

Conservation Groups Restate Vision for the Castle Special Place in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan

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CALGARY, AB - As the South Saskatchewan Regional Land use Plan nears the next phase of consultation, conservation groups who have long advocated for permanent protection of the Castle Special Place are re-stating the vision for this area.

The Castle Special Place is part of the transboundary Crown of the Continent ecosystem and is the headwaters for nearly one third of the water in the Oldman Water Basin. It is an area of international ecological significance as well as affording recreational and economic opportunities for locals and visitors.

In 2010 a locally driven Working Group created a draft proposal for the Castle through 12 months of extensive dialogue and information sharing. This group included 37 organizations, businesses, industry, recreationalists, grazing lease holders and adjacent landholders who worked on a consensus basis to discuss and weigh alternative approaches and trade-offs for management of the area.

“The outcome of this initiative was a recommendation to protect the Castle Special Place as a Wildland Provincial Park,” says Peter Sherrington of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition, who participated in the initiative. “Contrary to what some people believe, such a designation would allow the local economy to prosper from recreational uses such as camping, skiing and regulated OHV use on designated trails, while protecting watershed values for millions of users downstream across the Prairie Provinces.”

Public opinion studies conducted in the region indicate that an overwhelming majority (82%) of regional residents believe that protecting the watershed should take priority over recreational activities in the area. Seventy-seven percent of residents also oppose clear-cut logging in the Castle and 74% support legislating this Special Place as a Wildland Provincial Park.

“Legislated protection of the Castle Special Place and land use planning throughout Southern Alberta does not mean that recreationalists and other users would be excluded from the area” says Katie Morrison, Conservation Director for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Southern Alberta. “However, unregulated and inappropriate uses of the Castle and other areas on the Eastern Slopes such as clear-cut logging and new access creation by OHVs are degrading the our landscape’s ability to support critical values such as watershed protection, wildlife habitat and even the scenic value that recreationalists are there to enjoy.”

The upcoming South Saskatchewan Regional Plan aims to achieve Alberta’s long-term economic, environmental and social goals and to ensure good stewardship of the provinces natural areas.

“Water security is a vital strategic issue for irrigators, municipalities and others in the Oldman and Bow basins,” says Kevin Van Tighem, a fourth-generation southern Alberta and former superintendent of Banff National Park. “That’s why watershed health has to be the single highest priority in the mountains and foothills of the region. The Castle is a small area yet it produces a third of the Oldman River’s water. That alone argues for its protection. And we need to look at how we manage the rest of the headwaters area in terms of forestry, recreational use and conservation to restore their productivity for water and other benefits.”

Katie Morrison adds that “The Castle is a key part of the Eastern Slopes landscape and its full legal protection is a critical step in reforming forest management practices throughout the region. We have seen cooperation between conservationists, industry and other stakeholders to produce solutions on this landscape.” The oil and gas industry was part of the Working Group that supports protection of the Castle Special Place. “We’d like to work with the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development and the timber industry to ensure these ecological and social values are represented on the Southern Alberta landscape while taking a new look at management of the region.”

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