.d.) this is because there are “no traditional Métis harvesting areas in Kananaskis ... defined under the *Métis Harvesting in Alberta Policy* (2018)” (“Exemptions” section). Also of note, the visitor pass is not specific to just the provincial park area, but rather the whole region, with the exception of off-roading portions; even though there are various non-conservation related activities taking place in the pass-required area (e.g., ranching on Crown land, harvesting Christmas trees) (Alberta Parks, 2018). This differs from other parks which require a visitor fee, such as Canada’s national parks, wherein the fee is more intuitively tied to parks management and conservation.

Privatization & site closures

In February 2020, the Government of Alberta announced the “Optimizing Alberta Parks” plan. This plan intended to transfer 164 sites to private management and fully or partially close another 20 sites in order to “find efficiencies and create partnership opportunities” (Government of Alberta, 2020, para. 1). The removal and reassignment of the designated parks is able to occur through both the *Public Lands Act* and the *Provincial Parks Act*. The proposed removal of parks from the Alberta parks system was suspended due to public backlash (Jeffrey, 2020). Although the closures have been put on hold for now, they can be later reinstated. Meanwhile, partnerships with private entities to provide park services are moving forward.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION REGARDING ALBERTA'S PROVINCIAL PARKS



The evaluation of relevant legislation regarding Alberta's public parks and lands is important in the understanding of the recent changes made in Alberta and the power that the government holds in deciding the future of provincial parks in the province. The *Public Lands Act* establishes the role that the Alberta government plays in managing public land. In May 2021, the *Public Lands Act* was amended to enable the government to charge fees for the recreational use of public lands. The act allows the government to "prescribe or provide for the manner of prescribing ... fees relating to the use or occupation of public land, including the carrying on of activities on public land" (Public Lands Act, 2000, pp. 17-18).

The *Provincial Parks Act* provides legislation on the "establishment, protection, management, planning, and control of provincial parks, wildland parks and provincial recreation areas" (Government of Alberta, 2017, para. 1). According to the *Provincial Parks Act*, the government may i) close all or any part of a park or recreation area for a period considered necessary; ii) establish framework for zoning park or recreation area management and regulation; and iii) set mechanisms for fees applicable to park or recreation areas (Provincial Parks Act, 2000).

A relevant regulation within the *Provincial Parks Act* is the *Provincial Parks (General) Regulation* (102/85), which establishes activities and restrictions in provincial parks and recreation areas. The regulation details information on fees, prohibitions, park use, and visitor conduct. Under the regulation, "a person engaging in an activity under this regulation, or entering on an access pass area established under section 43.1, shall pay the applicable fees in respect of that activity or area", including provincial park or recreation area land (Provincial Parks (General) Regulation, 2021, p. 5).

VALUE OF PUBLIC PARKS

A major challenge to park management and accessibility are the values and intentions of stakeholders (Haddock & Quinn, 2016). According to each individual's perspective and insight, an optimal direction of management is defined (Haddock & Quinn, 2016).

The stakeholders involved in Alberta's public park system are the government, private investors, the public, the environment and wildlife. The addition of private investment can result in the investor's interests becoming the primary concern of management, putting other stakeholders' interests (i.e., the public) to the side. Although, as seen with the "Optimizing Alberta Parks" plan, the public does hold some influence over the direction of the provincial government's decisions in regards to park management. **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.** This perspective is important to include as all of Alberta's parks are on Treaty land (6, 7 or 8).

Economic value

In Canada, public lands are treated as a financial asset first. Budgetary and ideological changes in the capacity and priority of the public sector play a large role in the provincial government's decisions (Whiteside, 2019). **The alterations to Alberta's parks legislation followed neoliberal approaches to management, development, and conservation; an approach which holds market-oriented influences at the forefront of decision-making** (Hackett, 2016; Whiteside, 2019). This is exemplified by the shift towards management privatization and the pay-per-use system initiated in Kananaskis, as the public is responsible for satisfying the budget gaps created by provincial government cutbacks. **The pressure to fill the cuts to parks budgets through user fees and partnerships with private interests, along with the increasing tourism promotion, has resulted in environmental conservation becoming a low priority for park management** (Youdelis, 2018).



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)

Tourism is an important financial asset in Alberta. In 2019, expenditures related to tourism totaled \$10.1 billion (Government of Alberta, 2022). According to a report by the Tourism Industry Association of Alberta (TIAA, 2021), Albertans alone spend \$2.3 billion on recreation trips on provincially-owned land and another \$376 million on equipment and accessories for such trips. This revenue equates to 0.8% of the province's total gross domestic product (GDP) (TIAA, 2021). In the case of Kananaskis, according to the provincial government's press release in October, 5 months after implementation, \$10 million was raised (Bruch, 2021). The revenues generated by the provincial parks in Alberta make them a significant financial asset for the government.

Intrinsic value

Economic value is not the singular tool for measuring the value of parks and outdoor recreation spaces. Taking into account intrinsic/inherent value is important. Public parks can provide both leisure opportunities and aesthetic enjoyment (Meng & Malczewski, 2015). Accessibility to public parks is directly related to the users' quality of life (Meng & Malczewski, 2015; Nicholls, 2001). For example, proximity to public parks has positive effects on human health by lowering the rates of mortality, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Gordon Larsen et al., 2006; Meng & Malczewski, 2015). This value, as it is not monetary, is often overlooked by land management and planning bodies (Meng & Malczewski, 2015).

BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBILITY

There are many barriers to accessing natural spaces in Alberta. Although, often barriers are specific to each visitor, there were overarching themes identified throughout the project to be occurring for many park users.

Cumulative cost

The cumulative cost of visiting Alberta's provincial parks and public lands is high. Some examples of costs include travel to the site (e.g., vehicle maintenance, insurance, gas), necessities (e.g., water, food, first aid supplies, bear spray), recreational equipment and activities, and accommodations if staying multiple days (i.e., campsite with the additional costs associated with equipment or hotel). These costs are increased if visiting areas that require a user fee.

CASE STUDY BOW VALLEY PROVINCIAL PARK

During the 2022 camping season (April to October) the rate per night is \$31 for an unserviced site or \$47 for a power/water site (Alberta Parks, 2022-a). These rates represent a 34% increase from 2012 prices (\$23 and \$35, respectively) (Bishop, 2012). Additionally, visitors are now required to purchase the Kananaskis user fee, amounting to \$46 (100% increase) and \$62 (77% increase) per night, respectively. These prices when added to the other costs associated with camping (e.g., tent, equipment, necessities, firewood) makes visiting Bow Valley Provincial Park an expensive endeavor.

The Bow Valley Provincial Park case study noted [above/below] is not an anomaly, but a norm among Alberta's provincial campgrounds. The increased costs associated with visiting these areas pose a significant barrier to accessibility; especially to individual users, unable to share costs of visitation, or families, who have multiple people in a single party, when visiting for multiple days or times per season.

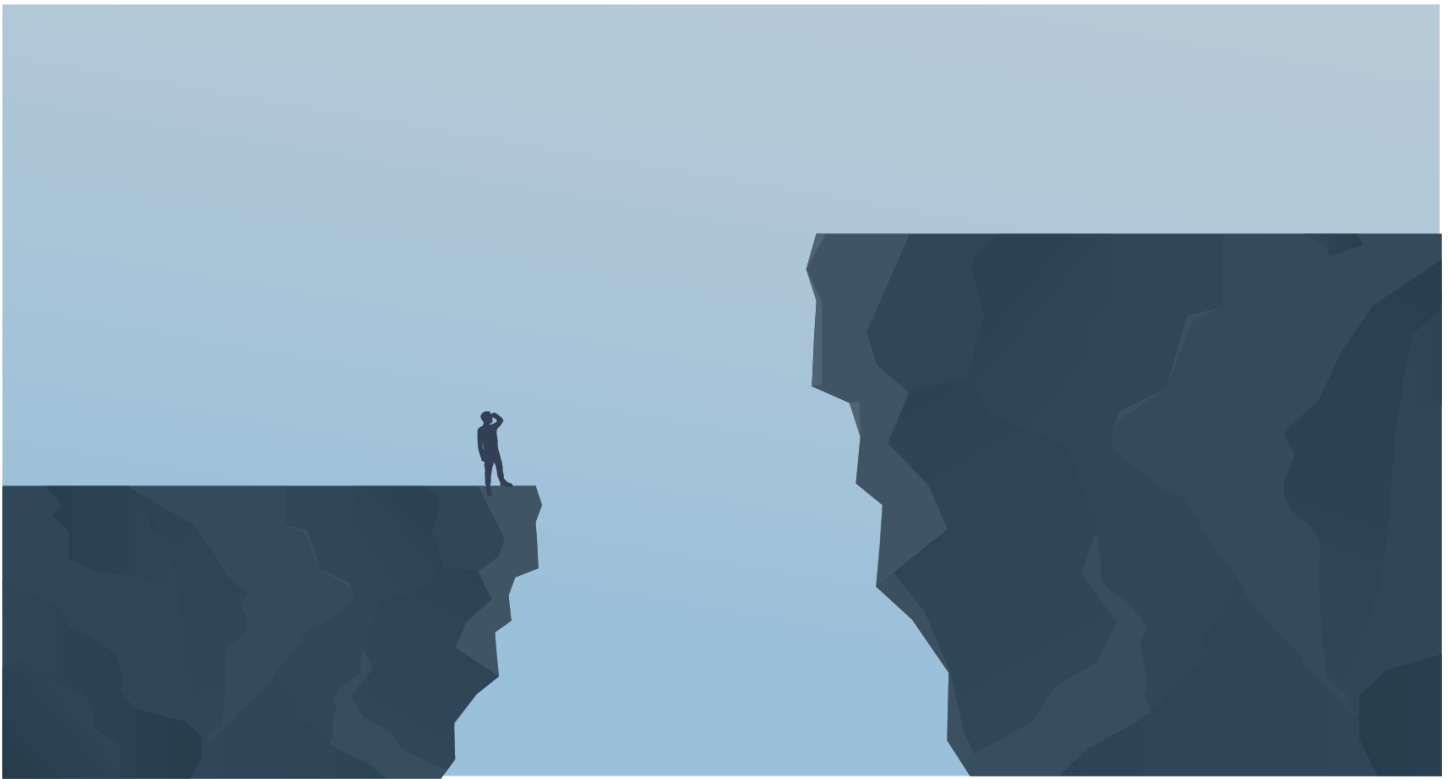
Service availability

The declining quality and availability of services leads to a poorer quality of visitation. This barrier is significantly affected by increased visitation rates and provincial budget cuts. Provincial budget cuts have negatively affected programming available in the parks; programming which provides educational and entertaining opportunities for visitors to learn about nature and culture in the parks. In 2021, Alberta Parks did not hire seasonal staff for educative programming, leading to the only personal interpretation available to be paid programs at Dinosaur and Writing-on-Stone (Corrigan et al., 2021).

CASE STUDY BANFF NATIONAL PARK

After cuts to the Canadian national parks budget, much of the programming available in Banff National Park was removed (Youdelis, 2018). The private sector filled the shortages to visitor experience (i.e., gaps in maintenance of trails and campgrounds due to staff shortages, quality interpretive programming); causing previously free programming to be available for additional fees (Youdelis, 2018). This resulted in declining quality and use. When comparing the national park user fee and the Kananaskis fee, along with the Alberta government's policies of increased privatization, it is probable that Alberta's provincial parks will yield similar results.

Increased visitation numbers have negatively affected the already limited parking available. This is especially true in summer and leads to visitors parking along roadways, creating a large safety hazard. As well, there are few designated parking stalls for those with disabled parking placards. This further lends itself to the inaccessible nature of Alberta's parks and public lands for those with disabilities or mobility issues. There are few accessible trails and only 24 "accessible" campsites in the provincial parks (Alberta Parks, 2022-b).



Quality of parks and public lands

Increased visitation to Alberta's natural spaces has led to decreased environmental quality, due to mistreatment of the environment and irresponsible tourism.

One significant issue affecting quality is the increased amount of waste and litter associated with visitation trends. Across parks, litter was not properly disposed of, often left on trails or around facilities that were not serviced quickly enough to keep up with demand. This degrades the environment and poses a risk to wildlife. Another issue is the busyness of trails. Crowding, especially in popular areas, degrades the trails, can lead to more off-trail activity, and poses a safety risk. The farther off trails humans roam, the greater effect they will have on wildlife in the area. The increased use of public parks by visitors, results in a declining quality of recreation available and environmental health (Haddock & Quinn, 2016; Youdelis, 2018).

User knowledge

Provincial parks and public lands across the province are open to all, regardless of individual knowledge. User knowledge is necessary for the safe use of natural spaces and many inexperienced users do not know proper practices, such as basic trail etiquette or how to camp responsibly. Subsequently they can pose a safety risk to other visitors and wildlife.

RECOMMENDATIONS/ “A WAY FORWARD”

In order for the barriers to accessing Alberta’s parks and public lands to be lessened various areas for potential change were identified.

Accountability & transparency

These are key to raising support for park user fees and increasing trust in the provincial government. Visitors want to know where the money from the fee is going. Parks Canada’s financial reports and statements are openly available to access on their website (Parks Canada, 2021-b), a similar release on behalf of Alberta Parks would satisfy this. Furthermore, accountability is needed for who is making the decisions on where the money is going. This can be satisfied through partnerships and collaboration with organizations and individuals knowledgeable about park needs, through research initiatives, and consultation with the public. Finally, accountability that revenue gathered from fees is not going to support political initiatives, but instead is used for the purposes of conservation, park maintenance, visitor experience enhancement, and reconciliation efforts.

Maintenance

With the addition of a user fee, visitors have higher management expectations. The first expectation is better upkeep of parks and campsites, which encompasses trail maintenance (i.e., cleaner pathways); cleaned, maintained, and stocked facilities; less waste and increased garbage collection; and increased signage along roadways and trails. The second is improving roadway systems to better handle increased capacity and safety concerns, through means such as roadway maintenance (e.g., filling potholes, de-icing in winter months) and better parking infrastructure (e.g., parking attendants, signs to identify availability). One consideration to lessening parking lot traffic is increasing public transit options to key areas or trailheads, which will also make the parks more accessible for those without access to a vehicle.

The accessibility of the parks for all people is important to take into consideration. The Alberta Parks “Push to Nature” initiative is working to increase opportunities for people of all abilities to enjoy the natural beauty of the province (Alberta Parks, 2022-b). This initiative, along with developing more accessible trails and options and designating more parking stalls for disabled placards, will increase accessibility for Albertans with disabilities or mobility issues.

Education

The addition of funding towards interpretive programs and educational resources (e.g., Conservation Officers, signage, visitor centers) will help to decrease multiple barriers. Education involving the importance of conservation, park history, and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, will increase both responsible use and visitor experience. Furthermore, the physical presence and visibility of Conservation Officers at various locations (e.g., popular trailheads, along trails, visitor centers, parking lots) should be increased. Enforcement and education conducted by the Officers will increase visitor knowledge and decrease environmental degradation, as seen in the study by Lackey & Ham (2003) conducted in Yosemite National Park, USA.

Reconciliation

Indigenous peoples are a vital stakeholder in Alberta and are underrepresented in decision-making, especially with regard to provincial parks and public lands. Alberta Parks should increase the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and initiatives to support the recognition and respect of Indigenous rights. Parks Canada’s Indigenous Affairs Branch was implemented to advance reconciliation in the national parks system (Parks Canada, 2021-a); a similar branch implemented in Alberta could help to foster such initiatives provincially.

Indigenous knowledge sharing should be implemented in Alberta’s natural spaces. This can be done 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. Another initiative is 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.



CONCLUSION

Alberta's public parks and lands reveal the natural heritage and ecological integrity of the province. The parks are intended to be for the benefit and enjoyment of both current and future generations. As such, they need to be accessible. The recent changes in legislation regarding the parks have brought into question if they are accessible and if, in the future, they will be. Through the exploration of Alberta's provincial parks on a systems-level throughout the fellowship, it has become apparent that access to the province's natural spaces is possible and within reach.

Future research considerations

There is a struggle in maintaining a balance between environmental conservation and accessibility for recreational purposes, especially in a province that is pushing for economic growth (Hallstrom & Hvenegaard, 2021). The addition of user fees and the shift to private management have the potential to cause both positive and negative impacts. Currently, as per the literature available on Alberta's parks, the short- and long-term impacts of the recent changes are not yet known and may not be for some time. This topic has many future research implications, including the impact the legislative changes have on the environment and wildlife and the suitability of other funding sources other than use fees; and should be continued as data becomes available.

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