

Written Submission

Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the
Upcoming Federal Budget



By: The Association of Mountain Park
Protection and Enjoyment (AMPPE)



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List of Recommendations:

Recommendation #1 – That the Government of Canada work with the provinces, territories, indigenous organizations and key stakeholders to address the unique short, and long-term challenges faced by Canada’s National Parks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to support the recovery of the tourism industry while protecting the natural assets contained within National Parks.

Recommendation #2: The Government of Canada, through Parks Canada, reinvest in Canada’s public infrastructure by addressing existing transportation and facility maintenance backlogs within Canada’s National Parks. Areas of specific focus should be investments in social infrastructure such as mass public transit and active modes of transportation (hiking and cross-country skiing trails, multi-use trails, etc.) and projects that reduce carbon intensity to ensure the safety and accessibility of park users while protecting National Parks’ natural assets.

Recommendation #3: The Government of Canada, through Parks Canada work with relevant stakeholders to create public infrastructure that is more pandemic resilient, such as the pedestrianization of Banff Avenue, by leveraging the newly established COVID-19 resilience stream of funding through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP).

Recommendation #4 - The Government of Canada work with Parks Canada to generate qualitative and quantitative data on user experiences to develop robust information campaigns and visitor experiences focused on encouraging responsible use of National Parks. The campaigns could be a key tool for Parks Canada and local stakeholders to make evidence-based decisions in the National Parks.

Submission

Since the founding of Banff National Park in 1885, visitors have come to Canada's Mountain Parks to recharge, rejuvenate, and experience the natural wonders of the mountains. From the beginning, the Parks were created for the "benefit, education and enjoyment" of Canadians and that the Parks should be left "unimpaired for future generations."

As health experts continue to stress the benefits of social distancing and exercise as mechanisms to both halt the spread of COVID-19 and to keep Canadians healthy, we're reminded of the incredible value of our parks to sustain us and keep us healthy.

Canadians are flocking to outdoor spaces in record numbers to participate in outdoor activities, it's increasingly important to find creative ways to maintain access to the outdoors while adhering to physical distancing requirements. Rather than restricting access to park amenities, AMPPE urges Parks and health officials to support park users to maintain their physical and mental health in these unprecedented times.

AMPPE is a member-driven organization that advocates for accessibility and positive visitor experiences in Canada's Rocky Mountain National Parks. AMPPE strives to act as a collective, place-based voice for the sustainability of the Mountain Parks and supports fair and balanced, science-based decision-making and provides and locally driven perspectives to decision-makers.

Recommendation #1 – Work with the provinces, territories and key stakeholders to address the unique short, and long-term challenges faced by Canada's National Parks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to support the recovery of the tourism industry while protecting the natural assets contained within National Parks.

National Parks across the country have all experienced tremendous changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Each park is different and so are the challenges but due to the importance of the parks system to Canada's brand it is important to understand not only what has happened but what it means going forward.

For example, the Mountain Parks are bordered by Provincial Parks, who are experiencing similar issues and opportunities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the disparity and conflict that can occur when municipalities and various levels of government issue conflicting or misaligned guidelines. An example of this came to light when National Parks reopened later than nearby provincial parks causing intense pressure on the provincial parks. As the natural environment knows no boundaries it is important to understand those impacts.

Establishing a working group bringing together stakeholders and groups with specialized and local and indigenous knowledge on topics such as planning and maintenance of the park, outdoor access, land management, and economic concerns would help Parks to become more responsive to the needs and concerns of Park stakeholders, build local consensus and could bring more sustainable solutions to light. National Parks impact the health, quality of life, and economies of the jurisdictions in which they operate. Developing a more inclusive and holistic approach will help identify the unique challenges and opportunities available.

Recommendation #2: address existing transportation and facility maintenance backlogs

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on almost every aspect of the lives of Canadians. Parks Canada, municipalities, and businesses that operate within the Mountain Parks have deftly – and quickly - pivoted to adapt to changing visitor demographics and behaviour. Backlogs in transportation and facility maintenance that were urgent before the COVID-19 have become even more critical as Parks struggle to maintain access and adhere to health guidelines while welcoming high numbers of local visitors, while seeing the number of international visitors drop dramatically.

The mountains have long been playgrounds for active outdoor enthusiasts, and the COVID-19 pandemic has taken this enthusiasm to a new level. Cyclists, campers, paddlers, and hikers, encouraged by health authorities to get outdoors, have found refuge in the Mountain Parks. It is encouraging to see more Canadians get out and be active, especially those from nearby areas.

Inadequate facilities for recycling, garbage and hygiene in day use areas result in increased litter wildlife attractants and human waste in natural areas.

In the near-term, washroom, parking, and waste removal systems must have budget allocations that allow for increased maintenance. Increasing maintenance budgets would immediately lessen human impacts on natural spaces.

With more park visitors now coming from nearby communities, traffic and parking issues have become even more pressing. Identifying and addressing transportation, design, and construction that can be undertaken with an eye toward long-term sustainability would address human impacts while providing an essential economic stimulus.

Investing in social infrastructure like mass public transit and year round dedicated multi-use trails for walking, cycling and cross country skiing along existing transportation corridors (Banff - Lake Louise – Jasper; Castle Junction – Invermere; and Golden - Revelstoke) would ensure park users' safety, ease parking constraints and congestion and increase accessibility while protecting natural assets and reducing carbon intensity.

The Government of Alberta and the Canada Infrastructure Bank have recently partnered to investigate the feasibility of 130-kilometer sustainable passenger rail from the Calgary airport to Banff. While this study is welcome, this project would take many years to come to fruition.

Smaller-scale solutions targeted at reducing congestion in local 'choke spots' such as Lake Louise and Moraine Lake could have an immediate impact.

Popular day use areas such as Lake Louise, Johnston Canyon, and Lake Minnewanka, could safely improve visitor experience if they were reimagined to integrate transit with hiking and biking while also creating an environmental win.

Expanding bus service with more frequent trips and at more times throughout the day would allow both hikers and sunrise photographers, for example, to visit the area during off-peak times and would free parking space.

Recommendation #3: create pandemic resilient public infrastructure

With more outdoor recreationalists coming to the Parks, Parks Canada and local municipalities have found creative ways for visitors to maintain access while adhering to public health guidelines.

The Town of Banff, for example, has pedestrianized the busiest section of its main street. The town has closed the most active areas to traffic encouraging visitors to walk through areas where it is difficult to social distance.

Contrary to earlier concerns the project has been an overwhelming success. By easing traffic congestion visitors are reporting greater levels of satisfaction.

Enabling transit and active transport to allow visitors to be active while distancing will require traffic barriers, upgrades to parking lots, increased signage, and in some cases, moving or changing existing traffic control mechanisms.

Funding this permanent COVID-resilient social infrastructure through the newly established COVID-19 resilience stream of funding through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP) would have immediate, long-lasting, and sustainable benefits.

Recommendation #4 - generate qualitative and quantitative data on user experiences to develop robust information campaigns and visitor experiences focused on encouraging responsible use of National Parks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused Canadians to modify their behaviours, travel closer to home to and seek new low-cost, family-friendly activities. Increased outdoor activities, traveling in family bubbles, and record-high unemployment are just a few factors driving changes in visitor behaviours.

Meeting the needs of this changing visitor demographic in an effective manner will require both qualitative and quantitative data on user experiences. Developing data-driven visitor experiences and marketing campaigns could enable Parks Canada and local stakeholders to make evidence-based decisions in our National Parks.

Robust data would enable more accurate predictions and insights about visitor behavior, preferences, knowledge, and assumptions could highlight ways visitors could be motivated to comply with desired behaviours. For example, what would encourage people to use mass transit? What are the barriers?

Having additional and better quality data will help Parks understand how and where to deliver messages and will provide insight by tracking changes in behaviour and knowledge over time.

Parks currently does not have the resources to design or deliver a data-driven campaign. Parks does take visitor counts at the gates but, most data collected in Parks' currently focuses on wildlife and the ecosystem versus human use. AMPPE would be pleased to work cooperatively with Parks Canada and other local organizations on such a project.