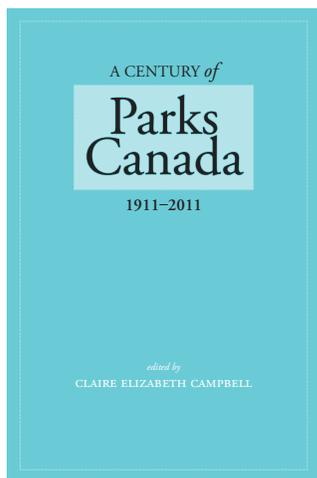




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# Nature's Playgrounds: The Parks Branch and Tourism Promotion in the National Parks, 1911–1929



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Every summer the migration begins. From the peaks of Rocky Mountains to the shores of the Bay of Fundy's intertidal zones, from the broad sand beaches of Vancouver Island's west coast to the deep inlets of Newfoundland's eastern shore, people by the thousands pack themselves into their cars or onto airplanes and travel to Canada's national parks. For many, the trip ends at a nearby park with a day trip or a weekend of camping. Others travel longer distances to more iconic wilderness or mountain parks, for experiences that range from a stay at a luxury hotel to a grueling multi-day hike through the backcountry. Regardless of the circumstances, all of these people encounter the national parks through the medium of commercial tourism, as sightseers, vacationers, day-trippers – as consumers of experience. Consider just a few of their options: the scenic highway loops, the ski resorts, the golf courses,

the resort towns, the hotel lodges, the campgrounds (complete with electrical hookups for owners of luxury recreational vehicles), the beaches, the backcountry trails, the canoe routes, and the interpretive centres. In many national parks, particularly the older parks located near the more populated regions of southern regions of the country, private and public development schemes have dramatically shaped the landscape to meet the expectations of the visiting tourist.

Historians have spared little ink describing the influence of tourism development on the national parks in the mountainous west. In the United States, several books have recently challenged the prevailing idea that the preservationist ideal associated with John Muir was the founding principle of the western parks, instead arguing that the push to sell mountain landscapes to railway patrons, and later auto tourists, was a primary influence on the creation of iconic spaces such as Yellowstone, Olympic, and Mt. Rainier national parks.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, a similar idea emerged much earlier with Robert Craig Brown's foundational 1968 essay "The Doctrine of Usefulness," the first of many works that highlighted the impact of tourism on the development of the national parks in the Rocky Mountains.<sup>2</sup> In the public realm, the long-term ecological consequences of tourism developments have been a matter of intense debates over the past three decades. At Banff National Park, in particular, the realization that highway, railway, and townsite developments within the ecologically sensitive montane habitat of the Bow Valley were having severe impacts on some wildlife populations led to the implementation of a government task force and the eventual removal of some facilities, the construction of highway overpasses for wildlife, and the establishment of a strictly protected wildlife corridor at the edge of the Banff townsite.<sup>3</sup> In other national parks with a history of heavy tourism development, Parks Canada similarly must attempt to balance the recent legislative emphasis on maintaining ecological integrity in the parks with the more traditional goal of packing in as many visitors as possible to maintain gate revenues, but also, paradoxically, to nurture public support for the mission and ideals of the national parks.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, despite the evidence of a close marriage between tourism and national park promotion in North America, some park advocacy groups and wilderness activists have promoted the idea that the early national parks were founded wholly on principles of wilderness preservation. The naturalist and

photographer Janet Foster served as a foundational author in this regard. Her *Working for Wildlife: The Beginnings of Preservation in Canada*, first published in 1978, is a hagiography of early Canadian conservationists that locates the origins of the wilderness movement in bureaucratic organizations such as the Parks Branch.<sup>5</sup> In the popular realm, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society has, as Alan MacEachern points out this volume's first chapter, publicly venerated the first parks commissioner James B. Harkin, as "the Father of National Parks, [who] developed the idea of conservation in Canada at a time when there was little precedent. Harkin created Canada's National Park system, the world's first park service. By establishing standards for their preservation, Harkin created a world class example of land conservation."<sup>6</sup> Such a portrait of Harkin as a conservation hero is deeply ironic, as we shall see, given his devotion to developing tourism in the parks. Nonetheless, the imperative to establish heroic historical antecedents for the contemporary wilderness movement tends to overshadow the contradictory goals of the early conservation movement. In his address to the Canadian Parks for Tomorrow: 40th Anniversary Conference, held at the University of Calgary in 2008, prominent wilderness activist Harvey Locke claimed that the historical argument for commercial concerns as a driving force behind Canada's national parks is misleading, primarily because it ignores the role of wilderness activists and conservation groups. It was these committed and public-spirited preservationists, Locke argued, who promoted national parks, not as tourist playgrounds, but as a means to protect wilderness and declining wildlife in the mountainous regions of western Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, as Locke has suggested, civil society's emergent wilderness activism did play a role in the creation of the early national parks. Pearlann Reichwein's extensive work on the Alpine Club has argued convincingly that the efforts of this organization to work with the Dominion Parks Branch in the 1920s to oppose hydro and irrigation dams within the mountain national parks represented an early example of wilderness activism.<sup>8</sup> Writers, painters, and photographers immersed in the late nineteenth century's affection for sublime mountain wilderness also did much to promote the creation of national parks within the Rocky Mountains.<sup>9</sup> If commercialism was one important influence on the mountain national parks during this early period, it was not the only influence, as a few voices in defence of the wilderness idea began to make themselves heard.



FIG. 1. CLARK'S BEACH IN THE 1940S, RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK. [COURTESY OF RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK PHOTO COLLECTION.]



But all of this focus on the mountain parks as historical exemplars of a public commitment to wilderness preservation may obscure as much as it reveals about the shifting purpose and origins of the national parks in Canada. For almost two decades (until the creation of St. Lawrence Islands National Park in 1904), the four mountain parks – Rocky Mountains (1885), Glacier (1886), Yoho (1886), and Waterton Lakes (1895) – represented the sum total of what can only loosely be described as a parks system. The haphazard early administration of these earliest parks does not tell us much about the policy agenda behind the creation of the much broader system of national parks that emerged in subsequent decades. Originally, there was no legislation or administrative body dedicated to the first three mountain parks, each of which was originally designated as a forest park under the broad authority of the *Dominion Lands Act*. When the first legislation specific to the parks, the *Rocky Mountains Park Act*, was finally passed in 1887, the result was not a well-defined policy regime governing the parks as wilderness, but a grab-bag of policies that included preserving land and wildlife, the issuing of permits for grazing and hay production, the leasing of land for residences and commercial development, and sanction for the development of mines within the parks. Although Howard Douglas's appointment as the first commissioner of Dominion Parks in 1908 suggests some development of a broader federal policy agenda for parks, several historians have outlined how the subsequent transfer of authority over parks to the Department of the Interior's Forestry Branch, an administrative body that devoted much of its attention to a burgeoning network of federal forest reserves, produced policy drift and confusion rather than systemic planning of a national park system during this early period.<sup>10</sup>

All of this changed in 1911, arguably the most important single turning point in the administration and development of national parks in Canada. In May, the first legislation dedicated to a truly national system of parks, the *Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act*, was granted royal assent. The new law provided for the first administrative body dedicated to the administration of national parks in this country – the Dominion Parks Branch – and for the appointment of a parks commissioner as its head. This position was filled by the energetic and decisive figure of James Bernard Harkin, a figure who, along with his secretary Mabel Williams (see the previous chapter), did more than anyone to promote the expansion of the national parks system and

shape the individual parks that were established during his twenty-five years as head of the Branch. Under Harkin's direction, the first semblance of a national system of Dominion parks took shape, guided by his oft-stated goal of establishing at least one park in each province.<sup>11</sup> In this, he was extremely effective: between 1911 and 1930 the Parks Branch established twelve new Dominion Parks (see Appendix A), one of the most significant expansions of the system in its history, and extended the reach of the national parks beyond the mountainous west to the Prairies, the parkland regions of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the Carolinian forests and waterways of southern Ontario.

Remarkably, however, national park historians and activists have devoted far less attention to this crucial period of park development than to the era of mountain wilderness and luxury hotels associated with the early mountain parks. It was during this period, however, that we can most readily assess, on a national scale, the public, bureaucratic, and political influences that fostered the creation of national parks in Canada. Did preservationism or commercialism guide this first massive expansion of the parks system? Certainly, the government created several parks through the 1910s and 1920s where the explicit purpose was to protect wildlife, a resolute expression of preservationist sentiment within the parks bureaucracy. At the same time, the advent of automobile tourism led to local organizations clamouring for the creation of national parks to capture the increasing numbers of motorists, from urban Canada and the United States, searching for attractions along the highway networks that were expanding throughout North America. Civil society thus played a critical role in promoting and expanding the national parks system during this period, as Locke has argued. Typically, however, it was chambers of commerce, local governments, tourism promoters, and recreational groups rather than conservationists that campaigned for the creation of individual parks. In most cases these groups advocated commercial development as a stimulus to the local tourist industry, though in some instances they campaigned also for game sanctuaries to protect remnant populations of elk, antelope, or bison. The Parks Branch was only too happy to respond these local initiatives, simultaneously adopting preservationist *and* pro-development policies that seem so contradictory from a contemporary perspective.<sup>12</sup> If national parks have served recently as wild spaces upon which human beings projected the idealized forms of nature, Canada's park system was founded

with a particularly strong emphasis on the parks as playgrounds, vacation destinations, and roadside attractions that might simultaneously preserve the fading scenic beauty and wildlife populations amid increasingly agricultural and industrial landscapes.

## Building the Parks System

In 1911, Rocky Mountains National Park became the first in Canada open to the automobile when a crude highway was completed from Calgary to the Banff townsite.<sup>13</sup> Although it is coincidental that the Parks Branch was founded in the same year, the promotion of automobile tourism became one of the most important influences on the new administrative body. Indeed, highways and cars determined the location and type of many national parks as automobile ownership and travel became more commonplace. In the first two decades of its existence, the Parks Branch enthusiastically built roads and related tourist facilities such as scenic lookouts and golf courses and facilitated the private sector development of resort towns in many of the same national parks where the preservation of wildlife and scenery were also important objectives. Harkin played a central role pushing for this road development within the parks, advocating for the completion of scenic driving loops or highway linkages to expansive circular routes through the mountain ranges of western Canada. By the end of Harkin's career as parks commissioner, there were just over 609 miles of roads winding their way through Canada's national parks.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, the Parks Branch's efforts to create auto-accessible parks were a direct response to lobbying from local groups hoping to create a high profile attraction that would justify the extension or improvement of highways (at least partly at federal expense) while attracting four-wheeled visitors to their local region.

At Revelstoke, British Columbia, for example, the town's Progress Club spearheaded a campaign (apparently with widespread local support) calling for the simultaneous creation of a national park and completion of an existing road from the townsite to the summit of Mount Revelstoke.<sup>15</sup> The Parks Branch responded with great enthusiasm, establishing in 1914 a park that would, as the enabling Cabinet order suggested, "attract large numbers of tourists and make it adapted for the purposes of a scenic park."<sup>16</sup> Two years

later, the Parks Branch, with Harkin's blessing, extended the park boundary southwards towards the townsite in 1920 so it could control and develop the entire length of the road.<sup>17</sup> Although the highway was not completed until 1928 due to the war and technical obstacles, one local newspaper declared effusively that the creation of the park would mean the "speedy completion of the automobile road to the summit of Mt. Revelstoke," and the "official recognition of the city as the great tourist capital of Canada."<sup>18</sup> The pronouncement proved prophetic: Revelstoke became an internationally renowned ski mecca, with the local ski club organizing high profile ski jumping competitions at a facility constructed in 1915, and improved to Olympic standards in 1933.<sup>19</sup>

An even more extreme example of a park organized around the spatial dimensions of a road can be found in Kootenay National Park. This mountain park was established in 1920 due in part to the lobbying efforts of R. Randolph Bruce, an engineer from Invermere who in 1916 convinced the Parks Branch and Department of the Interior to continue construction of a road from Banff to Windermere, British Columbia, that the provincial government had abandoned due to poor finances. As a condition of completing the highway, the federal government demanded that the province cede a strip of five miles on either side of the highway for park purposes.<sup>20</sup> The Banff-Windermere Highway, completed in 1923, provided the first road link across the central Canadian Rockies and a vital commercial route from Vancouver to Calgary, but the road and the park that envelopes it were also conceived as a means to draw tourists to the region. Writing to Harkin about the route in 1922, Bruce suggested that "It is purely a tourist road, and we have got to get out with a slogan that will draw the tourists. We have got to look to the United States for the bulk of these tourists.... We want their cars and their money and their business, and that is a good deal why we started it originally. I know because it was me who started it."<sup>21</sup> The Department of the Interior's reports echo this sentiment, stating in one case that "the completion of this highway will open up a spectacular scenic route through the Rocky Mountains and, it is considered, will serve to attract greater tourist traffic." A second proclaimed that "it will undoubtedly form one of the most spectacular motor drives in the world and will, in addition to connecting Calgary with Vancouver by automobile road, afford the opportunity to those desiring a round trip through the mountain to take a motor ride between Calgary and

Lethbridge, via Banff, Windermere, and the Crow's Nest Pass."<sup>22</sup> For the first time, the federal government had created a national park as a mere extension of a motor highway, a scenic shadow of an automobile route designed to filter tourists through the spectacular mountain landscape. Even the wildlife was thought of as a mere appendage to the view from the road. In 1922 Harkin asked Park Superintendent Howard Sibbald to place salt licks close to the highway so that game might frequent the area when the road was finally open to the public.<sup>23</sup>

This pattern of local lobbying for a federally funded tourist attraction was a major influence on the location and development of national parks established outside the Rocky Mountains. Prince Albert National Park, for example, was established in 1927 partly due to lobbying from politicians such as Saskatchewan's minister of Labour and Industry, T.C. Davis, and the rare personal involvement of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, the sitting MP for the Prince Albert riding. These senior officials, however, were largely responding to active local lobbying from several sources: members of the local Liberal Riding Association (to whom King owed recompense, for granting him a nomination so he could gain a seat in Parliament the previous year), the Prince Albert Board of Trade, and an ad hoc national park committee in Prince Albert, all of whom were interested in developing automobile tourism in their region.<sup>24</sup> One of the ad hoc committee's reports did mention the scenic value of diverse wildlife population in the proposed park area, but it devoted the bulk of its attention to the development and tourist potential of the park, declaring that "we have the finest opportunity to develop a road system for this park," and "it is a well proven fact that the tourist business is one of the most important industries of Canada and we have not been getting it. The development of this park will attract swarms of people who are investing great amounts of capital in their pleasures."<sup>25</sup>

At almost the same time, local governments and citizens in Manitoba conducted a high profile campaign advocating the Riding Mountains northwest of Winnipeg as the most suitable site for a park (as opposed to a competing site in eastern Manitoba).<sup>26</sup> Two leading Dauphin residents, J.N. McFadden and D.D. McDonald, formed the Riding Mountain National Park Committee, a citizens' advocacy group that conducted letter-writing campaigns and published literature promoting the Riding Mountains area for its rugged scenery, its significance as a sanctuary for a threatened elk herd,



FIG. 2. CLARK'S BEACH IN THE 1940S, RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK. [COURTESY OF RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK PHOTO COLLECTION.]

and its promise as a draw for automobile travellers from the United States. They imagined “mile upon mile of the most tempting winding drives over hills and valleys beside deep ravines and glassy lakes with something new and unexpected at every turn.”<sup>27</sup>

Local citizens and ratepayer groups afforded similar attention to the islands of southern Georgian Bay in the early 1920s.<sup>28</sup> The two men who spearheaded the initiative – cottage owner R.B. Orr and the local senator W.H. Bennett – urged Harkin to purchase Beausoleil Island (and other smaller islands) from the Department of Indian Affairs partly for its rumoured historical significance as a brief refuge for missionaries and native people after the Iroquois invasion of the seventeenth century, but primarily for its potential to attract tourist traffic as a playground for Torontonians and a terminus point for American boaters on the new Trent-Severn Canal system. Senator Bennett, in particular, envisioned a park where golf, horseback riding, and automobile travel along a specially constructed woodland road would create a playground paradise for tourists. None of these projects went



FIG. 3. INDIAN GRAVEYARD SHOWING FONT AT ENTRANCE, BEAUSOLEIL ISLAND, ONTARIO CA. 1940. [SOURCE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/CREDIT: MOTION PICTURE BUREAU/CANADIAN GOVERNMENT MOTION PICTURE BUREAU/C-021407.]

ahead due to low visitorship after the park was finally created in 1929, but Bennett was convinced that setting aside Beausoleil Island as a national playground was the best means to attract tourist dollars from the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Natural beauty, permanence, and scenic wonder: public advocacy and bureaucratic promotion of national parks in the 1910s and 1920s was infused with all these values, but only insofar as they could be sold to the expanding North America market. As parks commissioner, Harkin actively campaigned for parks as public goods that might simultaneously serve conservation and commercial objectives. He argued in a staff memo that “the commercial potentialities of tourist traffic are almost startling,” even as he invoked John Muir in defence of the parks as sites of spiritual uplift and renewal through intimacy with the great outdoors. For Harkin, there was no contradiction between preservationist idealism and commercialism in the national parks. “To sum up then,” he wrote in an oft-quoted statement, “Dominion Parks constitute a movement that means millions of dollars of revenue annually for the people of Canada; that means the preservation for their benefit, advantage and enjoyment forever, of that natural heritage of beauty.”<sup>30</sup> In some

of his writings, Harkin did argue for limits on tourism developments, particularly roads, within the national parks.<sup>31</sup> In practical terms, however, he worked tirelessly to promote the construction of roads and tourism amenities within the parks, especially those outside the mountainous areas that were conceived more as recreation areas.

He did this in large part because he felt that the public expected the government to implement a program of improvements that would transform the parks into viable hubs of regional tourist activity. In the case of Riding Mountain National Park, Harkin implemented an immediate and ambitious program of road and golf course construction, enlarging existing motor camps, and granting approvals for private sector development within the planned resort town of Wasagaming, which eventually included hotels, restaurants, a dance hall, gas stations, and other amenities of a modern tourist town. He was adamant that project funding should be approved quickly because the public was “looking forward to the various improvements to be made by the Department in Riding Mountain National Park,” and local residents would tend to judge the park based on the development work completed in the first year.<sup>32</sup> At Prince Albert, the Parks Branch responded to a similar local push for quick development with the construction of a scenic highway, public campgrounds, cottage subdivisions, and the expansion of Wasekesiu as the main park resort town (developments that stirred controversy by the late 1950s, when the federal government proposed removing cottages and shack tents from the park, as Bill Waiser points out in the next chapter).<sup>33</sup> The development program at Georgian Bay Islands National Park was less ambitious, restricted mainly to the construction of a campground, beach, and playground area, as the island nature of the park likely made the construction of roads and townsites prohibitively expensive.<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt, however, that Branch officials supported the establishment of the park based on its tourism potential. Both the field agent A.A. Pinard and Harkin noted that Beausoleil Island’s “bracing air, its remarkable beauty, its advantages in the way of boating and bathing and its easy access from Toronto and other points make its future as an important tourist centre certain.”<sup>35</sup> By the 1920s, Harkin and the Parks Branch had created a constellation of national parks that were intended to pull vacationers within their sphere of influence, serving as regional epicentres for the development of modern tourism within rural and hinterland areas.

Public values other than tourism promotion did work their way into the process of establishing national parks during this period. Harkin was particularly concerned with regional equity and the development of a truly national system of parks. He was pleased that the establishment of Georgian Bay Islands and Riding Mountain National Parks in 1929 had helped to create a chain of parks running from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the St. Lawrence Islands in the east.<sup>36</sup> Even the focus on parks as public playgrounds was tinged with idealism, as Harkin argued that the national parks provided critical opportunities for outdoor recreation in popular vacation areas such as Georgian Bay and the St. Lawrence River, where would-be cottagers and hotel owners were snapping up Crown lands at a rapid pace.<sup>37</sup> If, with hindsight, we now recognize the negative ecological consequences of attracting hordes of visitors to the national parks, we must also acknowledge that the development of roads, campgrounds, and other low-cost visitor facilities embodied a democratic ideal that the national parks should not be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, but remain as open to the Canadian public as possible.<sup>38</sup>

Such idealism for the recreational values of parks was generally not extended to their potential as wilderness preserves. Indeed, when I began archival research on the Parks Branch many years ago, I was surprised to find that the word “wilderness” is almost completely absent from correspondence justifying the creation of individual parks. It is clear that Parks Branch saw national parks, especially those outside of the mountainous west, primarily as public playgrounds.

In fact, the Branch hoped to designate the Riding Mountains as the first in a series of special national recreation areas, distinct from national parks (marked by their truly spectacular scenic value) until the public protested that this moniker would diminish the significance and appeal of the park.<sup>39</sup> After World War I, the Parks Branch vigorously promoted the tourism potential of the parks system as a whole, establishing a publicity division that produced and distributed promotional pamphlets, brochures, and advertisements. This included a steady stream of press releases to local newspapers that were only too eager to participate in the process of marketing the parks to tourists (sometimes reprinting government material word for word without listing any author). The resulting plethora of government literature and newspaper articles (which the Branch collected meticulously) solidified the



FIG. 4. RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK VISITORS. [COURTESY OF RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK PHOTO COLLECTION.]

image of parks as playgrounds rather than wilderness areas within the public imagination.<sup>40</sup>

As within the Branch itself, not all discussion of the parks among Canadians more widely was oriented towards commercialism. By the 1920s, a small number of public figures and organizations had begun to elucidate the value of wilderness rather than the parks' commercial potential. These included the Alpine Club of Canada and the National Parks Association, as well as celebrity conservationists such as the popular nature writer Tony Lascelles (a.k.a. Herbert U. Green), a police officer who lived near Riding Mountain National Park, and Grey Owl (a.k.a. Archie Belaney), the native poseur who – ironically – the Parks Branch hired explicitly to serve as a tourist draw in Riding Mountain and Prince Albert National Parks.<sup>41</sup> Although these two men focused much of their writing on natural history rather than public policy, Green did express more overt preservationist politics in one article when he condemned the managers of Riding Mountain for allowing logging in the park and failing to protect game from poachers.<sup>42</sup> Yet if Canadian conservationists such as Green articulated objections to industrial activity or

hunting in the parks, no evidence has emerged that they opposed the extension of roads and other tourist developments within the national parks prior to World War II. This is in sharp contrast to the United States, where historian Paul Sutter has argued that opposition to roads among such activists and public officials as Aldo Leopold, Benton MacKaye, Robert Sterling Yard, and Robert Marshall was a primary influence on the early development of the preservationist movement south of the border.<sup>43</sup> As I.S. MacLaren's chapter suggests later in this volume, the vast majority of public protest aimed at national parks policy in Canada during the 1910s and 1920s originated with local homesteaders who contested the restriction of hunting activities, the elimination of grazing rights, and the elimination of their homesteads and reserves within new national parks.<sup>44</sup>

What about the wildlife parks? Surely, the Parks Branch adopted a preservationist philosophy when it acted decisively in the 1910s and 1920s to protect species on the brink of extinction due to hunting excesses and habitat loss in the late nineteenth century. After all, the list of parks created with an explicit mandate for wildlife protection during this period is impressive and unprecedented. Between 1911 and 1922, the Department of the Interior established Buffalo, Elk Island, and Wood Buffalo national parks in Alberta to protect remnant and imported populations of wood and plains bison; Nemiskam, Wawakesey and Menissawok national parks to preserve pronghorn antelope on the prairies; and Point Pelee National Park to protect an important stopover point for migratory birds.

These parks were never subject to development on the scale of the more tourist-oriented parks; none contained resorts towns, and, save for hotels at Point Pelee, other forms of intensive commercial tourism developments were generally absent. Nonetheless, the Parks Branch's utilitarian focus on tourism and commercial development remained a critical influence on even the parks designed for wildlife preservation. Buffalo National Park, for instance, contained two enclosures displaying elk, moose, antelope, bison, and imported yak as part of a visitors' wildlife menagerie and recreation area. Park staff also participated in cross-breeding experiments with domestic cattle and bison in order to produce a new type of optimal stock animal – the cattalo – for the ranching industry, and established a small public cottage industry in the sale of bison meat as they culled herds that had grown beyond the capacity of their fenced range.<sup>45</sup> Elk Island National Park was created to protect wapiti



FIG. 5. EXTREMITY OF POINT PEELE, ONTARIO, 1918. [SOURCE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/CANADA. MARINE AIDS DIVISION COLLECTION/PA-I19818.]

herds, but over time the development of recreational facilities at Astotin Lake and the increasing identification of the imported buffalo herds as a tourist attraction (and a source of stock for commercial meat production) transformed the public perception of the park into that of a summer playground, complete with Sunday band concerts and golf tournaments.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of the Parks Branch's attitude toward wildlife preservation in this period is that many of these wildlife parks no longer exist. As the numbers of bison and antelope fell below critical levels of endangerment across Canada and the United States, and as range depletion and disease problems continued to plague fenced-in parks, the Branch was only too happy to delete protected areas from the system. Wawakesey, Menissawok and Nemiskam were abolished in 1930, 1938, and 1947 respectively, while Buffalo National Park was designated as a military training ground in 1939 and officially removed from the parks system in 1947. Harkin was likely not distressed to see these parks disappear: he had always been uncomfortable with national park designation for what he thought were less than spectacular scenic landscapes, and he had hoped to define the wildlife parks as a separate category of game sanctuaries in early versions of the *National Parks Act*.<sup>47</sup>

Wood Buffalo National Park represents something of a historical anomaly among federal protected areas. When the park was created in 1922 to protect the remnant wood bison herds south of Great Slave Lake, the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch of the Department of the Interior rather than the Parks Branch was granted control over the park for administrative convenience. Due to its remote location, there were no major tourism developments in the park, though the northern administration did propose the development of road access in the mid-1950s with traditional park amenities such as hotels, lunch stops, and golf courses.<sup>48</sup> When the Parks Branch was granted control over the park in the late 1960s, however, it is clear that older attitudes about tourism remained dominant. Parks officials constantly referred to Wood Buffalo as not a “real park” due to its lack of scenic values, and contemplated returning the Alberta portion of the park in exchange for areas in the southern part of the province more attractive to tourists. An agreement between the federal and Alberta governments was never completed, but the official disdain for Wood Buffalo National Park – until 2008, the world’s largest protected area – suggests that concern for ecological integrity in national parks had not yet entered the Branch’s policy framework. Even the imperative of preserving one of the world’s last free roaming bison herds paled in comparison to acquiring other parcels of land that might serve as playgrounds for the nation.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps no other national park embodies the contradictions of the early Parks Branch’s management philosophy more than Point Pelee. The federal government created the park in 1918, partly in response to a report from National Museum of Canada naturalist Percy Taverner highlighting the significance of the area as a stopover for migrating birds, but also to fulfill obligations under the Migratory Birds Treaty with the United States.<sup>50</sup> Public pressure also played a significant role in convincing the Branch to establish Point Pelee as a federal protected area. Members of a local sport hunting group, the Essex County Wild Life Association, lobbied federal wildlife officials furiously for the protection of the Pelee marshes (at the same time, they managed to protect their own recreational interests, convincing Harkin that they ought to be allowed to hunt ducks seasonally within the park, a practice that continued until 1989).<sup>51</sup> This inconsistent approach to park management was not limited to wildlife issues: Point Pelee soon became the most highly developed tourism centre among national parks created with

an explicit wildlife conservation mandate. By the 1930s, the construction of roads, campgrounds and two hotels within the park attracted large numbers of visitors to the park's popular beaches. The environmental impact of these developments was severe, particularly the loss of vegetation and habitat alterations associated with unregulated camping and the local tradition of driving automobiles along the beaches. Nonetheless, the Parks Branch continued to expand the network of roads and parking lots after World War II, as Point Pelee became Ontario's most popular destination among birdwatchers hoping to catch a glimpse of rare migratory songbirds in the Carolinian forest. Indeed, the efforts of the Branch and local promoters to market bird watching as an engine of tourism in the area were too successful: annual visitorship exceeded 700,000 people by the end of the 1960s, resulting in such a crush of car traffic along park roads that automobiles were banned from the tip area of the point after a park master plan recommended use of a shuttle bus in 1973.<sup>52</sup> Space for birdwatchers has been at a premium as well, with crowds of birders jostling for the best view of warblers and other rare species.<sup>53</sup> On this thin point jutting out into Lake Erie, non-human lives have been commercialized as much as they have been preserved for middle-class tourists seeking to reconnect with nature, a somewhat extreme manifestation of an impossibly paradoxical management philosophy – the integration of visitation and preservation – that continues to haunt the national parks to this very day.

## Parks for the People

In a popular indictment of industrial tourism and its attendant development pressures in the United States national park system, the iconoclastic writer and wilderness activist Edward Abbey wrote, “the first thing that the superintendent of a new park can anticipate being asked, when he attends the first meeting of the area's Chamber of Commerce, is not ‘Will roads be built?’ but rather ‘When does construction begin?’ and ‘Why the delay?’”<sup>54</sup> Clearly the same pattern holds true for national parks established in Canada during the first two decades of centralized administration under the Dominion Parks Branch. The public demanded that national parks be developed as playgrounds to attract tourists on an expanding highway network, bringing

not only the roads themselves but also campgrounds, golf courses, hotels and townsites – all conveniently at the expense of the federal purse or private investors looking to profit from the influx of visitors. As tempting as it may be to establish an origin myth for the national parks grounded in a historical continuum of wilderness activism, both government officials and civil society in the 1910s and 1920s were much more focused on parks' commercial potential. By 1930, the contradictory philosophies of preservation and utilitarianism that governed individual national parks had been codified into law as the *National Parks Act*, which famously declared that “the National Parks of Canada are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, subject to this Act and the regulations, parks shall be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”<sup>55</sup> Though we may choose from a contemporary vantage point to emphasize the word “unimpaired,” the legislation’s emphasis on public use and enjoyment was generally interpreted through the lens of tourism development and promotion until the 1970s, when Parks Canada expanded the parks system into more remote and inaccessible areas. Preservationist sentiment – much of it flowing out of the popular back to nature movement of the 1910s and 1920s – did influence parks officials. But even in cases where the protection of wildlife or scenery were advanced as key arguments for national park establishment, advocates often suggested that the preservation of scenic beauty or rare animals would only enhance the appeal of a site for the visiting tourist. If national parks served as a counterpoint to increasingly urban and industrial landscapes during the 1910s and 1920s, ironically their primitive appeal was repackaged and sold to visitors as part of a much broader expansion of industrial tourism during this period.<sup>56</sup>

Given this dominant theme in the early history of the national parks, why then are some contemporary environmentalists so determined to establish an origin myth for the parks system grounded in grassroots and bureaucratic wilderness activism? One might reasonably argue that the early national parks laid the groundwork for the establishment of protected areas with a more ecological focus as the mandates and policy frameworks governing Parks Canada began to shift toward the maintenance of ecological integrity in the 1980s. There is also the very real fear that acknowledging the utilitarian focus of the early parks system will justify the ongoing attempts of tourism operators to promote development within the parks. By ignoring

the close association of tourism and the early national parks, however, we fail to ask difficult questions about whether these types of protected areas represent the best means to preserve biodiversity and promote environmental sustainability. While park advocates tend to decry resource extraction activities such as mining, logging, and hydro-carbon development, they often fail to acknowledge that automobile tourism in the national parks can only be supported through dependence on these industrial processes. In broad terms, the historian Hal Rothman has argued that the popular conception of tourism as a post-industrial activity (focused, as it is, on the production of experience rather than material goods) masks a chain of development activity that leads from roads, airports, and hotels to oil fields and open pit mines.<sup>57</sup> The national parks in Canada, particularly those on major highway networks, have served – and continue to serve – as one important link in this chain of unsustainable economic activity. They are iconic attractions that draw tourists and their motor vehicles by the millions each summer, creations of North America’s car culture and commercial sensibilities as much as they are emblems of our love for wild nature.

#### NOTES

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  - 7 Harvey Locke, "Civil Society and Protected Areas." Final version of paper presented at the Parks for Tomorrow Conference, 7 July 2008. Available at <http://dspace.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/1880/46874/1/Locke.pdf>; accessed 6 April 2009.
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  - 9 For an overview of mountain aesthetics, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 1996); and Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles, *The Painted Valley: Artists along the Bow River, 1845–2000* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007). For collections of photographs, see Edward Cavell, *Legacy in Ice: The Vaux Family and the Canadian Alps* (Banff: Whyte Foundation, 1983); Bart Robinson, "A Biographical Portrait of Byron Harmon," in *Byron Harmon: Mountain Photographer*, ed. Carole Harmon, 5–14 (Banff: Altitude, 1992). Writers have produced a vast amount of material about the Rockies from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Representative examples may be found in Colleen Skidmore, ed. *This Wild Spirit: Women in the Rocky Mountains of Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2006); Mary Schaeffer, *Old Indian Trails: Incidents of Camp and Trail Life, Covering Two Years' Exploration through the Rocky*

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  - 11 Taylor, "Legislating Nature," 134. E.J. Hart, *J.B. Harkin: Father of Canada's National Parks* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010).
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  - 16 Order in Council P.C. 1125, 28 April 1914. A copy was found in LAC, RG 84, vol. 1673, file MR2, pt. 1.
  - 17 Harkin to Cory, 28 April 1920. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1673, file MR2, pt. 1.
  - 18 "Mount Revelstoke is National Park," *Revelstoke Mail Herald*, 5 February 1914. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1673, file MR2, pt. 1. Clipping found in LAC, RG 84, vol. 1673, file MR2, pt. 1.
  - 19 Lothian, *A History of Canada's National Parks*, 58; "Mount Revelstoke National Park," no date, Clipping found in LAC, RG 84, vol. 16, file MR109, pt. 1.
  - 20 For a summary of Bruce's role, see R. Randolph Bruce to Harkin, 22 June 1922. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1632, file K2, pt. 2. The Banff-Windermere Highway Agreement was established through Order in Council P.C. 827, published in the *Canada Gazette* 58, no. 47.
  - 21 R. Randolph Bruce to Harkin, 22 June 1922. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1632, file K2, pt. 2.
  - 22 Minister of the Interior to the Governor General in Council, 28 February 1919. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1631, file K2, pt. 1; "Banff-Windermere Road," undated memo. LAC, RG 84, vol. 1632, file K2, pt. 2.
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- 21 December 1922. LAC, RG 84, vol. 488, file GB1325-9-6. Harkin to Cory, 5 January 1925. LAC, RG 84, vol. 488, file GB1325-9-6.
- 36 Harkin to Cory, 5 January 1925. LAC, RG 84, vol. 488, file GB1325-9-6.
- 37 Harkin to Cory, 5 January 1925. LAC, RG 84, vol. 488, file GB1325-9-6.
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