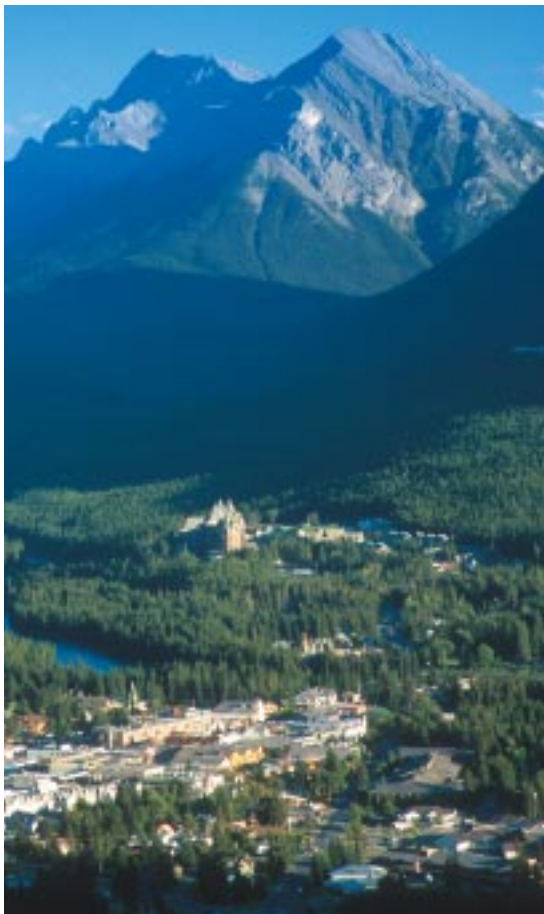


THE BATTLE FOR BANFF

Ottawa has laid down the law. Now the world watches as Albertans square off over the future of Canada's first national park

BY JEFF GAILUS



JOHN MARRIOTT

LAST WEEK, WITHIN A TWO-HOUR WALK OF MY back door, the Fairholme wolf pack set upon a female cougar just inside Banff National Park's east boundary. One on one, a cougar is the ultimate predatory machine. But a cougar, even a grizzly bear, is sorely outmatched against a well-organised pack of wolves.

This particular cat had two six-month-old kittens to feed; she must have felt keenly the need to defend her fresh kill—a young elk—against 11 winter-hungry wolves. Or she was “meat drunk,” her instincts deadened by a belly full of flesh.

Either way, the wolves thrashed her. When wildlife researchers stumbled upon her carcass they found her body punctured by dozens of wounds and her tail ripped clean off.

This is good news. In the wild, predators compete with other predators for food, often with deadly consequences. This fatal altercation is evidence that wolves, almost extirpated from the Bow Valley a year ago, are making a comeback. It also means that the natural relationships between predator and prey—and predator and predator—are intact and functioning, thanks in large part to Parks Canada's recent management decisions aimed at restoring some semblance of ecological integrity to a national park in decline.

But this long-awaited renaissance in conservation within Canada's national parks has left some Albertans—mostly pro-development entrepreneurs and politicians with their eyes on the one-billion dollars spent in Alberta's Rocky Mountain national parks each year—frothing at the mouth over the limits Parks Canada has placed on them.

“The threat of commercial exploitation has been present in our mountain parks for decades,” says Dave Poulton, executive director of the Calgary/Banff chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS). “In the 1990s, we saw the federal government stand up to those

pressures. The furor that we've seen over the last few years is the response of those who have come to take for granted their right to exploit the parks for their own gain, and are now having to recognize that they operate on land precious to all the people of Canada.”

Leading the campaign are the ski hill operators, banded together under the leadership of ex-*Calgary Herald* editor-in-chief Crosbie Cotton, a gravelly-voiced media guru with ties to both Conrad Black's media empire and the provincial government. Supported by a well-thought-out public relations strategy, the ski hill owners and an infantry of attorneys are pursuing legal action against Parks Canada and Heritage Minister Sheila Copps for infringing on what they say is their legal right to develop their ski areas as they see fit.

BANFF NATIONAL PARK IS SOMETHING OF AN ANOMALY.

In the fall of 1883, Canadian Pacific Railway construction workers happened upon hot springs in a cave on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The entrepreneurs among them concocted an idea to turn this magical place into a moneymaking tourist destination, but the overseers of North America's newest country instead created a federal reserve around the springs.

Concerned the area would be exploited by these profiteering explorers, and no doubt keen to make a buck or two for the federal coffers, the Crown decided it would retain control of the land. Thus was born Banff National Park, which has grown over the last hundred-odd years into exactly what those enterprising young railroaders



ROB JOBST

Even more acute is the issue of whether the Lake Louise gondola will be allowed to remain open during the snow-free months. Lake Louise owner Charlie Locke says he wants to continue a tradition, started in 1959, that now sees 80,000 summer visitors ride the gondola to the top of the Lake Louise ski hill. But Parks Canada and a cadre of scientists have suggested the summer gondola operation be shut down because the area is important summer grizzly bear habitat. While their research has come under scrutiny in recent months, it does indicate, without a doubt, that bears and people don't mix. And when they do, the bears lose—every time.

Defending this position is the conservation community—from the unapologetic hard-liners like the Bow Valley Naturalists to the more mollifying members of CPAWS—and most scientists, who have long called for not only an end to development in Banff and others of Alberta's national parks but a redress of past ecological wrongs.

In the middle is the federal government's representative army, Parks Canada, equipped with general support from the electorate and a new Canada National Parks Act, that has yet to come into force—but with little money and even less political will to enforce it.

LEFT: Elk and tourists have become hazards on the Banff Springs golf course.

RIGHT: Development continues in the Banff townsite.

could only have dreamed of—a world-renowned tourism destination generating nearly a billion dollars in annual revenue.

Like Yellowstone National Park, its counterpart in the United States, Banff was set aside, at least on paper,

both for the benefit and enjoyment of the people and for the preservation of the natural environment. How these words have been interpreted, however, couldn't be more different. In the United States, the duality of the National Parks Service's mandate has been clear from the outset—protection and enjoyment. But in Canada the role of our national parks continues to be debated to this day, even though the new Canada National Parks Act makes explicit that the preservation of ecological integrity, not enjoyment, is the primary role of Canada's national parks.

The need for legislation clarifying Parks Canada's legal responsibility was made abundantly clear by the Panel on the Ecological Integrity of Canada's National Parks. "Unimpaired for Future Generations?," the panel's final report, gave failing grades to 38 of Canada's 39 national parks, Banff foremost among them.

While Yellowstone remains relatively pristine—"protection and enjoyment" there has been translated into discreet roads that meander through a landscape rich with biological diversity—Banff harbours a four-lane highway, a railway and a bustling urban centre complete with sushi bars, night-clubs and enough hotel rooms to house all the spectators (and players) at a sold-out Calgary Flames game.

"Protecting ecological integrity has been on the books since 1930—and we still have a mess," says Wildcanada.net's executive director Stephen Legault, who has spent much of the last 10 years fighting to protect Canada's Rocky Mountain national parks. "This continued push for more development is motivated by greed and nothing more. This is just the thrashing of the dinosaur before it dies. And when it does we can get on with protecting our parks."

But the dinosaur is not prepared to go quietly.

"I APPEAR BEFORE YOU TODAY REPRESENTING FOUR world-renowned recreation areas that, combined, have under lease 2/1000 of the national parks in which they are located," the National Park Ski Area Association's (NPSSA) director, Crosbie Cotton, told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce last January. "The ski resorts believe the recently passed new National Parks Act, when combined with advocacy science and other federal government activity now underway, could lead over time to the demise of downhill skiing in our national parks."

A murmur rippled across the room like wind over water.

There is no doubt the new Parks Act and policy decisions that have preceded and accompanied it have changed the rules of the game for commercial operators in the park. But study after study has found that the old rules—based on our culture's penchant for developing first and asking questions later, irrespective of the social and environmental costs—are leading to the demise of our national parks.

"It's simple to find examples that show ski hill expansion is economically sound," says Legault. "But profit is not the sole motivator for management decisions in national parks. Besides, Lake Louise and Sunshine [because of their location in the park] have an incredible competitive advantage. Can't they see that?"

Simon Hudson, an associate professor in the faculty of management at the University of Calgary and an expert on ski area management and marketing, has written a case study about the ski hill dilemma in Alberta's national parks. Over a beer in Canmore, where he has a second home, he agrees their location in the parks does give them a competitive advantage. But, he adds, these ski hills face considerable challenges to stay competitive in an increasingly global market. "They need to be able to upgrade," he said, "at least for safety reasons."

Hudson's words proved prophetic. Less than a fortnight later, Charlie Locke, owner of the Resorts of the Canadian

Rockies and the Lake Louise ski hill, applied for protection from his creditors under Canada's Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. Locke said his company's financial ill health was a result of a warm, dry winter that kept skiers off the slopes, as well as the pullout of one of its prime U.S. lenders. There is no indication that stricter regulations in Banff National Park, where only one of Locke's several ski interests is located, had anything to do with the company's economic troubles. Instead, it appears Locke's buying spree of popular ski hills in B.C. and Quebec, which has pushed the company's debt up to \$57-million, may have been a little too aggressive.

Hudson says that what he doesn't understand is why the ski hills have adopted such a belligerent attitude during a decade-long battle with Parks Canada. Ski hills in the U.S. have flocked to sign on to the Sustainable Slopes Charter produced by the National Ski Areas Association, but not one Alberta resort has chosen to either sign up or develop a meaningful charter of its own.

"Sunshine has a sign up that says they are an environmentally friendly resort, but words aren't enough," says Hudson. "The hills have to follow through with some action."

He points to Intrawest Corporation, the leading developer and operator of village-centered ski resorts in North America, as an example. Intrawest, which owns more than a dozen skiing operations worldwide, has begun to take environmental stewardship seriously. Whistler/Blackcomb, for instance, has hired Arthur DeJong, an environmental manager who oversees a \$1.5-million watershed restoration program on its land—even though it's not in a national park. "The environment is the cornerstone of making Whistler the best resort in the world," DeJong told Hudson. "If we choose to lead conservation, then we can control our own destiny; but if we choose to follow, others will determine it for us."

By contrast, NPSAA's strategy has been to exaggerate both the federal government's restraints on Banff's commercial operators and the conservationists' cry to rein in development. In language bordering on lies, Cotton and his colleagues maintain that Parks Canada is trying to restrict, even prevent, human use of the national parks. And they portray conservationists, scientists, even Parks Canada staff as wilderness-addicted misanthropes intent on removing *homo sapiens* from the parks entirely.

"This is absolute nonsense. The real debate over ski hills is not whether they should exist or not. It's whether they should be allowed to expand," says CPAWS's Dave Poulton. He has come to the Chamber, like many of his conservationist colleagues, in a Machiavellian-inspired attempt to know the enemy. "They've twisted that debate to portray to the public that their existence is threatened, which it is not."

The crowd at the Chamber was a good one for Cotton, who was more or less preaching to the converted. Cotton, a career journalist whose work has appeared in *Time* and

Sports Illustrated, was enticed away from his job as editor-in-chief at the *Calgary Herald* by Lake Louise owner Charlie Locke, Marmot Basin's Rob Marshall, Sunshine co-owner Ralph Scurfield, and Mount Norquay owner Peter White. His job? Lead the fight to maintain the pro-development status quo they claim is being jeopardized by Sheila Copps's drive to reform the national parks system.

Cotton was a natural choice to co-ordinate what has become a loose alliance. He worked for Southam chief Conrad Black over the last three decades, including his tenure as top man at the *Herald*. This experience meant he could find his way around both the media world and Alberta's political landscape in the dark.

Norquay's White, a self-styled "conservative" and Cotton's boss, also has close ties to Black and his media empire. He has been a business partner of Black's as far back as 1969, when the two men, along with David Radler, purchased the *Sherbrooke Daily Record*.

White, long involved in politics, is hell-bent on "building the Canadian Alliance as a viable alternative to the Liberal Party of Canada as Canada's federal government." He also sits on Southam's board of directors, chaired by Black.

So it should come as no surprise that the *Herald*, at that time controlled by Black's Southam, faithfully reported on national park issues as if Cotton himself were still editor. Opinion pieces and editorials regularly condemned the federal government and "radical environmentalists" for stealing the national parks from the people, and articles covered issues from a consistently conservative, anti-Parks Canada perspective.

Perhaps the best example of this occurred the day the ecological integrity panel released its long-awaited final report on the state of Canada's national parks. Surely this is important national news, thought Poulton, as he hurried to a newsstand on March 23, 2000. He had expected the report to be front page news in the *Herald*. Instead, he found the bold headline: "Alberta's ski resorts in peril."

"It was unbelievable," says Poulton. "The province's economic agenda was splashed all over the front page while arguably one of the most important days in the history of our national parks was buried like a postage stamp in the back."

The article detailed the findings of a report released by Alberta Economic Development, either very coincidentally or very strategically, on the same day the federal government was due to release its own report. According to the *Herald*, the AED report, entitled *The Economic Impact of Downhill Skiing at Alberta's Rocky Mountain Ski Resorts*,

claimed that ski resorts in the Rocky Mountains (read: national parks) "must be permitted to grow if they are to compete with resorts in British Columbia and Montana," and that "the ability of the ski resorts to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace is being hindered by restrictive [federal] government policies."

This was antithetical to what the ecological integrity panel's report clearly stated, that ski hills in national parks were "non-conforming uses" that should be allowed to remain but not expand. And there was Cotton, in what could be one of the sweetest PR coups of the century, condemning, in the newspaper he so recently ran, the federal government for potentially "threaten[ing] the long-term

Banff harbours not only grizzly bears and cougars and wolves, but a four-lane highway, a railway and a bustling urban centre

A coyote lies dead beside the Trans-Canada Highway. Vehicle impacts are the number one cause of death for many species in the national parks.



future of skiing in Alberta."

The story spilled to page five, where Poulton found a short article on the panel's report. It was located under the pejorative heading "Development Controls," just above Cotton's continued attack against the federal government.

Two months later, CPAWS accused the *Herald* of printing a "false and misleading story" that reeked of the Cotton gin. Under the headline "Group demands pristine Banff," the article in question stated that CPAWS, Canada's largest environmental group, wanted "the federal government to ban all retail stores and housing development in Banff National Park."

Harvey Locke, CPAWS's national vice-president of conservation responded, "The *Calgary Herald's* story made it sound like we wanted to kick all humans out of the park, which is false and misleading. There is simply an urgent need to stop further expansion of commercial development, and that's what we propose."

The *Herald* has also been quick to report on the provincial government's tacit support of the ski hills' holy war. Premier Ralph Klein attacked the federal government for

leaving the province out of national-parks-related decisions. Provincial economic development minister Jon Havelock, who headed the department that commissioned the report on the economic impact of Alberta's ski industry, wrote a letter to federal Heritage Minister Sheila Copps reminding her that "the national parks in Alberta are a crucial component of our province's heritage, economy and ecosystems." Alberta tourism minister Pat Nelson also waded into the fray, labelling as "nonsense" Ottawa's plan to limit the number of skiers using Alberta's national parks.

Another ally in the siege is the Association of Mountain Parks Protection & Enjoyment (AMPPE), a business-oriented, non-profit organization bent, according to executive director Julie Canning's answering machine message, on reminding Albertans that "parks are for people too."

Although the ski hills are members, AMPPE seems to have adopted a more conciliatory line. Two years ago, AMPPE president Brad Pierce suggested that the Bow Valley, home to the TransCanada Highway and the Town of Banff, might just have to be carved out of Banff National Park to reconcile commercial interests that had already set up shop. This rather drastic idea has been replaced by what Canning calls "a more balanced approach."

"We've really embraced the core values of Parks Canada: the right people in the right place at the right time," Canning says. "This isn't new; we've just articulated it in a more concise way."

Mike McIvor, president of the Bow Valley Naturalists and Banff's version of John Muir, the famous American conservationist, isn't convinced. "Can a tiger change its stripes? I'll believe it when I see it, and I haven't seen it yet."

THE MOST RECENT BELLIGERENT TO STEP INTO THE FRAY

is the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based conservative think tank that recently released a study entitled *Off Limits: How Radical Environmentalists are Shutting Down Canada's National Parks* (from which Cotton is wont to quote). Co-authored by Barry Cooper, a conservative political scientist at the U of C and long-time adviser to Alberta's business lobby, *Off Limits* reads much like the ski hill rhetoric that preceded it: "the original mandate of Canada's parks is gradually being replaced by a narrow preservationist agenda that distorts common sense understandings of environmental protection and ecological integrity."

Says Cooper, a senior Fellow at the institute, in a press release at the time *Off Limits* was published, "There is good reason to be concerned that ideology as much as science is inspiring current and proposed regulatory and land management regimes in our national parks."

Cooper doesn't stop there. *Off Limits* goes on to attack everything from the nature of science, conservation biology in particular, to the personal and professional character of some of North America's top large-carnivore biologists, people like Dr. Stephen Herrero and Dr. Paul Paquet.

"As the goals of scientific and activist communities

merge, however, the realities of politics threaten (or promise) to undermine sound scientific method. Explicitly 'mission-oriented,' the goals of conservation biology are expressly tailored to the perceived policy problem at hand. ... Parks policy in the Banff area in particular has been significantly modified by the efforts of a small, tightly-bound group of environmental scientists, who, while asserting their status as independent researchers, are significantly funded, staffed, and resourced by the federal government. Their research is then publicized by environmental activists and lobbyists as the scientific basis to justify the interventionist policies they advocate."

Cooper misses the point of conservation biology. Like medical doctors, who examine the workings of the human body and then provide solutions as they come to understand the problems, ecologists and conservation biologists study ecological systems in the hopes of keeping them healthy. When they find an affliction compromising the health of those systems—habitat fragmentation, for instance—they prescribe the appropriate medicine. The issue is not bias or mission-oriented science. The issue is research that threatens the status quo and infuriates pro-business lobbyists like Cooper.

Ironically, politics, not science, has been responsible lately for saving Canada's national parks. Indeed, the majority of the Canadian electorate has been pleading for years to save Canada's national parks—even before scientific research indicated time was running out.

A 1993 Angus Reid poll, for instance, indicated 90 per cent of Canadians support the limiting of both development and access to protect parks' environment and natural resources.

Crosbie Cotton parries by saying polls can be simplistic and even misleading, and he is right. But another public process also found that the ecological integrity of Banff National Park had been seriously compromised. The Banff-Bow Valley Study used a participatory, roundtable approach to look at the area between Bow Lake and the eastern park boundary, which includes much of Banff National Park's montane habitat and most of the park's development. The conclusion? Banff needs serious help.

This was not a government-led process. Headed by a task force made up of people from the academic and private sectors, it considered environmental, social and economic factors to assess the health of the Bow Valley and develop sustainable management and land-use strategies. As a result, the buffalo paddock was removed, the air strip closed down and the cadet camp disbanded. Now wolves and cougars are using productive habitat that has been off-limits for years.

The results of the Banff-Bow Valley Study were reconfirmed by the ecological integrity panel's report—but on a national scale. Not only were the Bow Valley and the rest of Banff National Park ecologically unhealthy, so were all but one of Canada's 39 national parks.

“Our national parks are under threat, from stresses originating both inside and outside the parks. Unless action is taken now, deterioration across the whole system will continue,” panel chair Jacques Gérin said in a letter to Copps. Although the panel was composed of top-ranked professionals from many different disciplines, Cooper dismisses the panel and its findings because “environmentalists, park professionals, and scientists clearly outnumber other interested stake holders. The relative influence of environmentalists is reflected in the final report of the Panel, which concluded that Parks Canada had ‘no dual mandate’ to oversee both protection and use.”

If the panel wasn’t correct then, it is now. Canada’s parliament believed there was enough public support for improving the management of Canada’s national parks to warrant a new and improved National Parks Act. Now, without a doubt, the protection of ecological integrity is Parks Canada’s only legal mandate.

THE WAR, LIKE MANY THESE DAYS, has really been one of perception rather than substance. Cotton’s army, backed by Cooper and the long arm of Southam, has lobbed one outlandish remark after another onto the battlefield of public opinion. Playing on the West’s fear of Ottawa, they have tried to discredit everyone—the conservation community, enlightened business people, scientists, Parks Canada, the federal government—that has been working hard to find a solution to the crisis in Canada’s national parks.

While there are those who wish the ski hills in Alberta’s national parks would vanish from the face of the earth, most realize they, like much of the tourist infrastructure, are here to stay. Less than a month after Cotton spoke at the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, Parks Canada’s director general for western and northern Canada, Gaby Fortin, appeared before the same group to “set the record straight.”

“A few weeks ago, here in this very room . . . people heard ski industry lobbyist Crosbie Cotton imply that Parks Canada wants an end to skiing in our mountain parks. This is simply not so.”

Fortin repeated for the umpteenth time that ski hills are “the cornerstone of winter tourism in Banff National Park.” He emphasized, as have other Parks Canada spokespeople before him, that “national parks are a place for nature and a place for people.”

The question Parks Canada now faces is the same one it has been wrestling with for more than a hundred years: how to make it a place for people without compromising it as a place for nature? Even the strictest legislation will not solve the conundrum, and many conservationists believe Parks Canada still doesn’t have what it takes to

find an answer.

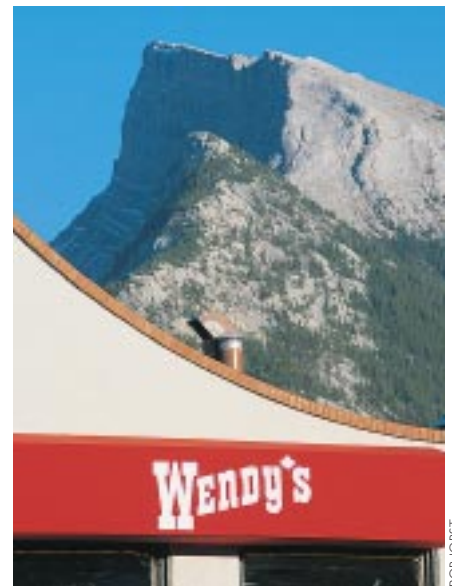
In a letter to Fortin about his presentation to the Calgary Chamber, the Bow Valley Naturalists’ Mike McIvor questioned Fortin’s resolve in the face of continued pressure from the ski area lobby. “You may have provided reassurance to the pro-development sympathizers and tourism industry lobbyists in that audience, that limits to growth are some vague future consideration,” he wrote, “but you did little to convince the Canadian public that Parks Canada is truly committed to protecting our national parks.”

Stephen Legault concurs. He believes Fortin and his boss, Parks Canada’s CEO Tom Lee, are soft. “They have no desire to protect the ecological integrity of the parks.”

Clearly, Fortin and Lee and the rest of Parks Canada have

Pro-development entrepreneurs are frothing at the mouth over the limits Parks Canada has placed on them

In the shadow of Mt. Rundle, the Banff townsite harbours fast-food outlets, nightclubs and sushi bars.



ROB JOIST

their work cut out for them, even with the Canada National Parks Act in their scabbards. But this battle is about more than Banff, or even Canada’s national parks. It is about a growing awareness that the natural world has limits our current assumptions and activities are quickly exceeding.

And for that it is possible to say the battle is being won, despite the machinations of the dinosaurs in our midst.

“I see these people as charter members of the Flat Earth Society,” says McIvor. “As long as they maintain that sort of mentality, they will fall further and further behind. There is a public notion out there that something large is going on—that the world isn’t flat, it’s round and it has limits. And that our national parks need to be preserved.”

Now it is up to Parks Canada to do whatever it takes, fairly and with sensitivity, to ensure that wolves and cougars can fight over their prey, even to the death, as they have since the last ice age.

Jeff Gailus is a conservationist and freelance writer living in Canmore, just outside the Banff Park gates.