



Castle Wildland and Provincial Parks: Management Principles

Submitted by Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC): March 2016

Summary

The Management Principles contained in this document were prepared and are advanced by the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) for the 1,040 km² Castle Wildland and Provincial Parks as announced by the Government of Alberta. (See Appendix 1)

These Management Principles are submitted to the Government of Alberta and to our fellow Albertans in response to growing concerns and decisions that if made will result in a lost opportunity for true protection of the Castle Wildland and Provincial Parks and its significant ecological value.

The Government of Alberta is to be applauded for announcing the designation of the Castle Parks, and for providing the opportunity to ensure proper management for the protection of the Castle area.

CCWC seeks to provide input to help the Government of Alberta set appropriate protection standards for the Castle Wildland and Castle Provincial parks. We hope our continued efforts to protect the area will be valuable to the Government of Alberta. (See Appendix 2)

Although the proposed Management Principles cover a range of land use activities, it is the current ongoing threat of continued Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use in the Castle Parks that is the most significant Management Principle.

CCWC requests that:

Off Highway Vehicle use be prohibited in both Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park.

1. OHV recreation is destructive to the Castle's environment, water quality, wildlife and endangered species.
2. OHV recreation use in the Castle is contrary to what Albertans, Southern Albertans and local people want.
3. OHV use of provincial crown lands is not reflective of the minor involvement of the public in OHV activity.

Rationale for eliminating OHV recreational uses from the Castle Parks.

1. OHV Recreation is Destructive to the Castle's Environment, Water Quality, Wildlife and Endangered Species.

- The total length of linear human disturbances in the Castle parks, of which over 90% are OHV recreational trails, is 1,283 km (1.3 km/km²) which is more than double the Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan's recommended threshold of 0.6 km/km² for any grizzly bear range, let alone Wildland and Provincial Parks, and more than triple the threshold in several watersheds and within several important grizzly bear areas. Linear densities even lower than this are required to maintain bear populations and to sustain Alberta's native fish populations in the Castle. The Castle parks are part of the larger Castle Grizzly Bear Core Conservation Area. This area is not yet secure for grizzly bears according to thresholds for disturbances in core habitat. (*Lee PG and M Hanneman. 2011. Castle Area Forest Land Use Zone (Alberta) – Linear disturbances, access densities, and grizzly bear habitat security areas. Edmonton, Alberta: Global Forest Watch Canada 1st Publication for International Year of Forests.*)
- In recent decades there has been a proliferation of OHV activity in the Castle, which has largely gone unmanaged. OHV use results in increased soil compaction, proliferation of invasive species, increased habitat fragmentation, and increased runoff of sediment into streams which negatively impacts water quality and fish habitat (*Ouren, D.S., Haas, C., Melcher, C.P., Stewart, S.C., Ponds, P.D., Sexton, N.R., Burris, L., Fancher, T., and Z.H. Bowen. 2007. Environmental effects of off-highway vehicles on Bureau of Land Management lands: A literature synthesis, annotated bibliographies, extensive bibliographies, and internet resources. U.S. Geological Survey, Open-File Report 2007-1353*)

2. OHV Recreation Use in the Castle is Contrary to what Albertans, Southern Albertans and Local People Want.

2015. Praxis Group (Albertans' Values and Attitudes toward Recreation and Wilderness: Final Report)

- The majority of Albertans (94%) agree that wilderness is important because it helps to preserve plant and animal species. There is also overwhelming support (92%) for wilderness areas, which contribute to better air and water quality (*The Praxis Group 2015*).

2011. Praxis Group; Public Opinion Study; Municipal District of Pincher Creek, Village of Cowley, Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, Town of Pincher Creek, Piikani First Nation's reservation and Fort Macleod

- "The area of lowest priority is infrastructure and land to support off-highway vehicle use" (page 6).
- "The majority (82%) reported that protecting the watershed is either "much more important" or "somewhat more important" within the Castle Special Management Area when compared to recreational opportunities." "Regardless of political party supported, the preference for watershed protection over recreational opportunities is very high; PC 83%, Wildrose 83%, Liberal 90%, and New Democrat 87%" (page 9).
- "The majority (84%) reported that wildlife habitat is either "much more important" or "somewhat more important" within the Castle Special Management Area when compared to

recreational opportunities.” Regardless of political party the majority support wildlife habitat protection over recreational opportunities, although Wildrose (74%) and PC (80%) supporters were lower than Liberal (91%) and NDP (100%) (page 10).

2011. Praxis Group; Lethbridge Public Opinion Study

- “An overwhelming majority of residents who expressed an opinion (94.2%) support protecting the Castle watershed over providing recreational opportunities in the area. Only 5.8% are more inclined to support recreational opportunities” (page 7).
- “An overwhelming majority of residents who expressed an opinion (94.3%) support protecting the Castle wildlife habitat over providing recreational opportunities in the area. Only 5.7% are more inclined to support recreational opportunities” (page 8).

2008. Praxis Group for Alberta Tourism Parks and Recreation

- “Albertans’ feel the top priority for Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation should be to set aside more land and leaving it in an undisturbed state” (page 5).
- “The area of lowest priority is infrastructure and land to support off-highway vehicle use” (page 6).
- “Over 70% of survey respondents indicated increased investment should be made in setting aside land to protect natural areas in an undisturbed state” (page 19).

3. OHV use of provincial crown lands is not reflective of the minor involvement of the public in OHV activity.

- Although OHV use is widespread throughout Alberta, only six percent of the population participates in motorized recreation (*The Praxis Group. 2015. Albertans' Values and Attitudes toward Recreation and Wilderness: Final Report. Commissioned by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Northern and Southern Alberta Chapters*). This is in direct contrast to the majority of Albertans that depend on the Eastern Slopes for their drinking water and for healthy recreation in our Provincial Parks and Wildlands.

Reasons for Protecting the Castle

The Government of Alberta’s reasons for designating the Castle area as protected areas are sound, namely:

“Protecting the Castle is critically important for the biodiversity and water quality of this entire region. Under Parks’ legislation, and with the input of all Albertans, we will permanently protect this special place for future generations to enjoy as we transition the land to support good local jobs in tourism and recreation.” (Shannon Phillips, Minister of Environment and Parks, (Government of Alberta media release September 2015) AND

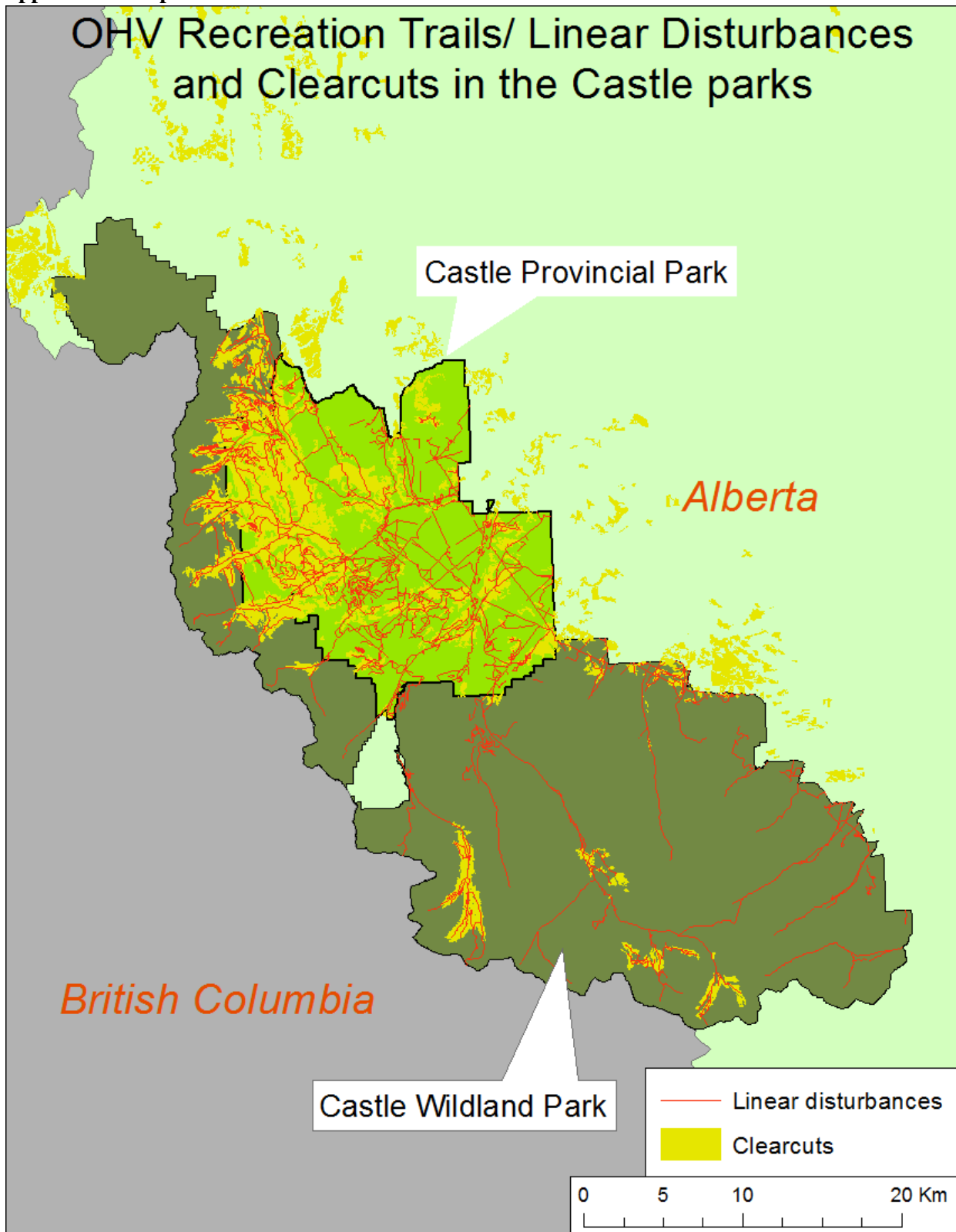
“Covering nearly 104,000 hectares, the Castle area is an ecologically-diverse expanse of mountains, foothills, forests, grasslands, rivers and lakes in southwestern Alberta. It is prized for its headwaters, biodiversity and functions as a key wildlife corridor. The Castle is culturally significant to First Nations, and forms part of the Crown of the Continent – the mountainous region where Alberta, British Columbia and Montana meet. (Government of Alberta media release September 2015)

Other Management Principles for Appropriate Protection Standards

CCWC appreciates the opportunity to provide further management principles to protect the Castle Parks. Criteria for the selection of these principles can be found in Appendix 3.

- A. Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use** must not be allowed in both Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park for a number of reasons based in provincial, regional and local public opinion, sound scientific study including the threat created by putting ecosystems and water security at risk, and the dangerous precedent it would set for other Wildland and Provincial Parks. Chronic non-compliance to date, refusal to remain on designated trails, coupled with scarce enforcement resources for OHV recreation are perennial escalating problems and the taxpayer should not be forced into paying for its continuing ongoing management.
- B. Natural restoration and reclamation of Castle wilderness with closure of roads and trails** is urgently required. Linear disturbance density is well beyond scientifically recommended limits. OHV trails need to be closed and restored.
- C. Equestrian use** is compatible.
- D. Guiding and outfitting** is compatible.
- E. Nature appreciation (nature study; wildlife viewing)** are compatible uses.
- F. Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing** are compatible uses.
- G. Livestock grazing** needs to be carefully managed and eliminated from the upland sub-alpine and alpine areas. Grazing has contributed to the spread of non-native plant species and great care is needed to avoid competition with other ungulates and wildlife grazers. Grazing in the Castle has diminished the quality of some recreation sites.
- H. Monitoring and consistent, empowered enforcement** will be needed for all activities and land uses.
- I. Hunting** should not be allowed in Castle Provincial Park.
- J. Random/primitive camping** may be an appropriate recreational activity but motorized random camping along existing roads must be properly enforced and consistently managed to prevent abuse.
- K. Adventure tourism** is a compatible use except for some ecologically high impact activities.
- L. Gateway community development** in the hamlet of Beaver Mine and along highways 774, 507 and along highway 3 in the Crowsnest Pass outside of the park boundaries will benefit the local economy and should be encouraged by strategic planning with municipalities. Highway-side development is not needed within the Castle Parks.
- M. Transition Zone** - To facilitate full protection and restoration within the park, there should be a scientifically determined transition zone around park boundaries which would require lessened industrial activity - including logging operations around the park.
- N. Aboriginal places, their cultural use and their history are protected.**
- O. Oil and gas exploration and development** is an incompatible use.
- P. Logging** is an incompatible use.
- Q. Industrial and commercial developments** are incompatible uses.

Appendix 1: Map of Castle Wildland and Provincial Parks



Appendix 2: Protection Efforts - a brief history

Since 1968, local people and numerous credible reports, agencies and commissions have recommended that the Castle Wilderness needs protection now. The Castle's incredible diversity, role as a wildlife corridor, vital watersheds and spiritual and wilderness recreational values must be secured.

1968: Local residents and the Pincher Creek Fish and Game Association request legislated protection for the Castle.

1977: The provincial Policy for Resource Management of the Eastern Slopes notes that the Castle "has been identified as having considerable park potential."

1993: Alberta's Natural Resource Conservation Board finds the area has deteriorated and stipulates protection is needed.

1998: Parks Canada study finds ecological health of Waterton Lakes National Park threatened and cites activities on adjacent lands, including the Castle, as an important reason for protection.

1998: the Castle was a candidate site under the Alberta government's Special Places 2000 program in the late 1990s. Only a very small ecological reserve resulted, the West Castle Wetlands Ecological Reserve. The larger area of the Castle was designated as a "Special Management Zone," but that zoning has shown little effect in protecting natural values.

1999: Proposal for protection of the Castle Wilderness area submitted to Minister of the Environment.

2000: The North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, set up under the free trade agreement identifies the Castle as one of fourteen of North America's most biologically significant and threatened areas.

2005: An independent report commissioned by CPAWS, World Wildlife Fund and Shell Canada as a synopsis of current scientific knowledge for the Castle finds its ecosystem health and sustainability has been diminished.

2008/2009: A citizen-based group was formed to discuss potential options for legislated protection of the Castle. After working together for sixteen months, the citizen-based working group submitted a consensus-based conceptual proposal to the government of Alberta recommending that the Castle Special Place be legislated as a combination Wildland and Provincial Park.

2010-present: OHV use exponentially expands throughout the Castle Wilderness.

2012 and 2014: Government designates almost 1,000 km of trails for OHV use, despite science based evidence of OHV caused destruction of endangered species habitat (grizzly bear and Westslope Cutthroat Trout habitat).

2015: NDP government platform: "5.15 – And we will protect the Castle Wilderness Area."

2015 (September): New NDP government announces: "Province to fully protect Castle area" (September 4, 2015 media release).

Appendix 3

Criteria for Selection of Management Principles

- 1. Headwaters Security.** The premier water source for southern Alberta is threatened by OHV use in the Castle parks. The area needs to be secured, protected and restored. Urgent action is needed, considering water allocations in the Oldman River Basin exceed supply. The Castle Parks provides an unsurpassed 1/3 of the annual water flow for the Oldman Basin.
- 2. Wildlife and Endangered Species Protection.** The natural ecosystem, including the scenery, plants and animals upon which outdoor recreation, guiding and tourism depend, are threatened and needs restoration. The Castle is Alberta's most biologically diverse area, and is of national and international significance.
- 3. Provision of Ecological Goods and Services,** such as protection of soils, clean air and buffering from floods, which also have economic value, are restored and provided.
- 4. Economic Diversification and Supporting the Growth of the Local Economy:** there is a lack of tourism development and opportunity for the Crowsnest Pass economy, given the amenities that are available. OHV activity in the Castle Parks will detract from substantial economic development opportunities. The failure of the OHV community and businesses to generate a sustainable tourism economy in and around the Crowsnest Pass, even in this unregulated environment for the past 20 years, speaks for itself. The economic unrealized opportunity is huge and presently lies in providing sustainable tourism benefits similar to those in Waterton National Park. Waterton presently has an overflow of tourists which the Castle, if properly managed and promoted and integrated with Waterton National Park, could accommodate.
- 5. Doing What Albertans Want (Provincially, Regionally and Locally).** At all levels, Albertans clearly support the Protection of the Castle area with no OHVs.
- 6. Abiding by the Legal Purposes of Parks:** *"[The] Primary purpose [of Provincial Parks] is the conservation of nature."*, while, *" [The] Primary purpose [of a Wildland Provincial Park] is the conservation of nature on large, healthy landscapes with opportunities for backcountry/wilderness recreation and experiencing nature in a relatively undisturbed state."* The Alberta Provincial Parks Act states: "Parks are established, and are to be maintained, (a) for the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage, (b) for the conservation and management of flora and fauna, (c) for the preservation of specified areas, landscapes and natural features and objects in them that are of geological, cultural, historical, archeological, anthropological, paleontological, ethnological, ecological or other scientific interest or importance, (d) to facilitate their use and enjoyment for outdoor recreation, education and the appreciation and experiencing of Alberta's natural heritage, and (e) to ensure their lasting protection for the benefit of present and future generations.