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What Drives the Mountain Parks?

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The history of the National Parks in the Rocky Mountains is intricately tied to the development of transportation infrastructure. Railways, through their choice of stopping points, gave rise to the popularity of geographic icons of the mountain parks. J. B. Harkin, the first Parks Commissioner, spearheaded the construction of roads as a democratizing force that would allow park access to those who could not afford rail travel, and would allow visitors to choose when and where they would get out to explore the land. By the 1960s, motor-tourism was a guiding force behind administrators' choices to design large roadside signs that eliminated the need to leave one's car to get interpretive information.

Today, amidst debates over automobile-animal collision rates on un-fenced highway sections and the twinning of the Trans-Canada Highway, transportation infrastructure continues to shape the parks and the experiences of their visitors. As Parks Canada focuses on improving "visitor experience," and plans to revitalize the Icefields Parkway as a world-class attraction, environmental NGOs are asking whether the mandate of protecting ecological integrity in the parks is being compromised for the sake of motor-tourism and transportation demands. This paper offers a brief historical survey of the changing cultural expectations of accessibility in mountain parks, and discusses the implications of encouraging increased motor traffic in the era of global climate change, on a highway best known for glaciers now receding at an alarming pace.