

POLITICS

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**THE DECLINE OF WILDERNESS IN THE BOREAL FOREST:
Clearcut logging in the Owl River Basin.**

By ANDREW NIKIFORUK

wilderness

It began with a handshake, the creation of Special Places 2000. Yet, even after the deal was inked new leases have been given to logging, oil and gas and mining industries on protected land. If the Klein government has its way with wilderness there won't be much left by the year 2000. ►

Photo: RICHARD THOMAS

IT BEGAN WITH A FOREST of promises in 1992. At least that's how Tom Maccagno, a lawyer with a passion for wild orchids, viewed Special Places. In fact Maccagno, then the mayor of Lac La Biche, hailed the "made in Alberta" program to set aside large areas of wilderness for protection, fun, heritage and tourism as a noble gesture. Nor was he alone. Opinion polls noted that Albertans, the nation's most intense park users, uniformly favoured the creation of a network of protected areas as an urgent priority. "I felt really encouraged that the government might protect our natural treasures," recalls Maccagno.

Special Places even began with much fanfare. Just six years ago the Duke of Edinburgh joined arms with then-environment minister Ralph Klein to create a new 600-square kilometre park and recreation area in Alberta's boreal forest. Klein not only upheld Lakeland Provincial Park as a haven for Lake Trout, rare orchids, beavers, white spruce and wilderness-seeking Albertans, but as a model "Special Place" that increased the size of Alberta's puny park system by 22 per cent. Lakeland, vowed Klein, would be the first of many protected areas, "our lifeline to an ecologically sustainable future."

Today anyone who has followed the program's hellish progress will tell you that Special Places is neither a lifeline for wildlife, nor for Albertans. The government has not only failed to honour its original commitments but repeatedly has subverted them, all the while chanting fluffy green rhetoric." The whole idea is stillborn," says Maccagno. "Here in the boreal where the economic activity has been greatest, we haven't protected anything. We



GOING FAST: Seismic cutlines, oil and gas drilling, mining and logging heavily fragment Alberta's foothills natural region that encompasses almost 100,000 square kilometres.

before Lakeland was designated a Special Place, industrial development continues. Just last month, the Alberta government announced plans to run a major utility corridor for oil sands expansion through the eastern side of Lakeland. Seismic lines, roads and pipelines crisscross three-quarters of the Lakeland, making the forest look like shattered glass. Clear-cut logging has removed half of the white spruce old growth forest, where 50 per cent of all the creatures live, and the government wants to remove more. The oil and gas industry holds leases on 40 per cent of the land. More than 25 well sites give Lakeland a unique industrial touch. According to government reports pike and walleye, once ubiquitous, are getting harder to catch, while trappers removed 1,059 fur-bearing creatures in 1997. Military aircraft routinely fly over the place during the summer while all-terrain vehicles cruise through Lakeland all year round.

"Lakeland is a microcosm of all the problems associated with protecting the environment in Alberta," notes Richard Thomas, Lakeland's former district planner and now an independent consultant. The ecologist recently documented Lakeland's gross fragmentation as well as the relentless destruction of other wild areas in the boreal for a 300-page government report.

Thomas concludes that Special Places has evolved into an Orwellian conservation ruse for

"rape and pillage." Like many Albertans he fears the program will condemn more wild places to death by development than it will ever save. Special Places, of course, are intended for conservation or recreation. Thomas says, "I

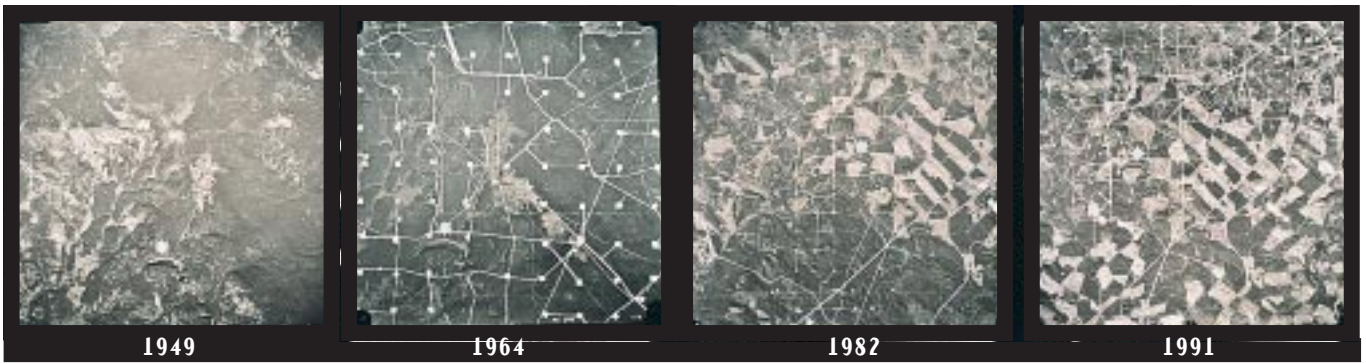
"THERE IS A UNIQUE AREA IN THE CHINCHAGA, BUT WHEN YOU SAY THE

don't have an environment minister in Alberta. Instead we have two ministers of economic development."

The state of Lakeland Provincial Park and Recreation Area, the program's original wilderness prototype, reveals the bleak future of Special Places—industrial development. In fact, this boreal park gives a whole new meaning to the word "special." Although much of the damage was done

don't think any other government would recognize clear-cut logging as a recreational activity except Alberta."

The reasons for the failure of the Special Places initiative aren't hard to decipher. For starters, a whole bunch of Tory cabinet ministers including Environment Minister Ty Lund have a problem with protecting wild Alberta from economic development. Lund calls it "sterilization." So does



DIMINISHING FOOTHILLS FOREST: Time-lapse aerial photographs of the central Swan Hills area document logging and oil and gas activity. Today, the Klein government has allocated almost every inch of commercially “productive” forest to industrial use.

Energy Minister Steve West. Sterilization appears to be a made-in-Alberta term that means “no development, nothing.” It has even appeared in documents published by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. Lund is amazed that some Albertans actually want land to be “sterilized” but he, the minister, is not one of them. Lund says, “We are not going to have large protected areas off limits and only accessible by foot. That’s just not going to happen.” (Readers should note here that wilderness is legally defined as being “roadless” in the United States.)

SUCH BRAZILIAN SENTIMENTS, A willful denial that wilderness and civilization must have their own domains if either is to remain healthy, has doomed Special Places from day one. Its single success has been the protection of a few wild areas in the Canadian Shield, the least populated and most northerly corner of the province. And these lands have been saved because neither the government nor industry have found any minerals to develop there yet. In the province’s five remaining natural regions (the Rockies, Foothills, Parklands, Grasslands and Boreal Forest) Special Places staggers along under the weight of bad faith, incoherent policy and a bizarre selection process designed to fail. This probably explains why many Albertans now call the program “Special Stumps” or “Postage Stamps 2000.”

Most players, whether industrialists, naturalists or prac-

commitments. Most ranching communities have wisely refused to nominate any Special Places in the Grasslands largely due to their historic dislike of parks, bureaucracy and government. And both the oil patch and forestry companies now recognize that barring some unforeseen miracle the program won’t buy the political peace or stability that it originally promised.

One of the purposes of Special Places, after all, was to end bitter wilderness feuds between environmentalists and oilmen by creating a positive international image for Alberta businesses that depend on natural resources. In other words, Special Places would spell out where the oil patch can and can’t drill. But that hasn’t happened. In fact, the inability of Special Places to protect any area, including the much disputed Whaleback (a remarkable patch of grizzly and elk habitat), has made industry all the more vulnerable to international boycotts and trade sanctions. So the program’s demise has not amused the oil patch or forestry companies.

“I’m more concerned about the province’s ability to deliver on the vision of Special Places than I ever have been in the last three years since the process began,” says Rob McManus of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers. He believes, “It’s a major area of concern.” Peter Lee, Alberta’s WWF director and a former

conservation biologist for the government for 18 years, speaks more bluntly. He says, “The seeds for destruction were sown when the government put forward a policy vastly different than its original commitment and different from



SURROUNDING AREA HAS TO BE STERILIZED TOO, THAT’S A PROBLEM.” TY LUND

tical hybrids, freely admit that Special Places has lost credibility faster than the north is losing Woodland Caribou. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) recently pulled out of the program altogether while the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) only sits at the table of the program’s “multi-stakeholder” Provincial Coordinating Committee to keep tabs on how the government is failing to honour its

all the public advice it had been given. And that has had a domino effect on the whole process.” Adds Wendy Francis of CPAWS, a notoriously unradical conservation group: “If this program runs its course we will have a network of compromised areas and we will lose the wilderness in Alberta.”

The program, of course, didn’t start as a wilderness burner. After Klein bragged about Lakeland and Special



Places in 1992, he gave the program “high priority.” He then set up a Public Advisory Committee to review the noble idea of protecting endangered spaces and to solicit public comments.

As a pragmatic province with a largely utilitarian view of landscape, Alberta was the last province in Canada to embrace the idea of setting up a wilderness savings account. Klein now wanted Alberta to show Canada how the job should be done. The advisory committee represented rational, middle class Alberta. Its six members included a cattleman, a forester, a tourism rep, two Tories, a former Banff Park warden and one business professor. There wasn't one longhaired, polar-fleeced environmentalist in the bunch. Their recommendations pretty much reflected the public attitudes of the day—that wilderness was a wise investment.

AFTER DUTIFULLY RECORDING loud public cheers for preservation (five per cent of the land base, after all, didn't sound like a lot) the committee spelled out what mattered. For starters Special Places required urgent action and needed to be completed before the year 2000 before industry ate up the last best places. It also noted that only large areas (between 1000 to 2000 square kilometres) in each of the six natural regions could leave a lasting legacy. Small unconnected parks didn't give large mammals such as grizzlies and caribou a fighting chance. The primary goal, of course, had to be conservation and to that end the province needed specific legislation to keep industrial hands off wild lands. Having local

DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A PROTECTED PLACE? Even after Ft. Assiniboine Wildlands Park was designated a protected area under Special Places 2000, new oil and gas leases were renewed within the pristine site.





MULTIPLE USE: Castle Crown Wilderness, once part of Waterton National Park in Southern Alberta boasts breathtaking hiking and spectacular Castle Crown Wilderness from Hastings Ridge, clear-cut logging at Goat Creek, a drilling rig near Whitney Creek on Rocky Mountain Forest Reserve

communities review potential sites so they could select ones with the least immediate economic impact also seemed like a fair idea. At the time nobody mentioned logging, drilling and Special Places in the same breath. But then things fell apart.

“The two most influential government departments and kings of resource royalties, energy and forestry, went after the plan,” recalls Ray Rasmussen, who served on the advisory committee. “And they did everything they could to stop it.” Energy, for example, put out a bogus paper that said Special Places would cost the province nearly \$1 billion in foregone revenue. (The 1996 Dobson/Thompson study by Alberta Environmental Protection showed the exact opposite to be true—that well-managed parks can contribute as much to the economy as farms or logging.) Like energy, which derives all its institutional power from liquidating resources, the forestry bureaucracy simply was appalled. Without public consultation it had just signed away a chunk of boreal forest almost five times greater than the land base Special Places sought to protect to Japanese multinationals. It hadn’t planned on saving trees for anything other than pulp mills.

As a result the two ministries began an extensive disinformation campaign. Ray Rasmussen remembers sitting through one talk complete with overheads given by the energy department. It stressed that Special Places would cost Albertans big dollars using contrived estimates of lost oil and gas revenue. “That was the principle piece of hatchet work and disinformation that lead to the destruction of Special Places as a legislated piece of conservation in government,” claims Rasmussen. Peter Lee, then an employee of Alberta Environment Protection, also recalls hearing the

hunting and fishing might be forbidden in Special Places, another half-truth. Then they charged that the program would doom grazing on Crown land. (In reality most naturalists have always supported grazing in grasslands as good buffalo practice). A 1995 cover story in *Alberta Report* billed Special Places as “green protectionism run amok.” Adds Rasmussen: “The disinformation got so bad that even chapters of Alberta’s Fish and Game Association started to oppose Special Places.” In the end the government’s anti-sterilization and pro-development forces won the day.

As a result Klein’s government substantially rewrote policy for Special Places in 1995. The conservation focus disappeared as fast as a poached deer. So, too, did the idea of protecting whole watersheds and ecosystems so that they could continue their good economic work. The new game plan declared that Special Places would balance the goal of preservation with the parallel goals of outdoor recreation, heritage appreciation, tourism and economic development. The government called it “multiple use.” Conservationists tagged it “multiple abuse” and declared that they’d have nothing to do with it.

The new policy not only broke Klein’s original promises but also defied prudent economics. Take the boreal forest, for example. It carpets half the province and provides Albertans with billions of dollars of free ecological services every year. These natural economies include oxygen-making, carbon-holding, fish-rearing, moose-making and water-cleaning as well as a lot of fibre-growing. Alberta’s boreal contains some of Canada’s greatest wetlands and it plays a major role in the world’s carbon cycle. If the tropical rain forest is one of the world’s lungs, the boreal is its able brother. You’d think that such a valuable, hard-working ecosystem

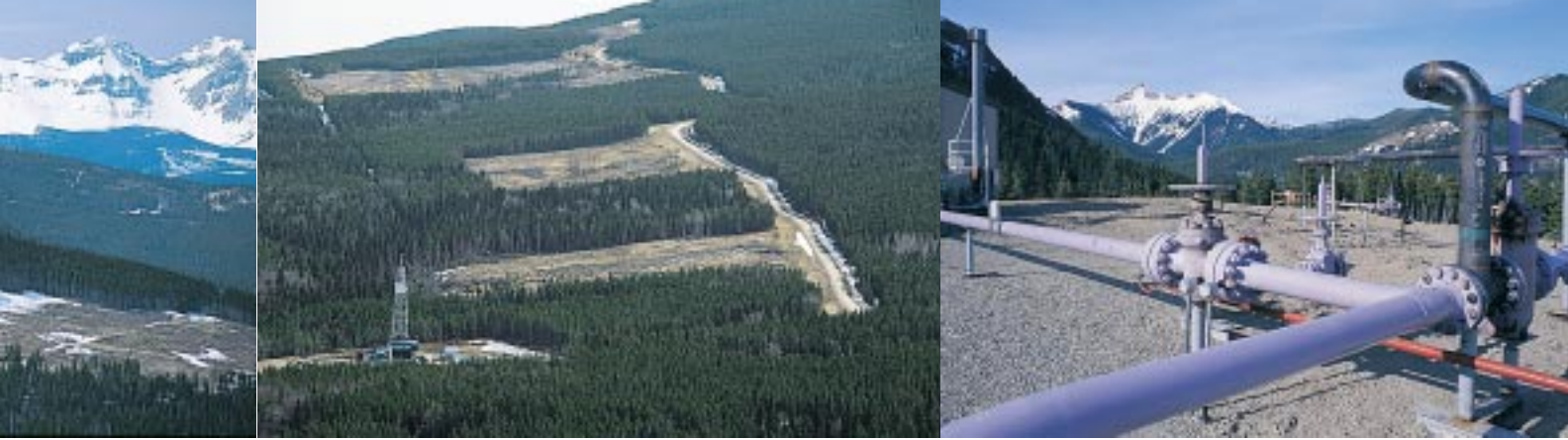
IF SPECIAL PLACES RUNS ITS COURSE WE WILL HAVE A NETWORK OF

presentation and being incensed by its inaccuracies. But Energy didn’t act alone. Other government officials said the program would keep Albertans off the land and in their cars. (Alberta’s powerful off-road vehicle lobby really got incensed with that one.)

The civil servants of oil and fibre also suggested that

might get a little respect. Not in Alberta.

In fact almost every inch of the forest has been allocated to one or more industrial activities by the government. Already roads or oil wells have fragmented more than 75 per cent of the forest. Thanks to logging, drilling and farming less than nine per cent of the once great forest actually



scenery. That is, until the government passed a new “multiple use” policy that enshrines oil and gas exploration and logging. Left to right, near Pincher Creek, drilling rigs and clear cuts near Whitney Creek, and a new pipeline at the Shell Waterton gas field near Whitney Creek.

remains as wilderness. In some areas the clearing of the forest has proceeded at a rate faster than that in Amazonia. The government has so thoroughly liquidated natural capital in the forest that there is little left to preserve. The new version of Special Places also failed to recognize the value of wild lands as a sustainable base of tourist income, genetic diversity or just plain water filtration.

In 1996 a government economic study leaked to the press showed that conservation paid and paid handsomely. It even detailed how intensively managed provincial parks and recreation areas actually generated higher levels of economic activity than agriculture or forestry. “Aside from protecting key parts of Alberta’s natural cultural heritage,” concluded the study, “programs like Special Places 2000 may, depending on the circumstances, lead to economic activity and employment that may be equal to or greater than conventional types of resource development.” Realizing that Special Places had wandered far from its original promise, the Tories eventually tried to woo some environmentalists back to the table.

Photo
GORDON PETERSEN

TODO SO THE GOVERNMENT FINALLY protected backlogged wilderness sites in the mountains and foothills—Kakwa and Elbow Sheep. Environment Minister Ty Lund also said that preservation would still be the number one goal. “There was a great deal of doubt and angst but we decided to join the process,” says Wendy Francis, a CPAWS director. Other groups such as the Alberta Wilderness Association, an outfit largely founded by retired oilmen, never bought in. Nor did the Rocky

authorities advised hungry peasants to do what they wanted with the forest because the public interest was too difficult to defend.

The government still hadn’t produced any legislation to protect special places from industrial advances. In fact, a National Heritage Act is now in the works that will permit industrial use. And the Tories faithfully vowed that they would honour all existing deals to log, drill, mine or develop every inch of Alberta regardless of the Special Place to be protected. Creative problem solving such as land swaps, debt for nature plans or royalty breaks were out of the question. “To talk in these tough times about buying back dispositions that were sold in good faith would be unfair and extremely expensive,” says Lund. Not surprisingly the government has added new dispositions to areas identified for protection.

Take for example the case of the Chinchaga, a unique patch of old growth forest where grizzlies fish, caribou forage and Trumpeter swans nest in oxbow lakes. Both industry and citizens jointly recommended the place be spared anymore drilling or cutting. But three days after making their recommendation last year the forestry department allocated half the forest for logging. Bob Demulder, forestry director for Alberta Forest Products Association admits: “That came as a bit of a surprise. The forest industry had nothing to do with that.” Lund says the story’s a little more complicated. But his version illustrates the tortuous process now involved in any Special Places designation.

According to Lund, after the Chinchaga was duly nominated by an Albertan, the Provincial Coordinating Committee (PCC) comprised of 21 industrialists and three conservation groups, looked over the site and approved it with

COMPROMISED AREAS AND WILL LOSE THE WILDERNESS IN ALBERTA

Mountain Ecosystem Coalition. Big problems continued to dog the program. The new policy gave local communities a carte blanche veto over site selection and management plans without any guiding conservation principles because that smacked of “paternalism.” In other words, Lund and company again took a cue from Amazonia where Brazilian

different borders. The PCC candidate then went to an interdepartmental group of energy and forestry servants whose job is to sell off resources and make protected areas as small as can be. PCC changed the boundaries of the area without reducing it in size. They whittled away at the boundaries again. “There is no logging in the place approved by

the interdepartmental government committee,” confides Lund. The big problem, adds the minister who calls himself “an environmentalist,” is that some people just want too much land protected. Lund says, “There is a unique area in the Chinchaga but when you start going outside of that unique area and saying it has to be sterilized as well, I have a problem with that.”

To prevent “sterilization” now seems to be the central goal of Special Places. Rumsey, one of the world’s last examples of native aspen Parkland, was set aside in 1996 as a special treasure. The next year Alberta Energy opened the chest and sold a whack of new oil and gas leases in and outside this rare parkland. The energy boys don’t want us to worry. They say that only existing roads will be used. But a public committee that included the oilpatch had already agreed years ago that all gas and well development should be phased out. Ft. Assiniboine Wildlands Park got exactly the same treatment in northern Alberta.

Lund and company have also fought hard to prevent the Crown Castle area from being “sterilized.” This mountain and foothills jewel was once part of Waterton Lakes National Park and boasts breathtaking hiking and mighty berry crops. But the folks that nominated the site, the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition, weren’t allowed to be part of the local committee that decided the Castle’s special fate. Thanks to the doctrine of “multiple use” it will continue to include oil and gas exploration and log cutting. To ensure nothing got “sterilized” in the Whaleback, another piece of internationally prized wildlands in the Foothills, Amoco got a place at the table. Amoco holds leases in the area and not surprisingly recommended oil and gas activity in spite of a dramatic 1994 ruling by Alberta Energy and Utilities Board which said no to gas drilling and described the area as a “truly unique and valuable Alberta ecosystem.” Yet bad policy tends to have a domino of bad effects.

Maryhelen Posey, a representative of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists, has sat on the provincial coordinating committee for Special Places for three frustrating years. It’s the group that has reviewed 400 site nominations and passed on advice to Lund. She understandably sums up the whole exercise as a nightmarish time-eating labyrinth. “It’s not that you don’t know where you are going and have to keep returning to where you started but that you have to do it all knee-deep in mud.” Her highest hope for the program is that another government might implement the original vision a decade from now “if there is anything is left to save.”

Most conservationists and even many industrialists now

believe that only two things can save Special Places (and Alberta) from public disdain and international censure. “The process needs to be drastically redesigned and it has to come out of the premier’s office,” says Peter Lee. It needs a strategic timetable and an unfettered commitment to conservation. That means a creative process to deal with existing oil and logging leases as well as some honest sacrifices. A successful conservation program will also need an independent agency to help communities manage wild lands. The government can’t be trusted to defend the public interest anymore, notes Rasmussen. “It is quite frankly another commercial interest and has to be treated as such.”

SPECIAL PLACES HAS HAD A RATHER unspecial impact on the province’s heritage. It has continued to compromise a number of wild areas such as Lakeland and Rumsey with developments that neither Costa Rica nor Venezuela—both big park supporters—could stomach. It has “sterilized” less than one per cent of Alberta’s wild lands,

a world class record of underachievement. (New Zealand, which has twice as many people living in an area two-fifths the size of Alberta, has legally protected 20 per cent of its natural areas.) The one remaining conservation group participating in the process, the World Wildlife Fund, says it is there only to monitor further duplicity. Meanwhile, Alberta’s export-dependent industries have not won any respect on the conservation front. “We can’t escape international attention forever,” says Lee. “And a boycott would be a terrible shame because we still have the leeway to protect some areas.”

Lund, however, remains an optimistic environmentalist. He says, “I think Special Places is moving along and slower than I would like to see, and yes we have a problem in the grasslands. . . . Our objective is to make sure all regions have representative samples of their uniqueness and I think we will succeed.” But to many Albertans success in this venture now represents nothing less than a special betrayal of the public interest. ■



THE LAST WILDERNESS: Despite a dramatic 1994 ruling by Alberta Energy and Utilities against drilling in the internationally-prized wildlands of the Whaleback, Amoco, which holds leases, recommended oil and gas activity.

Andrew Nikiforuk is a Calgary-based freelance journalist who writes about the environment, education and the abuse of publicly-owned resources. His books include *School's Out: The Catastrophe in Public Education and What We Can Do About It*, *The Fourth Horseman* and *Running on Empty: Alberta After the Boom*. In recent years, his magazine articles have won three National Magazine Awards.

Photo
KEN A. MEISNER