

A drive through Jasper National Business Unit



Been to the national parks lately? Let's hop in the car and head for Jasper.

Surprise! At the park gate, you will pay more

than ever to enter a park that you, along with every other Canadian, already own.

Well, OK. The scenery beyond the gate is worth the price of admission. Here are the awesome Rockies, the pristine forests and lakes, the wildflowers and the wildlife. In the business jargon so popular with park managers these days, this landscape is "a world-class tourism product." But it's a "product" with some world-class paradoxes.

One lies on the highway ahead of us: a bighorn sheep, run over by a transport truck. The bighorn was attracted to road salt spread by Parks Canada last winter. A non-attracting de-icer is available and used elsewhere, but the parks service considers it too expensive. Yet a few years ago they spent \$2.2-million paving the access road to Jasper's ski area.

Here's an elk and her calf grazing beside the highway. Ten cars pull over; families burst out, cameras ready, and everybody closes in on the elk. Suddenly she's got her ears back, and she's charging. Back into the car!

Park wardens sometimes shoot "aggressive" female elk. They don't like doing this—the elk are only trying to protect their babies—but how else can wardens ensure the safety of all those people their bosses invite to the park? Visitation is actively promoted by park officials who might as well be working for the Chamber of Commerce. In fact, for a few years in the late 1990s, Parks Canada referred to Jasper National Park as a "business unit" and the park superintendent as the "business unit manager" or "BUM" for short. (Embarrassment overtook the idea.)

As we roll into the town of Jasper, we see hundreds of hotel rooms added in the last 10 years and dozens of new shops. This development would be good news in most communities, but not in a national park. A town is the antithesis of the wilderness the park is supposed to protect. Jasper National Park is a World Heritage Site, but the town resounds with noise, crawls with wildlife-killing vehicles, dumps out polluted air and fouled water... like any place that concentrates humans, it's an ecological disaster.



It's also an administrative nightmare for Parks Canada. Rory Flanagan, park superintendent in the 1970s, once told me after a particularly bad day with local businessmen that "there's nothing about this goddamn town that one good forest fire wouldn't cure." (Last summer Rory almost got his wish.)

Our tour continues. We drive past craggy summits, shining glaciers and roadside mountain goats—more excellent product—to the Columbia Icefield, where one finds the most poignant parks-health indicator of all. It's the \$7-million "Icefield Centre," a name suggesting a shopping mall. It even has its own mall-style logo on highway signs. The Icefield Centre was built in 1997 by Brewster Transportation and Tours, whose slogan is "Welcome to Brewster Country."

Indeed, this is Brewster country.

The government information desk and exhibits are cheek-by-jowl with Brewster's hotel rooms, dining rooms, souvenir shop and ticket wickets. One could easily get the impression that Parks Canada had been privatized.

Dozens of tour buses arrive daily at Icefield Centre and disgorge their passengers directly into the arms of Brewster's ticket agents, who sell them a "SnoCoach" ride on the Athabasca Glacier. On a busy day in July, when many "SnoCoaches" crawl across the glacier and hordes of tourists search for their shuttle-bus departure times on Icefield Centre's overhead monitors, the place looks like an airport. Families who came all the way from Ontario to stand at the edge of the Columbia Icefield may find themselves greeted with the odour of diesel exhaust on the once-pure glacial wind.

You're not happy with all this? You're not alone. Poll after poll shows that the majority of Canadians prefer protection over profits in the national parks. Conservationists have been doing their best to get Parks Canada's "CEO"—yet more corporate usage—back on track. But they are getting nowhere. That's not surprising, considering how dependent the agency has become on user fees from visitors and royalties from in-park businesses.

You could complain personally to the federal environment minister. But be prepared for a lukewarm response. The minister reports to his party, which reports, we can safely assume, to its financial benefactors. Among these is the tourist industry.

Our drive seems to have ended in Ottawa. It needs to. Parliament had better act quickly to regain control of the national parks system and fund it properly, or the parks will suffer the same fate as the dead bighorn sheep or the mother elk shot by her supposed protectors.

Ben Gadd is a Jasper-based author and naturalist.