IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2017 **(archived)**
Finalised on 08 November 2017

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Canada
Inscribed in: 1984
Criteria:
(vii) (viii)

Site description:
The contiguous national parks of Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho, as well as the Mount Robson, Mount Assiniboine and Hamber provincial parks, studded with mountain peaks, glaciers, lakes, waterfalls, canyons and limestone caves, form a striking mountain landscape. The Burgess Shale fossil site, well known for its fossil remains of soft-bodied marine animals, is also found there. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2017 Conservation Outlook

Good with some concerns

The Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage site has significant threats that have and will continue to impact its World Heritage values. Glaciers are receding dramatically and are predicted to shrink by 95% by 2100. This will have a significant impact on hydrological systems particularly river flows. An important mammal species, mountain caribou has been lost from much of the site and is declining. Caribou numbers are trending to be extirpated from the site. Rapidly increasing tourism numbers and tourism infrastructure are impacting the scenic value of the main valleys, and external pressure from increasing development activities outside of the property is affecting the property. Reduced budgets and staffing levels raise questions about the commitment and capacity to address these threats. The site is considered on the borderline between 'good with some concerns' and 'significant concerns'. Planned tourism developments including expansion into legally protected wilderness would trigger a review should they go ahead.

Current state and trend of VALUES

Low Concern
Trend: Deteriorating

Whilst there are serious conservation issues in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks the attributes of OUV remain intact for the moment. Some threats cannot easily be addressed by management such as the loss of glaciers, part of the iconic mountain scenery, to climate change. The globally important fossil beds appear to be well managed and protected. Whilst the values for which the site is inscribed under (vii) and (viii) remain relatively intact across the site as a whole tourism infrastructure is expanding in the main valleys changing the iconic mountain scenery from one of wilderness to one of recreational development. At a time when values are being impacted it is of significant concern that budgets and staffing have been reduced. Priority needs to be given to science-based

management which protects ecological integrity above all else. In this regard recent statements from political leaders are welcome but must be followed through (Minister for Environment & Climate Change, Canada, 2017)

Overall THREATS

High Threat

Threats to the Rocky Mountains WHS are cumulative, and its most significant threats arise from climate change and external industrial development pressure. Tourism infrastructure is additive to the main road and transportation corridors and the natural resource development pressures on the outside. While the actual footprint of the impacts are small as a % of entire World Heritage property, the impact is large because the impacts are primarily in the main valleys, which are central to the scenic values and also critical for wildlife movement and feeding.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Some Concern

Parks Canada has a considerable record of conservation innovation at the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage site. Notable achievements are mitigation of the major highway corridor, improvements in aquatic connectivity, the use of prescribed fire and effective science to understand ecological conditions and trends. However in recent times, the role of resource management has diminished at the site and there is an increased emphasis on tourism, visitor experience and recreational opportunities (Auditor General, 2013; CPAWS, 2016). The 2013 Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development states that recently "the number of scientific staff positions [in Parks Canada] has decreased by over a third". Ecological conditions are only in fair condition, and mountain caribou have almost disappeared. Although ecological integrity is a mandate of Parks Canada, this does not appear to be receiving adequate focus at the time of this assessment. Threats to the site from climate change and pressure for more tourism are increasing. For the British Columbia Parks there is very little management, although boundaries are respected.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

▶ **Natural Scenic Beauty**
Criterion:(vii)

The seven parks of the Canadian Rockies form a striking mountain landscape. They are situated in an area of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance

▶ **Fossils**
Criterion:(viii)

The Burgess Shale is one of the most significant fossil areas in the world, famous for the exceptional preservation of the soft parts of its fossils. Fossils are from the Middle Cambrian (508 million years old), marking the beginning of complex multi-cellular life. There are several out crops of the shale in the World Heritage Site, the most significant being the Walcott Quarry in Yoho National Park.

▶ **Glacial processes**
Criterion:(viii)

The seven parks of the Canadian Rockies comprise Banff National Park (BNP), Jasper National Park (JNP), Kooteney National Park (KNP), Yoho National Park (YNP), Mount Robson Provincial Park, Hamber Provincial Park, and Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park. These seven parks provide a classic representation of significant and on-going glacial processes along the North American continental divide on highly faulted, folded and uplifted

sedimentary rocks

Other important biodiversity values

▶ **Biodiversity - rich assemblage of North American mammals**

Biodiversity: there are three life zones or ecoregions: Montane, Sub-alpine and Alpine. These have high species richness of large north American mammals including grizzly bear, big-horn sheep, mountain goats, mountain caribou, wolves, cougar, wolverine and bison. This intact large mammal assemblage represents significant ecosystem diversity and integrity.

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

External pressure on the property due to increasing industrial developments is on the rise. Although the property is nearly 2.3 million hectares in size it is still vulnerable to these impacts with limitations to its resilience. There is a significant increase in tourism numbers and associated tourism infrastructure. The crowding and facilities being permitted is impacting and will impact the scenic beauty in the main mountain valleys. 98% of tourism activity is in the main valleys (Bow, Athabasca, Kicking Horse and Kootenay) and tourism and transportation infrastructure is obvious and growing in these valleys.

Glaciers are melting due to a changing climate. Between 1919 and 2012, glacier cover in the study area decreased by 590±70 km2 (40±5 %). Seventeen 17 of 523 glaciers disappeared and 124 glaciers fragmented into multiple ice masses. Predictions are that Glaciers in Canadian Rockies Could Shrink By 95% by 2100.

The Burgess Fossil shales are well protected (camera, alarms, enforcement staff) and visitation to the sites is controlled and well managed. Research is carefully managed with a zoning system. Fossil theft has previously been recorded but with a successful arrest. Additional outcrops of the fossil bed are being carefully managed.

► Hyper-Abundant Species

Data Deficient
Inside site, extent of threat not known
Outside site

Whirling disease (Myxobolus cerebralis) is a microscopic parasite of salmonid fish, including trout and whitefish. In 2017, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency declared the Bow River watershed in the WHS infected with whirling disease and the remainder of the province of Alberta a buffer zone. The disease is exotic and has the potential to have population level impacts in species at risk, including Bull Trout and Cutthroat Trout.

► Invasive Non-Native/ Alien Species

Low Threat
Inside site, extent of threat not known
Outside site

All parks have identified issues related to invasive and non-native species. This includes fish and montane plants. Programs to limit the spread of such species and control known populations are ongoing and have been implemented and in some cases through coordination with other land agencies. Complete eradication may not be possible and efforts currently focus on areas of higher impact.

► Fire/ Fire Suppression

High Threat
Inside site, widespread(15-50%)
Outside site

The frequency of widfire on the landscape is far below any historical metric or Parks Canada's goals for the site. A lack of fire changes montane grasslands to forest, alters forest age classes and encourages large-scale insect outbreaks that kill large areas of trees. Montane grasslands are

important for wildlife.

Parks Canada, who manages most of the property, has a sophisticated fire management program with detailed fire histories. However, having fire at the site is very complicated because of danger to visitors, visitor facilities, and national transportation corridors. The use of prescribed fire is now infrequent because the prescriptions are narrowly written to avoid smoke in towns or major visitor facilities. There is a direct conflict between re-introducing fire and the presence of millions of visitors. Parks Canada's assessment of forest condition shows the measure of "areas disturbed by fire" to be in in poor condition. A decline of fire on the landscape changes the mix of forest and open montane grasslands. In addition, a lack of fire creates conditions for large-scale insect outbreaks. Currently there are large areas of lodgepole pine forests killed by mountain pine beetle

► Roads/ Railroads

Low Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)

While the high impacts of direct wildlife mortality have been subject to some mitigation through fencing and animal crossing structures, the heavily-used railway line remains a significant source of mortality. The railway carries large amounts of grain and legume crops, which are spilled onto the tracks and attract wildlife. There are have been efforts to mitigate the impact and clean up the spills, but a significant problem persists.

► Mining/ Quarrying, Logging/ Wood Harvesting, Oil/ Gas exploration/development

Low Threat
Outside site

Most of the mountain parks abut active resource extraction areas (forest harvest, oil and gas, and mining areas) and park managers have identified potential impacts to wildlife movement and species at risk (e.g., grizzly bear, woodland caribou) posed by such activities. Considerable research has been done to confirm mining and other industry impacts predicted for wildlife in the park after approval of the Cheviot Mine, including the 5 year Model Forest Grizzly Bear Study, work on mountain sheep, harlequin duck, fish and water quality. Analysis of monitoring data has shown that reclaimed mining areas

are providing better habitat than originally predicted for grizzly bear. The Foothills Research Institute has conducted other work in conjunction with the University of Alberta and other institutions to investigate cumulative effects of development along the eastern boundaries of JNP. The Cheviot site and Coal Valley sites remain active. Two mines in this area (Luscar and Gregg River Mines) are being closed and reclamation planning will incorporate these findings and aim to maximize biodiversity. Forestry and oil and gas development remain important activities on the east and west sides of the mountain parks. Participation in the Yellowhead Ecosystem Group and the Foothills Research Institute allows JNP to collaborate with regional industrial interests. Mt Robson PP participates in regional land use groups for similar purpose. All of the mountain parks belong to the Central Rockies Ecosystem Interagency Liaison Group, which allows coordination with other government agencies involved in regulating resource management beyond the parks, although in recent years, this group has not been very active.

► Temperature extremes

Very High Threat
Inside site, throughout(>50%)
Outside site

Glaciers are melting due to a changing climate. Between 1919 and 2012, glacier cover in the study area decreased by 590±70 km2 (40±5 %). 17 of 523 glaciers disappeared and 124 glaciers fragmented into multiple ice masses. Predictions are that glaciers in Canadian Rockies could shrink by 95% by 2100. The loss of glaciers and icefields will alter flow regimes, which may lead to flooding of low-lying habitats, and inhibit any ongoing glacial processes.

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas

High Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)

The major valleys in the WHS have heavily used highway and railway infrastructure. On top of this, there are planned major expansion of the Lake Louise Ski Hill into designated wilderness and the construction of a multi-purpose paved recreational pathway from Jasper to Lake Louise. In addition there are proposals for more gondolas and a much expanded gondola station at the top of Sulphur Mountain. These developments can impact a core value

of the WHS, that of natural beauty and aesthetic importance, albeit within a relatively small percentage by area of the overall site. Tourism visits to Parks Canada sites nationally have increased 19% in the last 4 years to 8.5 million visits, leading in some components to congested routes, noise pollution, as well as light pollution from new facilities. The main valleys are key feeding and movement areas for large mammals.

Potential Threats

Data Deficient

In addition to the significant effects of climate change already observed within the property, it poses a further potential threat to those values for which the property is inscribed as well as the significant associated biodiversity values.

► Droughts

Data Deficient
Inside site, throughout(>50%)
Outside site

Warmer annual temperatures and lower annual precipitation raise the possibility of more frequent droughts, but the timeframe for this shift and the increase in frequency are uncertain

► Storms/Flooding

Data Deficient
Inside site, throughout(>50%)
Outside site

Warmer spring temperatures may increase spring run-off, with risk of more frequent or extreme flooding. As above, the uncertainty in the variables affecting this prediction (for example the rate of rise in annual temperature over time, and relative reduction in snowpack) makes prediction of timeframe and severity difficult.

► Habitat Shifting/ Alteration

Data Deficient
Inside site, extent of threat not known
Outside site

As noted above, a warming temperature trend is predicted within the

mountain parks, but the rate of change is uncertain. Range expansion to higher elevations of forest species is anticipated to impact subalpine and alpine habitat but the extent of habitat reduction is unknown.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Some Concern

There are two very different management agencies with responsibilities for the Rocky Mountain Parks WHS. Parks Canada manages 4 national parks and British Columbia Parks Branch manages 3 provincial parks.

In general Parks Canada has an abundance of processes in place that encourage public participation and its decisions receive considerable scrutiny in the media. However some stakeholders have expressed significant concern that Parks Canada's relationships were driven by the economic interests of tourism operators rather than conservation values, and furthermore, transparency has become an increasing issue. However, First Nations are increasingly being brought into a positive dialogue by Parks Canada and there appears to be real progress in this area.

► Legal framework

Some Concern

There is strong legal framework in place under the National Parks Act and the British Colombia Parks Act and the rule of law prevails. B.C. has recently amended its Parks Act to permit boundary adjustments for pipe lines, which is cause for some concern. It is important to note that ecological integrity is a distinct mandate of Parks Canada but implementation has been weak.

► Enforcement

Mostly Effective

Effective. No reported cases where a lack of enforcement is a problem

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Some Concern

Parks in the WHS tend to plan and work inside their boundaries. There is no umbrella planning system in place for the broader WHS, either inside or outside. Formerly there was a Central Rockies Ecosystem Inter-agency Liaison Group that coordinated ecosystem planning and management throughout the WHS. This is now disbanded and not been replaced, hence the lack of proper planning and assessment of development on the outside of the parks is compromising the value of the parks themselves.

► Management system

Some Concern

There is no management system in place for the larger WH site. Managers do not meet to discuss World Heritage. It does occasionally come up as part of Parks Canada management but there are no meetings with British Columbia.

► Management effectiveness

Some Concern

There are no management effectiveness assessments reported or done for any of the 7 parks at the WHS. Parks Canada does State of Parks reports every 10 years and system wide reports every 2 years with a brief summary of visitation, ecological integrity, heritage resources and facilities at each site. There are no such reports for British Columbia parks within the WHS.

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Data Deficient

The property has not been examined by the Committee since 2006.

► Boundaries

Highly Effective

No issues noted. Boundaries marked and respected

► Sustainable finance

Serious Concern

Although Parks Canada is well relatively financed for its 4 National Parks in particular areas, British Columbia has very low levels of resourcing for its 3 provincial parks which orders of magnitude below that of the national agency. The level of financing for BC parks is well below that of basic management and the ability to deal with threats and take management action. Reduced budgets and staffing levels across Parks Canada have been documented by Canada's Auditor General who noted "Spending on Heritage Resources Conservation at Parks Canada has recently decreased by 15 percent. Overall staffing for conservation has declined by 23 percent and the number of scientific staff positions has decreased by over a third. Parks Canada has not clarified how and by when, with significantly fewer resources, the Agency will address the backlog of unfinished work, the emerging threats to ecological integrity, and the decline in the condition of 34 percent of park ecosystems that it has identified. As a consequence, there is a significant risk that the Agency could fall further behind in its efforts to maintain or restore ecological integrity in Canada’s national parks" (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2013)

► Staff training and development

Mostly Effective

Staff are well trained but there is considerable variation between the national park and provincial parks.

► Sustainable use

Some Concern

The only formal harvest within the WHS is for recreational fishing, which appears to be well managed. Outside the WHS, there is considerable trophy hunting for bighorn rams (Ovis canadensis), and long-term research data has shown that the pressure and selection of trophy rams has led to a reduction in horn size, and also suggested slower horn growth, thereby significantly affecting the genetics of these populations. However hunting policy appears to not have been amended.

▶ Education and interpretation programs

Some Concern

The parks offer some interpretation programs but this has been reduced and much of the contact is done by commercial operators.

▶ Tourism and visitation management

Some Concern

Visiting the park and using the commercial facilities reveals little information that the sites are protected areas or part of World Heritage Site. Some commercial operators do an excellent job of interpretation. Visitors report high satisfaction levels in Parks Canada surveys.

▶ Monitoring

Some Concern

Parks Canada has a strong, but narrowly focused, monitoring program in place but it has reduced the number of indicators so that significant ecosystems such as Montane grasslands are no longer covered. Only the summary ecological condition monitoring is available to the public and there is no information on the results of management interventions. There is minimal monitoring in the provincial parks in British Columbia parks.

▶ Research

Some Concern

The number of external research permits has declined significantly in recent years. Some stakeholders have reported the disaggregated system as a cause for the decline, and lack of transparency in the decision making process.

Overall assessment of protection and management

Some Concern

Parks Canada has a considerable record of conservation innovation at the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage site. Notable achievements are mitigation of the major highway corridor, improvements in aquatic

connectivity, the use of prescribed fire and effective science to understand ecological conditions and trends. However in recent times, the role of resource management has diminished at the site and there is an increased emphasis on tourism, visitor experience and recreational opportunities (Auditor General, 2013; CPAWS, 2016). The 2013 Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development states that recently "the number of scientific staff positions [in Parks Canada] has decreased by over a third". Ecological conditions are only in fair condition, and mountain caribou have almost disappeared. Although ecological integrity is a mandate of Parks Canada, this does not appear to be receiving adequate focus at the time of this assessment. Threats to the site from climate change and pressure for more tourism are increasing. For the British Columbia Parks there is very little management, although boundaries are respected.

► Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Some Concern

The WHS is inscribed under criteria (vii) and (viii) and, whilst these values remain relatively intact, there are external pressures such as climate change which are challenging the capacity of management. On biodiversity values with the exception of freshwater ecosystems, Parks Canada ecological forest and tundra (Alpine) indicators all show either fair or poor condition. In addition many indicators are trending downward. Mountain Caribou are extirpated from Banff, Kootenay and Yoho and declining rapidly in Jasper. The wildfire disturbance regime is suppressed from fire control. Prescribed fire is not being used sufficiently because its’ perceived impacts on visitors (Cliff Whyte Personal communication). Trophy hunting of bighorn sheep external to the park is changing the genetics of horns size. On a positive note, there has been a reintroduction of bison to one area of Banff in 2017. Management is largely internally focused and there are concerning downward trends in budgets and staff levels particularly for scientific staff.

► Best practice examples

1. Reintroduction of plains bison
2. Replacement of aging tourism infrastructure
3. Improvement of aquatic connectivity by replacing dysfunctional highway

culverts

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

▶ **Natural Scenic Beauty**

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

There is a significant increase in tourism numbers and tourism infrastructure. The crowding and facilities being permitted are impacting, and will impact, the scenic beauty in the main mountain valleys. 98% of tourism activity is in the main valleys (Bow, Athabasca, Kicking Horse and Kootenay) and tourism and transportation infrastructure is obvious and growing in these valleys. New tourism developments impact the viewscapes. One example is the large expansion of the gondola terminal at the top of Sulphur mountain which now has an evening restaurant with lighting that can be seen across the valley thus detracting from the naturalness of the experience.

▶ **Fossils**

Good
Trend:Stable

The Burgess Fossil shales are well protected (camera, alarms, enforcement staff) and visitation to the sites is controlled and well managed. Research is carefully managed with a zoning system. There was incidence of fossil theft at the site but an arrest was made. Additional outcrops of the fossil bed are being carefully managed.

▶ **Glacial processes**

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Glaciers are melting due to a changing climate. Between 1919 and 2012, glacier cover in the study area decreased by 590±70 km2 (40±5 %). 17 of

523 glaciers disappeared and 124 glaciers fragmented into multiple ice masses. Predictions are that glaciers in Canadian Rockies could shrink by 95% by 2100.

Summary of the Values

▶ Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

Low Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

Whilst there are serious conservation issues in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks the attributes of OUV remain intact for the moment. Some threats cannot easily be addressed by management such as the loss of glaciers, part of the iconic mountain scenery, to climate change. The globally important fossil beds appear to be well managed and protected. Whilst the values for which the site is inscribed under (vii) and (viii) remain relatively intact across the site as a whole tourism infrastructure is expanding in the main valleys changing the iconic mountain scenery from one of wilderness to one of recreational development. At a time when values are being impacted it is of significant concern that budgets and staffing have been reduced. Priority needs to be given to science-based management which protects ecological integrity above all else. In this regard recent statements from political leaders are welcome but must be followed through (Minister for Environment & Climate Change, Canada, 2017)

▶ Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values

High Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

Parks Canada has a relatively solid ecological monitoring program, which shows the biodiversity values of the site to be in generally fair condition. Key issues are the dramatic decline in mountain caribou, and low levels of fire changing ecological communities. Again declining budgets and specialist scientific staff contribute to the high concern rating.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Access to drinking water, Commercial wells

The WHS rivers provides drinking water, irrigation water and industrial water for most of Western Canada. This includes water for major cities such as Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon. The melting of the glaciers will dramatically impact summer flows with far less water in the summer on the river

► Direct employment, Tourism-related income, Provision of jobs

The WHS is one of Canada main tourist attractions and an iconic international tourism for Canada. Visitors of the Rockies generated 1.09 billion dollars in economic impact in 2012 (Ref 10)

► Importance for research, Contribution to education

The Rocky Mountains have along history of being important research areas for large wildlife, glacial processes and many other natural features. Many graduate students and trained there and many classes have field trips there.

► History and tradition, Wilderness and iconic features, Cultural identity and sense of belonging

The Rocky Mountains are the traditional territory to several First Nations (indigenous peoples) who still use and have important connections to the land. The Rocky Mountains WHS contains Banff, Canada's first and oldest National Parks. Banff is one of best known parks in the world. The site is also a wilderness icon in Canada and globally. Images from the site have been

printed in Canadian currency.

Summary of benefits

The site is the water tower for western Canada, one of Canada's largest tourism draws and part of the Canadian identity. Its benefits cannot be overstated.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	Parks Canada	From: 2017 To: 2020	Reintroduction of Plains Bison to Banff

Compilation of potential site needs

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
1	Better use of workd heritage values in sites management	World Heritage values do not explicitly appear to be an important part of the management of the 4 national parks and 3 provincial parks that constitute the site. Impacts on WH Values are not included in major environmental assessments, such as the Lake Louise Hill Hill expansion (Ref 17) or the Sulphur mountain gondola station redevelopment (Ref. 18).	
2	Recommedna tion for the WH Committee to consider boundary expansion	There is an outstanding recommendation to expand the boundaries of the WH site. Decision : 30 COM 11B Follow-up to the Periodic Report for North America / Adoption of Statements of Significance 6. Encourages the State Party of Canada to put forward extensions to Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks and Wood Buffalo National Park, pursuant to Canada's Tentative List for World Heritage Sites (2004);	From: 2017

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