PRESERVATION vs DEVELOPMENT

In critiques of each other's publications, two authors present radically different views on the management of Banff National Park

Phantom Parks: The Struggle to Save Canada's National Parks
by Rick Searle
Key Porter Books, 2000

Reviewed by Barry Cooper

Because it combines an irrefutable sentimentality with studied indifference to common sense, this is not an easy book to appraise. The double dedication provides a clear indication where Rick Searle is heading: first comes a traditional expression of piety towards his grandfather, and then an even more pious evocation of J.B. Harkin, the first commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch, predecessor to Parks Canada Agency.

Searle says, correctly, that Harkin considered the parks "sacred" but he adds anachronistically that they were also to be the site of "ecological integrity" and of "wildness," two things apparently designed to recreate the human spirit.

Now, "ecological integrity" is a technical term currently in vogue, but one, Searle says, that is "slippery and complicated." To be precise, it is a pseudo-scientific trope of great rhetorical power but of a highly elastic—indeed, unspecifiable—meaning. "Wildness" is a nonce term pressed into service by Neil Evernden to express his own rather odd experience of a "self-willed" Other that, Evernden says, is also "nameless." The less said of the gnostic nonsense behind recreating the human spirit the better, not least because of Harkin's fine reputation as the builder of the picturesque highway between Banff and Jasper.

Next, the "venerable historian" Pierre Berton contributed a foreword wherein we learn that Banff is "a disaster" and that "more than half" of Jasper is either "destroyed" or "degraded." Indeed, the parks are "dying." Harvey Locke, the well-known Liberal Party organizer, lawyer, and environmentalist adds his own foreword where he selectively quotes the 1930 National Parks Act and identifies what killed the parks: "the cancer of commercialism."

The motivating centre of the book is Searle's confession: "I cannot live without wildness." Much of the text, however, consists only of pungent aphorisms that express deep anxieties, but little argument. We hear that "anthropocentrism encourages exploration while ecocentrism advocates protection," that we are "in a period of mass extinction," and are in need of a "complete cultural transformation." In a touching dialogue in a Toronto traffic jam the author instructs his wife on the subtleties of medieval scholasticism and the evils of SUVs.

Much depends on wildness. It is "the essence of who we are as Canadians," and also "the essence of life." But as every scholar of medieval scholasticism would know, it must be an unusual essence because it can be destroyed. By so doing, Canada's "soul" would be destroyed as well. Fortunately, a "geography of hope," can be found in the national parks.

The path through the geography of hope is provided by data ordered by the new science of wildlife biology. Unfortunately, "there is some dispute among scientists and managers about the methods used to collect and interpret the data that provides the basis for the reports," but "there is very little disagreement over the general findings and conclusions." Au contraire: there is a very large amount of disagreement concerning method and the reliability of the data, what the data might mean, and thus the validity of the reports.

> *"If any single park can be said to be hemorrhaging from overuse and development, it's got to be Banff.... High steel mesh fences designed to keep the wildlife off the Trans-Canada Highway erode the park's ecological integrity."*
>
> — excerpt from ***PHANTOM PARKS***

Precisely because of questionable data, policies such as ecological integrity remain dubious. Others such as "no net negative impact" and "appropriate development and use" likewise sound scientific but are not. Regarding the first, there is no baseline data by which to measure change; the second is entirely a product of whimsy. Or there is "ecosystem-based

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Off Limits: How Radical Environmentalists are Shutting Down Canada's National Parks
by Sylvia LeRoy and Barry Cooper
The Fraser Institute: Public Policy Sources, 2000
www.fraserinstitute.ca/publications
Reviewed by Rick Searle

Off-Limits is the latest salvo aimed at the environmental movement by the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based right-wing think tank. As with much of the Institute's research, *Off Limits* is filled with innuendo and hyperbole punctuated here and there by glimpses of insightful, critical analysis. The result is truths, half-truths and deliberate misrepresentations concerning the future of Canada's national parks.

Focusing much of its attention on Banff National Park, the Institute contends that national park policy has been captured by "radical environmentalists" who want to phase out commercial and recreational development such as downhill skiing, golf, and tourism activities. This agenda, the Institute argues, is supported by questionable science and an exclusionary ideology that puts ecosystem-based management and the protection of ecological integrity ahead of the public's right to enjoy and use the parks. "...ecosystems are not, in fact, concrete systems, but mental constructs ('geographic free-for-alls')," they maintain. The idea that large carnivores help regulate ecosystems "lacks widespread support within the scientific community." To add insult to injury, the Institute alleges that this radical agenda is being supported by the government through grants and other funding programs which tilt "the playing field in the debate over park policy towards the agendas of special interests."

In contrast to the radical environmentalist agenda, the Fraser Institute presents what appears to be a conciliatory and balanced perspective based on a reaffirmation of the original dual mandate of Canada's national parks, that is, they are to be used and protected. In the report's introduction, they readily acknowledge that "such a balance has never been achieved easily"; however, they have the solution to make this elusive balance possible. "This can only be done by local decision-making, positive incentives, and the responsible stewardship associated with secure, enforceable, transferable property rights." In other words, let the market be the prime determiner of what is appropriate within the national parks.

> *"It has been proposed that Moraine Lake... be either bombed or poisoned so as to eradicate all non-native fish species.... It seems a curious policy of wildlife management that requires the extinction of wildlife."*
>
> — excerpt from ***OFF LIMITS***

The challenge with the Fraser Institute's work is separating truths from half-truths and misrepresentations. First, while it is true that the national park system began with a dual mandate, this is no longer the case. In light of growing scientific, political and public concern over the global loss of biological diversity (which the Institute thinks is entirely bunk or at least exaggerated), there has been a movement world-wide to enhance the protection afforded by parks. Within Canada's national parks, that shift began in the early 1960s and has resulted in significant changes in the National Parks Act and Policy over the past two decades making the protection of ecosystems and species (also referred to as ecological integrity) the first priority over visitor use. As a consequence, park managers, biologists, environmental groups, politicians and the public have begun to question what facilities and services are appropriate within parks with an eye to their possible removal. Contrary to what the Fraser Institute argues, these facilities have ecological impacts far greater than the physical space they occupy.

The second point concerns their criticism of ecosystem-based management, ecological integrity, and the science that underpins the shift in park policy towards greater protection. While it is true that "ecosystems" are constructs and that ecosystem-based management and ecological integrity are inexact terms, this does

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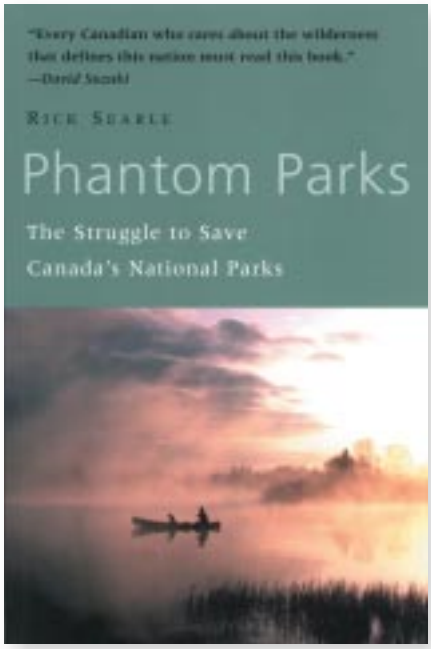
management," another pseudo-scientific term that serves as a means to extend control by Parks Canada Agency over land beyond its administrative empire, the "adjacent" lands of the "buffer zone." This means that no park can ever be big enough.

Searle strongly advocates retaining management of the parks by members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, a union that also helped fund his research. He laments the fact that union biologists are "outgunned" by scientists who are bought and sold by commercial interests beyond the park boundaries, but gives not a single example of these great guns in action.



The real problem is that there has been next to no independent examination of the wildlife data and population viability assessment models commissioned by Parks Canada.

As with so many romantic and good-hearted individuals, Searle is concerned with the relationship between human activity and the natural environment. But so are the people who work in Banff or Jasper and who are not employees of Parks Canada or members of PSAC. Their livelihood depends directly on the preservation not of the elusive and recondite notion of wildness, but of wilderness.

Searle's spiritual yearning is poignant, and one may have sympathy for one so tormented, but it provides no basis upon which to formulate prudent public policy.

Barry Cooper is a professor of political science at the University of Calgary.

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not in any way diminish their usefulness. Indeed, even industries are embracing these approaches. Across Canada, forest companies are adopting ecosystem-based management systems in their struggle to prove to domestic and foreign consumers that they are practising sustainable forestry. Meanwhile, more and more rigorous, peer-reviewed research is refining both the conceptual basis of these terms as well as their application. The Fraser Institute does not acknowledge that the market place and capitalism are equally suspect, laden as they are with abstract concepts, such as the idea of perfect competition or the gross national product, that result in the failure to respect social and environmental limits.

As for the point that government funding has somehow given environmentalists an unfair advantage in the debate between use and protection within the national parks, this is preposterous in the extreme. What little moneys environmental groups

receive for research and education (not lobbying, as Revenue Canada rules for charitable organizations prohibit this activity) hardly matches the vast financial resources available to certain business interests which are intent on extracting as much profit as possible from the national parks. Furthermore, a quick scan of newspapers such as the *Calgary Herald* reveals that environmental groups are constantly battling with politicians, bureaucrats and business interests just to hold the line on the level of development, much less roll it back.

But it is the Institute's proposed solution that is most frightening and maddening. To suggest that making the parks even more of a commodity to be bought and sold through the market place by private interests will engender responsible stewardship is downright deceitful. National parks and other protected areas are, at the minimum, public goods, if not a public trust. They are a demonstration of the collective commitment to values beyond the immediate and the material and the ego. They are the manifest recognition of respect for the web of life of which we are all a part and on which we all depend. There is no radical conspiracy to make them off limits, as the Fraser Institute attempts to fearmonger; rather there is a concerted effort to have the public understand and respect the need for limits, if the national parks are to remain wild places.

Rick Searle teaches in the department of geography at the University of Victoria