

Shaping Culture in Nature: Human Use Management in Canada's Mountain National Parks

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Introduction

Located in the Rocky Mountains on the border between Alberta and British Columbia, Banff, Yoho, Jasper and Kootenay National Parks comprise the majority of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site. The area draws more than 5 million visitors per year. Management decisions are directed by a dual mandate (protection versus use) and the recently amended Canada National Parks Act (2000) which puts maintenance of ecological integrity as the first priority for all national parks managers. More specific direction is provided in individual park management plans approved by Canadian Parliament. These plans were recently amended to reflect significant changes in the human use management, based upon a prediction that visitation and associated environmental impacts will increase significantly. For their part, scientists have been using an indicator species, the grizzly bear, to measure changes in ecological integrity. Subsequently, the human use management strategy is built upon a framework for the conservation of grizzly bears. Put into effect to protect the wildlife from human caused mortality and from habituation to humans, trail and area closures throughout the park have increased dramatically over the past ten years. Critics of this bio-centric approach to management ask whether the park is for bears or humans (Cooper et al 2002). How one experiences the mountain national parks is, to a large degree, dictated by infrastructure. A network of hardened trails leads visitors to popular destinations; trail closures have an immediate and decisive effect upon one's national park experience.

Realizing the predicaments created by relying solely on biology and other natural sciences, Parks Canada's latest corporate orientation documents prepare for an important shift, one that recognizes that ecological integrity cannot be achieved without 'people'. There is an emphasis upon human relations and interactions with nature and the involvement of Canadians as partners and advocates for National Park Policy. One aim is to 'convert' visitors who presently have low awareness and understanding of ecological integrity (Parks Canada 2005). Parks Canada set a target that 50% of park visitors will have a learning experience. Using first hand experience as a key to personal awareness and understanding, it was decided that the learning experiences would be: guided walks or hikes, interpretive programs and interpretive exhibits. Focus on the visitor requires a shift, from emphasizing the provision of services, facilities and programs in a way that meets only Parks Canada's goals and objectives, to one where the visitor's needs and expectations becomes the focus (Parks Canada 2005).

Methods & Results

Methodology to learn more about the people using national parks includes on-line surveys, traffic and trail counters, and site-specific projects employing triangulated methods. The value of social science research is already being recognized. A 2003 survey of Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho National Parks revealed visitor's most popular activities. The human use of remote and fragile natural areas is far less than previously assumed. As well, annual visitation was over-estimated by nearly 2 mil-

lion visits. From this and other research, the Agency hopes to develop “products, services and events to reach specific audiences and produce both short and longer-term changes” (Parks Canada Agency 2005: ii) and tools for predicting and measuring those changes. Human use simulation modelling is such a tool being developed for integrating human activities with wildlife movements, predicting impacts of displacing use and monitoring human use.

Conclusion

There are inherent complications with adopting this new approach to national parks. The contradictions in reducing human use while at the same time encouraging more visitors to experience the park first hand suggests that neither approach has been considered from the park managers perspective, many of whom will ponder the values of ecological integrity versus visitor experience. Discourse on experiential tourism touts individuality and personal experience, yet there is an underlying theme in support of a homogenous and conditioned visitor/tourist population. Political realities are such that, due to the popularity of these national parks, making obvious, positive progress is imperative. As neither the necessary tools nor content have been developed, much work lies ahead.

References

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