

# Outdoor Recreation Opportunities Management

## Introduction

The natural features of Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks provide a wide variety of outdoor recreational activities. However, these activities must be carefully managed so that they are compatible with the parks' zoning; are not detrimental to the natural and cultural values; are consistent with visitors' expectations; and respect the Vision Statement of this management plan.

Both of these parks have benefited from previous management direction that is largely consistent with the management objectives and actions identified in this management plan. Previous planning documents emphasize the importance of maintaining the remote, wilderness qualities of the park while allowing for established commercial and non-commercial recreational activities.

As backcountry parks, Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks fulfill wilderness seekers' backcountry expectations in a relatively undisturbed wilderness setting. The sense of solitude and mountain scenery is an integral part of the attraction to this area. It is important to maintain the natural, undisturbed character of the parks' backcountry and a high priority will be placed on ensuring that recreation activities have minimal impact on the landscape. As well, minimizing interactions between visitors and wildlife, particularly grizzly bears, will be a priority.

In maintaining a high quality wilderness recreation experience, values must be assessed and use monitored and managed to ensure that recreation does not affect the environmental and social integrity of the area and the experience itself. In cooperation with local residents, guide-outfitters and recreational users, BC Parks must assess the impact of recreation activity on the parks and their resources.

Both public and commercial recreation activities are well established uses in Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks. Early settlers engaged in recreational guiding and guiding continues to provide a safe commercial recreation experience that enhances many visitors' enjoyment of the parks. It is important for BC Parks to balance public and commercial recreation use to ensure fairness of access to the parks and to protect the natural values that contribute to the recreation experience.

This section of the management plan describes the strategies for managing outdoor recreation, park visitation and providing park information. It will consider:

- 1) Providing opportunities for people to experience the park in ways that are compatible with park features;

- 2) Providing outdoor recreation activities in such a way that there are minimal conflicts between user groups; and
- 3) Providing the tools for creating public awareness of and respect for the natural and cultural values in the parks.

## **Hiking and Backpacking**

These parks offer a variety of hiking opportunities, from short day hikes (Elk lakes area), to backcountry trips (Cadorna Creek, Sylvan Pass), to rigorous wilderness excursions (the Canadian Great Divide Trail). In addition to the marked trails, there are many more unmarked game trails and routes that crisscross these parks. Very few trails are maintained and those who use these parks should be experienced in backcountry travel.

In Height of the Rockies Provincial Park there are two cabins, one at Queen Mary Lake and another at Connor Lakes, where most visitors stay overnight. There are fire pits and pit toilets located at these sites that support some tent camping. Camping also occurs at primitive campsites scattered throughout the park.

In Elk Lakes Provincial Park there are four areas where tent camping is permitted. Three are located in the vicinity of Elk Lakes and another at Abruzzi Lake. These campgrounds range from developed, with pit toilets and tent pads, to primitive, with no facilities. Because the campsite at Lower Elk lakes is only one kilometre from the trailhead parking lot, this area of the park is used as an introduction to the backcountry for the inexperienced visitor.

The campgrounds located at the Elk Lakes receive the most use of both parks. Campground attendance has averaged 239 parties per year between 1988-1995. Observation of public use suggests that use levels and facilities for both parks appear to be appropriate for the foreseeable future.

Backcountry visitors, especially to remote and difficult areas, need to be independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant. For their protection they need to be fully aware of the potential hazards. For example, interactions between park visitors and grizzly bears can result in harm to both the visitor and the bear. Backpackers should be aware of appropriate bear avoidance behavior and identification of prime grizzly habitat to reduce the chances of encountering a grizzly bear.

As backcountry visitors increase, public safety, search and rescue and low impact use will become a concern.

## **Objectives:**

To provide a variety of backcountry and wilderness camping opportunities dependent on a wilderness environment.

To enhance the backcountry visitors' awareness of natural features, wilderness etiquette, cultural setting, techniques for respecting bear habitat and avoiding bear encounters.

To assess and monitor impact of backcountry visitors on natural and cultural values.

## **Actions:**

- Limit camping and overnight accommodation facilities to what is already developed.
- Maintain routes and trails, as prescribed by zoning.
- Close, relocate or improve trails as required if bear and visitor safety problems arise.
- Assist outfitters with trail problems and relocation on user maintained trails.
- Assess conditions and monitor backcountry visitor numbers and destinations to protect natural values in accordance with the Backcountry Recreation Impact Monitoring (BRIM) Policies.
- Educate visitors about minimum impact camping at all sites in the park to avoid site degradation and minimize human-bear conflicts.
- Encourage the use of portable campstoves instead of open campfires to reduce the potential of forest fires.

## **Angling**

The lakes, rivers and streams in these two parks offer a number of angling opportunities. Connor Lakes in Height of the Rockies Park contains a pure stock of Westslope cutthroat trout and is also used as the brood stock for the Kootenay Fish Hatchery. Cutthroat trout are also found in the Middle White River. Several of the high elevation lakes in this park have been stocked with trout in the past.

As the parks and the angling opportunities found in their lakes and rivers become more well known and other fisheries outside the parks become over-fished, the pressure on these parks may increase. Management of this activity will be very important in order to protect valuable fish stocks.

## **Objective:**

To provide angling opportunities for park visitors without detriment to fish populations.

## **Actions:**

- Monitor human use of fish resources through recreation surveys and information from other agencies. If any changes are required they will be implemented by managing access to the area and by fishing regulations.
- Manage natural fish stocks in collaboration with BC Environment, First Nations and anglers.
- Provide information on fishing regulations to park visitors.

## **Horse Use**

Historically, horses have been an important means of travel for both commercial operators and members of the public in Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks. Given this traditional role, horse use continues to be an acceptable use in both parks. The *Park Act* permits horse use only in areas designated by signs for horse use.

Horses can do damage to trails and wet areas and can create conflict with other users such as hikers. Care must be taken not to over-use areas or damage the parks' sensitive natural areas.

## **Objectives:**

To provide a variety of horseback recreational opportunities that minimize impact on the environment and conflicts with other users.

## **Actions:**

- Identify and sign areas in the parks that are designated for horse use.
- Assess conditions and monitor the impact of horse use in accordance with the Backcountry Recreation Impact (BRIM) Policies to minimize impacts on natural values and the visitor experience. Criteria such as limited entry permits, limits on horse numbers, camp facilities, forage availability and timing will be used. Trails may be relocated around recurring problem areas and during certain conditions (extended periods of rain, soft conditions after a late thaw) to prevent trail damage.

- Consider trail closures to minimize environmental degradation and impacts on wildlife.
- Prepare and provide information on established horse use and travel to minimize conflict between users.
- Relocate horse tethering areas and corrals away from all lakes, creeks and rivers to protect sensitive riparian areas.

## **Mechanized Activities**

Although some mechanized activities such as floatplanes, ATV's, snowmobiles, motorized boats and mountain bikes are accommodated in some provincial parks in British Columbia, mechanized activities are generally not compatible with the wilderness nature and land use intent of protected areas. Some mechanized recreation (snowmobiling and mountain biking ) has occurred over a number of years along the old seismic road in the Abruzzi Creek corridor. As the area has now become a provincial park, the impact of these uses needs to be considered for the conservation of park values.

Although snowmobiling is very popular with local residents, its impact on park values is the subject of debate. Proponents claim impacts are non-existent or negligible given winter conditions; however, snowmobiles are known to have impacts on wildlife values in other areas. A comprehensive study of mechanized uses and the impact of snowmobiles in the Abruzzi Creek corridor is needed to determine the most appropriate management.

### **Objectives:**

To minimize the impact of snowmobiling and mountain biking in Elk Lakes Provincial Park.

To seek alternative mechanized recreation opportunities outside the parks.

### **Actions:**

- Restrict mountain bikes to the old seismic road in Cadorna Creek.
- Monitor and assess the impact of continuing snowmobile and mountain bike use in the Abruzzi Creek corridor (seismic road) through the BC Parks Impact Assessment Process Policy, including an impact assessment of these uses on wildlife values.
- Prohibit all forms of mechanized recreation in all other areas of Elk Lakes Provincial Park and Height of the Rockies Provincial Park.
- Prohibit the use of motorized watercraft on all lakes in the parks except for expressed management purposes only.

- Initiate an interagency review of mechanized recreation in the Elk Valley to determine options for accommodating these activities.

## **Hunting**

These parks are home to populations of big game species native to the southern Canadian Rockies. Consequently, the area is popular for hunters. There is open season for bighorn sheep, elk, deer and black bear; limited entry hunting permits for mountain goat, grizzly bear, black bear, mule deer and moose in both parks. Non-resident harvest is managed using quotas for the two registered park guide-outfitters on bighorn sheep, mountain goat, moose and grizzly bear.

Those First Nations who have an aboriginal or treaty right to hunt for sustenance or ceremonial purposes may do so in all provincial parks, subject to conservation requirements and public safety concerns.

BC Parks must manage hunting conservatively to ensure healthy wildlife and predator populations. The Wildlife Branch of BC Environment works with BC Parks to manage the wildlife in the area and has special concerns in relation to mountain goats and grizzly bears. A spectrum of management techniques is used, including open seasons, limited entry permits, hunting closures, archery season and motor vehicle restrictions.

### **Objectives:**

To manage wildlife in the parks using sound and accepted wildlife management principals.

To maintain healthy wildlife populations while providing for conservative hunting opportunities.

### **Actions:**

- Assess, monitor and regulate hunting in cooperation with BC Environment, First Nations, guide-outfitters, hunters, and special interest groups to ensure healthy wildlife populations and habitats are maintained.
- Obtain updated wildlife data in order to manage for healthy populations and appropriate hunting levels.
- Adjust harvest levels according to fluctuations in wildlife populations, including natural predators.
- Review proposed changes with First Nations, guide-outfitters and recreational hunters.

## **Commercial Recreation**

Presently, most of the commercial recreation activities in Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks are provided by the tenured guide-outfitters. Commercial activities include big game hunting, horse packing trips, hiking, photography, angling and wildlife viewing. Although guided outfitting has traditionally been limited to hunting, the outfitters have diversified their activities to adjust to changing client preferences and to lengthen their operating seasons and increase their revenue potential. The Middle Fork of the White River in Height of the Rockies Provincial Park is the only area in both parks that has no tenured commercial recreation. This contributes to the diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities.

Guide-outfitting is an established activity that has been a long standing traditional use in the parks. Previous planning processes (KBLUP and previous management plans) have established that it continues to be an acceptable use in these areas subject to review through the management planning process. With the rapid growth in commercial backcountry recreation in recent years, it is expected that there will be a growing demand for commercial services in these parks. It is important to ensure that recreation services do not adversely affect park values.

### **Elk Lakes Provincial Park**

Elk Valley Bighorn Outfitters provides guiding services in the Cadorna Creek portion of the park in the summer and fall. The guide-outfitter has a base facility on the Elk River near the confluence of Cadorna Creek. Summer clients are taken into the camp in Cadorna Creek and are taken on day trips from this site. The outfitter occasionally makes hiking trips into the Elk Lakes area and in the fall operates hunting camps in each of the major drainages in the park.

### **Height of the Rockies Provincial Park**

Elk Valley Bighorn Outfitter's operate in the Quarrie, Bleasdell and Forsyth Creek basins. Height of the Rockies Adventure Company Ltd. operates at Queen Mary and Ralph lakes and in the Palliser and Joffre Creek drainages. Both operations have expanded from their original focus on hunting trips to fishing and horseback trips in the summer season. These trips now account for over 50% of their client base.

### **Objectives:**

To continue to provide commercial guide and outfitting services within acceptable limits of impact.

Encourage stewardship of park resources by all commercial users.

## **Actions:**

- Authorize pre-existing commercial recreation tenure holders by Park Use Permit.
- Retain the Middle Fork free of commercial recreation activities.
- Work with existing tenure holders to develop a stewardship program and code of conduct.
- Limit new commercial recreation services to low impact proposals that do not require infrastructure to be located in the park, in accordance with the KBLUP-IS.
- Conduct BC Parks Impact Assessment process for new recreation services.

## **Outdoor Recreation Features**

The natural scenery and large landscapes with little sign of human impact are a key recreation feature of these two parks. Outstanding scenery, including the high peaks of the Royal Group; the Limestone lakes; the Upper Middle Fork Valley; and the Castlneau and Petain glaciers offer top-caliber recreational opportunities. Trail rides and backpack trips of several days are popular, using a network of trails in all of the major drainages in the parks. Fishing and big game hunting opportunities are also a part of the attractions of these parks. In winter there are opportunities for ski touring, although little use occurs presently.

These combined features provide visitors with a wide range of outdoor recreation opportunities; however, all are affected by the conservation goals of the park. The amount of recreation at any one site will vary with the site's ability to support a given recreational activity. Consequently, management prescriptions will vary according to environmental sensitivity.

## **Objective:**

To ensure that recreation promotion, development and use are compatible with the conservation objectives for the parks' natural features and values.

## **Actions:**

- Manage the parks according to the Wilderness Recreation, Natural Environment and Special Features zoning requirements. These include natural areas, solitude, high quality natural features and varied recreational opportunities.

- Undertake the BC Parks Impact Assessment process for major recreational developments, including archaeological impact assessment.
- Establish capacity and limits of use through research and monitoring and in consultation with park users.

## **Aesthetic Values**

The natural scenery and untouched panoramic vistas offered in these two parks are fundamental to the visitor's experience. Views from the high elevation passes (North Kananaskis and Palliser Passes, the Middle Fork of the White River), and at many of the lakes (Queen Mary, Connor, Upper and Lower Elk) are outstanding, and rival any offered in the adjacent World Heritage Site (encompassing the four mountain national parks and adjacent BC provincial parks). Almost all the views of the Royal and Italian Group of peaks are spectacular. Views at lower elevations and away from the lakes tend to be restricted due to forest cover. The facility development in these two parks is limited and concentrated in specific areas, yet trails, campsites, and bridges create visual impacts within the parks. Management activities outside the parks can also affect the quality of visual or scenic values in the parks. Cooperative management strategies are required to lessen these impacts.

### **Objectives:**

To minimize human-caused changes to the views in the parks so that the visual qualities and wilderness nature of the parks are retained and to minimize the visual impact of activities outside the parks.

### **Actions:**

- Locate and design all park facilities in harmony with the visual setting and in accordance with park zoning objectives.
- Provide input to the Ministry of Forests and forest licensees to help ensure, through the Forest Development Plan Review Process, that views outside the park boundary are managed in accordance with the *Forest Practices Code of British Columbia Act*.
- Work with other agencies to minimize the visual impact of adjacent uses on the parks.

## **Access Strategy**

The opportunity for a wilderness experience depends, in part, on how access is managed. Access management helps define the type, impact, distribution and amount of use. It is also important to maintain the wilderness qualities of the park and keep visitor numbers

low. These two parks are accessed by ground transportation. Air access is not compatible with wilderness values. Access to the two parks is as follows:

### **Elk Lakes Provincial Park**

There are four accesses to the park. A good quality Forest Service road runs up the Elk Valley to the park boundary at Lower Elk Lakes. Access to Cadorna Creek is via an old seismic road that branches from the Elk Valley road. The first three kilometers of this old road have become a trail and are on Forest Service land outside the park. Access from Alberta is from a trailhead at Kananaskis Lakes which goes through Elk Pass to Upper Elk lakes. The last access to the park is from Height of the Rockies Park through a high elevation pass near Mount Cadorna.

### **Height of the Rockies Provincial Park**

There are seven trailheads and four mountain passes accessing Height of the Rockies Provincial Park. The main trailheads are located at Forsyth and Quarrie Creek via trails that begin close to the Elk Valley Road. The first few kilometers of the trails into both basins are through Crown lands outside the parks. No trailhead facilities have been developed. Access to the Middle Fork is via logging road from Whiteswan Lake.

Several trails and most of the trailheads in both parks are located outside the parks' boundaries in areas administered by the Ministry of Forests. Consequently, it is important that BC Parks and the Ministry of Forests work together to determine appropriate levels of access to the parks as well as the management of trails and trailheads on lands adjacent to the park boundaries.

Lands to the north of Elk Lakes Provincial Park and to the north and east of Height of the Rockies Provincial Park are managed by Alberta Natural Resources (Peter Lougheed Provincial Park) and Parks Canada (Banff National Park). Coordination between these agencies is critical for effective access management. It is also important to address the potential for increased pressures that may arise from the recent imposition of new user fees and other restrictions in the national parks and similar changes that are anticipated in Alberta Parks within the next two years.

### **Objective:**

To provide access to the parks from existing access points.

### **Actions:**

- Develop a protocol between the Ministry of Forests and BC Parks concerning the management of trails and trailheads on Crown lands that provide access to the parks.

- Encourage cooperative management with the adjacent National and Alberta parks.
- Use registration boxes and visitor surveys at access points to monitor users' experiences and social conditions regarding access issues.
- Prohibit all forms of motorized access except for management purposes and as provided for in this management plan.

## Management Services

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks are administered from BC Parks Kootenay District Office, located in Wasa, BC. Staff ensure that various management responsibilities are carried out according to the *Park Act* and the *Park and Recreation Area Regulations* and the established policy and procedures of the Ministry. This includes such priorities as regulating public use to ensure safe and appropriate use of the park; maintaining trails and facilities; managing permits for commercial uses and research within the park; minimizing impacts from visitor use; conducting environmental rehabilitation and management projects; continuation of First Nation traditional uses and collecting data on the parks' natural and cultural values.

### Objectives:

To carry out management responsibilities according to the *Park Act*, *Park Act and Recreation Area Regulations* and the guidelines of this management plan.

To develop a close working relationship with other agencies and First Nations.

### Actions:

- Liaise on a regular basis with groups representing park users and commercial operators to ensure that the park management concerns benefit from the greatest possible input.
- Consult with First Nations on the actions that affect their traditional use.
- Continue to provide a seasonal ranger program with periodic winter patrols as funding allows.
- Use volunteers where possible to enhance park management.
- Continue to prepare Park Annual Operating Plans to determine the annual management requirements of the parks, including the management actions to be implemented.