

Role of the Protected Area

Provincial and Regional Context

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks lie in southeastern British Columbia in the Rocky Mountains, about 85 km southwest of Calgary, Alberta. They are flanked to the East by the Elk Valley and the Kananaskis Valley and to the West by the Park Ranges. The mountain ranges of the Kootenay District provide a wide diversity of natural values and recreation opportunities as evidenced by the numerous national and provincial parks in the District (Fig. 2). Over 16% of the land base in the East Kootenays is in protected areas.

- Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks are a significant part of BC's system of protected areas. In conjunction with Banff National Park and Peter Lougheed Provincial Park in Alberta, they form a large, contiguous protected area that is rich in natural, recreational and cultural values. Also, these parks are critical links in the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y)¹.
- The combined size of these two provincial parks contributes to the protection of biodiversity in the region and is integral to the conservation of wildlife populations, plant communities and biodiversity.
- These parks offer a wide range of top caliber wilderness recreation opportunities and outstanding features.



Plate 2 : Fish fossil in Elk Lakes Provincial Park

¹ Proposal by Canada and U.S. conservation groups to create a thread of ecological connectivity linking protected areas in both countries from Yellowstone National Park to the Yukon.

Significance in the Protected Areas System

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks are a significant part of BC's system of protected areas. In conjunction with Banff National Park and Peter Lougheed Provincial Park they form a contiguous area that is rich in natural, recreational and cultural values.

- These parks represent five percent of the Southern Park Ranges Ecosection and four percent of the Border Range Ecosection.
- These parks are considered to have some of the highest wildlife values in the Canadian Rocky Mountains.
- They also protect some of the most spectacular scenery in the Rocky Mountains.
- They form an important connector that preserves critical wildlife movement corridors from the Southern Rocky Mountains to the Central Rocky Mountains.
- The combined size of these two parks contributes to the protection of biodiversity in the region and is integral to the conservation of wildlife populations, plant communities and biodiversity.
- They offer a wide range of top caliber wilderness recreation opportunities and outstanding features such as the high peaks of the Royal Group of mountains and the Connor Lakes area .
- Upper and Lower Elk lakes are outstanding outdoor recreation features unrivaled by any other areas in the Southern Rocky Mountain ecosystem except for Mount Assiniboine Park.
- They form critical links in the international Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) conservation initiative.
- Connor Lakes, in Height of the Rockies Provincial Park, is the single source of brood stock for Westslope cutthroat trout in the interior of the province.
- The fossils in the parks are of potentially national significance.

Conservation Role

BC Parks has two conservation goals:

Goal 1 Representation - *ecosystem representation of the natural ecosystems of British Columbia*

Goal 2 Special Features - *the conservation of the best provincially significant natural, recreation and cultural features (Appendix A).*

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks contribute to both goals, specifically:

- Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes contribute significantly to the protection of ecosystem and biological diversity of the South and Border Park Ranges ecosystems. Three of the provinces biogeoclimatic zones are found here, including the Engelmann-Spruce Subalpine Fir zone (ESSF), the Alpine Tundra zone (AT), and the Montane Spruce zone (MS).
- According to the Protected Areas Strategy analysis, these areas contribute to the representation of high elevation areas within the Southern and Border Park Ranges Ecosystems. They also play an important role as part of the Southern Rocky Mountain ecosystem, as they form a contiguous trans-boundary system of protected areas.
- These parks support rich and diverse wildlife values. One of the highest densities of mountain goats in the world is believed to be found in these parks. They also provide high quality habitat for grizzly bear and elk. The grizzly bear population in these parks is of special significance due to its high density and adjacency to populations in Alberta, where their viability is of special management concern.
- The pure strain of Westslope cutthroat trout resident in Connor Lakes has special conservation importance. The fry may be stocked over a wide range of interior lakes. The stock is especially suited to alpine lakes. Pure stocks of Westslope cutthroat trout are provincially significant as introductions of hatchery produced rainbow trout have hybridized with resident cutthroat.
- These parks play an important role in conserving the critical wildlife movement corridors of the Southern Rocky Mountain ecosystem.
- Nationally significant special features include the Upper and Lower Elk lakes area and possibly fossils.

Recreation Role

BC Parks has four recreation goals (Appendix A):

- Goal 1** **Tourism Travel Routes** - *to provide park attractions and services which enhance the province's major tourism routes*

- Goal 2** **Outdoor Recreation/Holiday Destination** - *to provide park attractions that serve as or enhance outdoor recreation holiday destinations in key areas across the province*

- Goal 3** **Backcountry** - *to provide outstanding backcountry adventure recreation experiences across the province*

- Goal 4** **Local/Regional Recreation** - *to ensure access to local outdoor recreation opportunities for all residents of the province*

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks contribute to backcountry and local/regional recreation goals by providing visitors with an outstanding backcountry wilderness experience. Specifically:

- Horse trips of several days are possible using a network of trails in the Palliser, Joffre, Middle White, Forsythe and Maiyuk creeks. Trips through these areas can extend into Banff National Park (via Palliser Pass) and Peter Lougheed Provincial Park (via North and South Kananaskis passes).

- The first third of the Great Canadian Divide Trail, extending from Connor Lakes to Mt. Robson Provincial Park, lies within Height of the Rockies Provincial Park.

- Good quality fishing is available in several lakes in the area and in some of the major creeks and rivers. Big game hunting and viewing opportunities for mountain goat, big horn sheep, elk, moose, mule and white-tailed deer and grizzly bear are also part of the attractions of these parks.

- Mountain climbing in the Royal, Military and Italian Groups is also important due to the large concentration of high altitude peaks.

Cultural Role

BC Parks plays an important role in protecting cultural heritage features in the province. Although there are no known archeological sites, Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks contribute to protecting cultural values by preserving an area that is important to First Nations and Canadian Rockies exploration history. Specifically:

- Several historic passes such as Pass in the Clouds and North Kananaskis Pass;
- Historic First Nations hunting areas such as the White River and Cadorna Creek; and,
- Numerous unclassified historic trails.



Plate 3 : Horseback riding at Queen Mary Lake

Vision for Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes Provincial Parks

Being clear about the long-term vision helps to guide what should be done in the short-term. The Vision Statement is an important guide for reacting to changing demands for recreation or for incorporating new approaches to conservation management. This Vision Statement for Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks looks 20 years into the future to set the tone for how the parks may differ from what they are today.

Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes provincial parks will continue to be known in the future as primarily wilderness parks. They form an important part of a contiguous network of protected areas within the Southern Rocky Mountains ecosystem and link habitat and wildlife corridors from south to north. As a result of 25 years of research, monitoring, assessment and education, a solid information base is generated. This allows for the management of dynamic ecosystems with negligible evidence of human influence. Wildlife values remain high given efforts to ensure connectivity between habitats inside and outside park boundaries. A close working relationship has developed with a variety of agencies, First Nations and community groups who have become partners in the management of parks. This has fostered a strong sense of stewardship, pride and achievement across all sectors of the community.