



Managing Canada's Mountain National Parks: The Hiker's Perspective

Submitted by the Alberta Hiking Association (<http://www.abhiking.ca>)

The national parks in the Canadian Rockies and the interior ranges of British Columbia currently provide some of the world's most satisfying hiking and backpacking experiences. The mountain national parks management plan review currently underway provides an opportunity to ensure that hiking in these parks continues to be supported appropriately by parks policy and practices.

Hiking and Environmental Integrity

In the terminology of the Banff National Park Management Plan working draft, hikers and backpackers fall into the fifth category of visitor, those who seek "Rocky Mountain Wilderness." Although we are the smallest segment of park visitors, we have the closest relationship with the environment. Hikers and backpackers also have less environmental impact on an individual basis than the two other groups of non-motorized backcountry users, equestrians and mountain bikers.

It is important to hikers to experience intact and undisturbed wilderness. The Alberta Hiking Association supports the closing of areas or the limitation of numbers of visitors when needed to protect the environment. We also support allowing equestrian or bicycle access to only a limited number of trails, so that hikers and backpackers can use trails undamaged by these other visitors. We have observed that backcountry trails shared with horse traffic are more quickly eroded, and the presence of horse manure also detracts from the trails' attractiveness and may cause some hikers to go off-trail, increasing erosion.

We believe the reintroduction of bison to the Banff National Park ecosystem will not negatively affect day-hiking, as day-hikers and bison have successfully coexisted in Elk Island National Park for many years. Efforts will need to be made to educate backcountry users on the proper ways to avoid interaction with bison, as they have with bears. However, we regard the effect of bison on backpackers camping in the backcountry as worthy of investigation. What is known about the response of a herd of bison to encounters with people sleeping in tents? Will fenced-off backcountry campgrounds be required, and if so, will they be provided, or will the areas used by bison be closed to camping?

Hiking Facilities

We support the separation of equestrian and pedestrian trails when feasible. The two groups have different requirements for trail design. Pedestrian trails should be designed to drain well. Horses seem to be content to walk through the mud their hooves have helped create.

Trail maintenance should be a priority in all areas of the parks.

Current primitive backcountry campgrounds should be upgraded to meet the standard of semi-primitive campgrounds. Tent pads, bear-proof food storage, table-equipped food preparation areas and adequate latrines are necessary to control environmental impact, even in areas with lower numbers of visitors.

We recommend the upgrading of backcountry permit and registration systems to allow on-line purchase of wilderness passes and booking, payment, and cancellation of campsites, co-ordinated for contiguous parks. Computerization will also allow better recordkeeping and analysis of backcountry use patterns, and more efficient use of backcountry facilities.

Working Together

Current plans and the drafts for future plans overlook opportunities for co-operation with the many community-based hiking groups that regularly plan trips in the mountain parks. For example, the Banff National Park Management Plan working draft speaks of “bringing the mountains to people where they live” by community outreach. Hiking clubs often include guest speakers or filmed presentations in their meetings, and should be considered as a vector for outreach.

Hiking groups also provide a valuable service to parks management by educating their members in hiking and backpacking practices and promoting environmental awareness and safety. Management plans should consider ways in which Parks Canada can support hiking groups, and Parks Canada should include representatives of the hiking community in planning processes.