



Clash of the conservationists

OWL & SALAMANDER PHOTOS BY DICK CANNINGS; OTHERS BY LAURIE CARTER

South Okanagan Similkameen park proposal
stirs up a snake pit of dissension, debate
and potentially problematic possibilities...



BY DAWN RENAUD
AND LAURIE CARTER



Scientists call it the Interior Dry Plateau; locals just call it home. Both would say that the South Okanagan Similkameen is a region of unparalleled natural beauty, rich resources and ecological significance. Yet, the characteristics that support its stunning biodiversity also encourage agriculture, urbanization and tourism. A virtual tsunami of development is sweeping the valley and stakeholders agree that conservation is imperative. The question is not if—but how. A proposal to create the South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Reserve is now under study. Is this the best solution?



Human development threatens the unusual biodiversity made possible by the close proximity of varied habitats ranging from semi-desert to alpine.

What's all the fuss about?

“42 species at risk”

The Interior Dry Plateau is a region of rugged mountains, deep river valleys and long, narrow lakes where low rainfall and high temperatures produce desert-like conditions and ecosystems range from rich riparian zones and low elevation grasslands through ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forest to high elevation pine and spruce forest. Cactus, sagebrush and bitterroot survive along with lizards, California Bighorn sheep, deer, coyotes, grouse, meadowlarks, scorpions, badgers and rattlesnakes.

These same ecosystems are ideal for a broad spectrum of human activity. Rugged mountains, perfect for hunting, fishing, hiking and off-roading, may also contain rich mineral deposits; forests attract logging operations; riparian zones support orchards, market gardens and vineyards, while cattle ranchers have taken advantage

of the grasslands for generations. Combine the high temperatures and low rainfall with those long, narrow lakes and resort and retirement crowds are sure to follow.

Net result?

Some scientists claim the South Okanagan Similkameen is the most threatened environment in the nation. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), a group of experts from across the country that advises the federal government, has listed 42 species at risk in the region.

Among the 14 species regarded as endangered are badgers and night snakes, antelope brush and western screech-owls. A further 10 species, including the western rattlesnake, peregrine falcon and mariposa lily are rated as threatened, while 18 more species claim special interest.

Forests change with elevation: ponderosa pine and Douglas fir up to high elevation pine and spruce.

Conservation measures

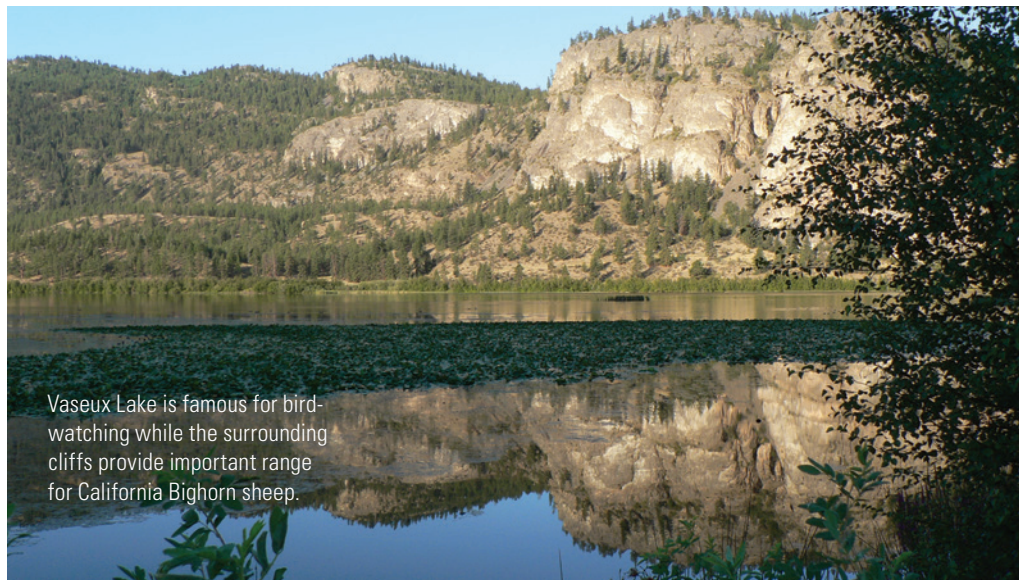
Citizens have recognized the imperative — to balance growth with conservation and the protection of quality of life. Beginning in 1995, local stakeholders representing land users and interest groups of all backgrounds began work and through negotiation and compromise, drafted the first initiative. The Okanagan Shuswap Land Resource Management Plan (LRMP) was approved by the provincial government in 2001.

It created 49 protected areas that cover just under eight per cent of the land base including some of the rarest ecosystems in the province. It established resource management zones (RMZ), covering 93 per cent of Crown lands (outside the protected areas), where integrated resource management is based on objectives and strategies specific to the zone. The plan also recognized the significance of riparian management. Mineral exploration and development is permitted in all but protected areas and commercial timber harvesting is allowed in the vast majority of the protected area. The LRMP is now operational in the Shuswap. However, full implementation has been delayed in the South Okanagan until the national park question is resolved.



National priorities

Conservation has struck a global chord and pressure has been increasing within the international community for individual countries to do their part — especially countries like Canada that are considered wealthy both economically and in terms of natural resources. In 2002, the government of Canada announced its intention to create 10 new national parks and five new marine conservation areas by 2008. The eventual goal is to protect a sample of each of the country's 39 natural regions. Zone 3, the Interior Dry Plateau is not yet represented.



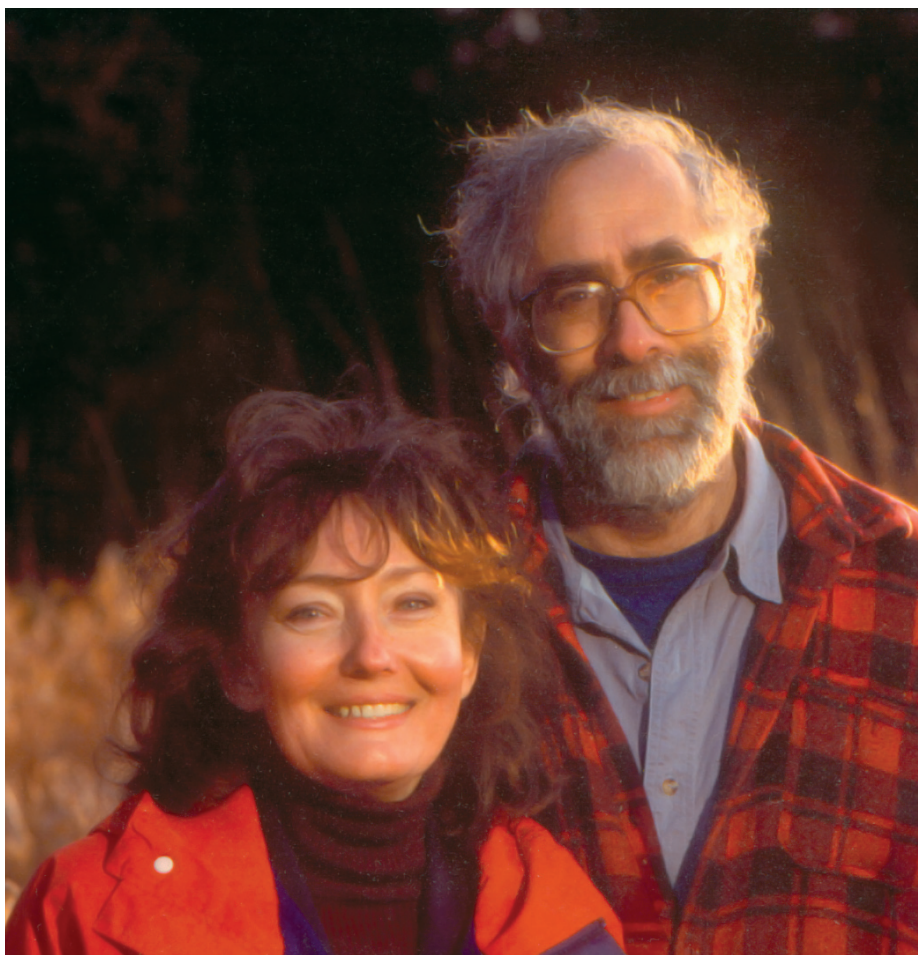
Vaseux Lake is famous for bird-watching while the surrounding cliffs provide important range for California Bighorn sheep.

land — water — plants — animals — people — confrontation — coexistence — past — present — future

VASEUX LAKE PHOTO BY DAWN RENAUD; OTHERS BY LAURIE CARTER



Orchards and vineyards thrive in the rich valley riparian zones and low elevation grasslands.



WHY NOT CHURN CREEK?

Opponents of the South Okanagan Similkameen as the best choice for a national park protecting the Interior Dry Plateau point to the Churn Creek area south of Williams Lake as a more viable alternative. Far less densely populated and facing nothing like the same development pressures, they contend that Churn Creek contains a good representation of the required characteristics and some of BC's rarest ecosystems.

John Theberge counters that these are really two quite different regions and he says that Parks Canada should at some time make another national park in the north representing the dry ecosystems in the Chilcotin.

Either way, "the provincial government didn't support national park consideration of Churn Creek," says Doug Harvey of Parks Canada, and there was no opportunity to pursue a feasibility study in that area.

Instead, the province followed the LRMP. Conservation and recreation now co-exist in the Churn Creek Protected Area. The 11,000-hectare Empire Valley Ranch operates there with carefully managed grazing.

Conservationists John and Mary Theberge: "Unless we have some sort of land use control, we're not going to see darkness when we look up at these hills at night—and the very strongest form of land use control is a national park."

Environmentalists seize the opportunity

John and Mary Theberge are unabashed proponents of national parks. Renowned for their research on wolves and their contribution to wildlife and wilderness conservation across Canada, the couple was instrumental in the creation of Kluane and other northern parks.

"We've had a long involvement with national parks," says John, "trying to establish them and, when they're established, trying to make sure they're managed well, preserving ecological integrity."

When John (a University of Waterloo professor) and Mary decided to retire in 2000, they returned to the South Okanagan where they'd spent vacations

while he finished his PhD at UBC and Mary taught in West Vancouver. Three decades later, the Theberges found the South Okanagan had changed dramatically from the sleepy little places they'd known.

"We were aware that Natural Region #3 has no national park," says John. "And we're certainly aware of the beauty, the rare species and the volatility of all of this and wanted to see if it was possible to do something before we lose it."

"Nowhere else do you have such a stunning range of habitats," says Mary, "where you can go from the very dry desert ecosystem up to alpine habitat."

John adds that to their knowledge



WHY A NATIONAL PARK *RESERVE*?

A national park reserve (rather than a national park) is considered where lands are subject to claim by Aboriginal people and where the Government of Canada has accepted that claim for negotiation. *Parks Canada*

The Draft Park Concept released in May 2006 encompasses 600 sq. km of land. Of this, 300 sq. km are currently protected areas under the LRMP, 150 are Crown land and 150 are privately owned and would have to be acquired on a "willing seller, willing buyer" basis.

"there are only two mountains in Canada that extend from shrub steppe semi-desert to alpine... one's Baldy and one's Snowy."

Approaching the issue as ecologists, they see two reasons for creating a national park, one practical and one moral. On a practical level John points out that the world's population is increasing at a rate of 75 million per year. He cites a United Nations study in which the major conclusion is that "human kind is running down its natural capital. We're not living sustainably for the biosphere," he says, and suggests that "one of the antidotes is setting land aside that we don't mess up, where natural processes that we only dimly understand are allowed to play their way and provide the ecological services that are the life support of the biosphere."

He and Mary argue that grasslands and semi-desert are among the least well represented of the world's protected ecosys-

tems. "So, we in the South Okanagan really have a global responsibility to pull our weight and contribute to the amount of protected land," John, says. "I taught in the school of planning for 30 years and sometimes am dismayed at the weakness of planning controls on land use. Pressures get a little stronger and politicians cave in. National parks, by virtue of their statute and stature assure that land's going to be protected."

The Theberge team gathered support from like-minded people including political clout and set about getting government attention. In 2003, the federal and provincial governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding announcing that the South Okanagan Similkameen was chosen as the site to represent the Interior Dry Plateau and that Parks Canada would conduct a study to assess the feasibility of establishing a national park reserve in the South Okanagan Similkameen.

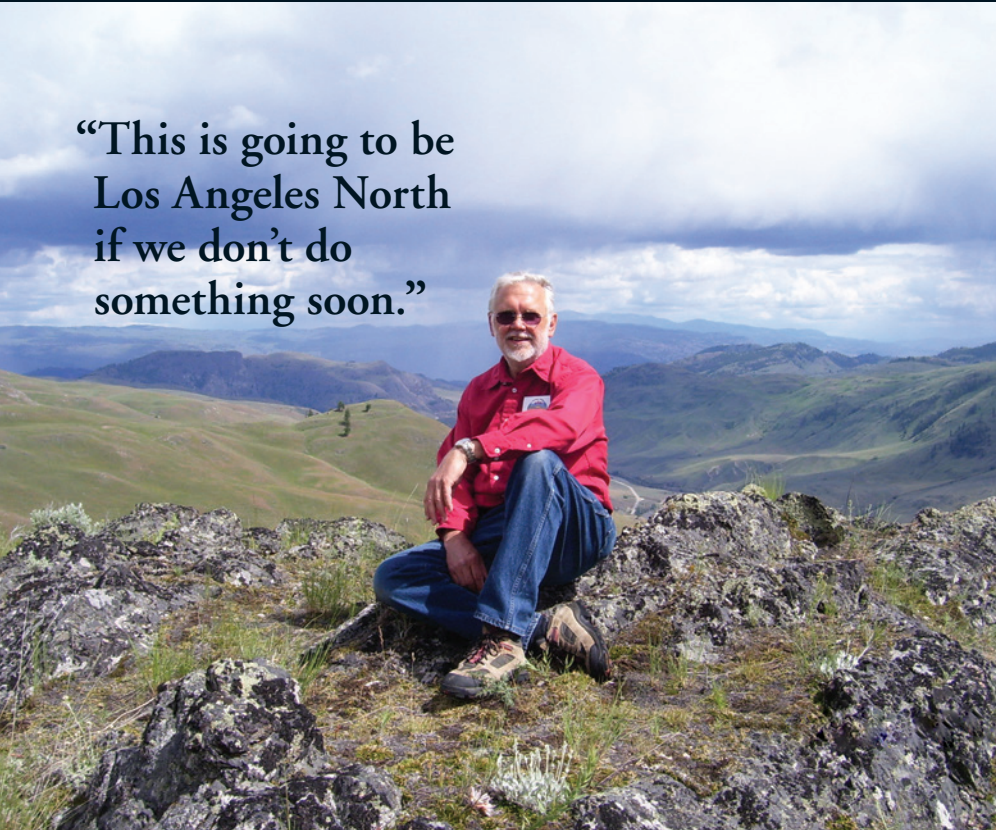
"There are only two mountains in Canada that extend from shrub steppe semi-desert to alpine ... one's Baldy and one's Snowy."

BATTLE LINES DRAWN

From the moment the idea of a national park was proposed, opinion began to polarize, not so much on the issue of conservation — you'd have to look hard to find anybody who doesn't want to see some form of environmental protection — but on the location and desirability of a national park to do the job. Two groups have emerged as the collective representatives of the opposing camps.



“This is going to be Los Angeles North if we don't do something soon.”



Retired biologist Bob Lincoln thinks the South Okanagan Similkameen is the best choice for a national park to represent the Interior Dry Plateau.



Best choice

Biologist **Bob Lincoln** has worked in the South Okanagan for decades. In the 1980s, he and his colleagues developed the method now commonly used to map the characteristics of a landscape by dividing it into polygons. As a result, a wealth of scientific data spanning more than 20 years has already been collected and Bob has become thoroughly familiar with the ecology and diversity of species in the region.

Bob thinks the South Okanagan Similkameen is the best choice for a national park to represent the Interior Dry Plateau. Because the post-glacial migration

of plants and animals occurs northward along the valleys, our area contains a very much wider range of plants and animals than potential sites further north, like the Churn Creek area south of Williams Lake.

“The ponderosa pine/bunchgrass doesn't occur there yet, so they would be missing an entire major component of the ecosystem.” In addition, he says, the need to protect the Churn Creek area isn't as urgent. “Churn Creek is a gorgeous grasslands, and it will still look essentially the same ten, twenty even fifty years from now, whereas in the Okanagan.... This is going to be Los Angeles North if we don't do something soon.”

However, despite his enthusiasm for a national park in the South Okanagan Similkameen, Bob thinks Parks Canada staff face a difficult situation.

“Dry grasslands are the first areas that are occupied by arriving peoples whether they're the First Nations peoples or subsequent Europeans... it's the grasslands that are fully occupied,” he says. Parks Canada is “coming into an area that has already got just a constellation of different users, all of which have vested interests. They have to tread this really fine line to maintain their credibility as fair adjudicators on the one side and achieving their system objectives on the other.”

While Bob recognizes that a park created here will be relatively small, “just to create a benchmark that is conserved forever would be really great,” he says. “As difficult as it might be, the rewards will be commensurate, because these grasslands are fantastic. They really are a treasure worth preserving.”

And looking down the road to the bigger potential payoff: “We hope eventually for an international park, spanning the border in this area. That would be the final link in a chain of conservation lands constituting an ecological cross-section spanning ecosystems from dry desert to temperate rainforest, from the driest dry to the wettest wet, shared by our two nations.”

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Steering Committee (SOSNPSC):

Dedicated to creating a national park reserve in the South Okanagan Similkameen. "We have collectively been gifted with a major opportunity to protect and sustain the beauty, natural quality and biological richness of this nationally significant region—for us and for our children's children. Together we have only a short time to capture this 'one-time-only' opportunity—if forfeited it will not return."

This group maintains that the South Okanagan Similkameen contains by far the widest range of species, including rare and endangered, concentrated in the smallest area. For this reason, it lobbied senior levels of government and local First Nations to agree to make this the subject area for the Parks Canada feasibility study.

Biologists, ecologists and environmental organizations supporting the national park proposal emphasize that it's not just size that matters: it's what you do with it that counts. Apart from the scientific considerations, the big difference between national and provincial parks lies in the activities that are not allowed: grazing, hunting, trapping, flying and use of off-road motorized vehicles.

Grassland Park Review Coalition (GPRC):

Dedicated to identifying the true impacts of establishing a national park in the South Okanagan Similkameen. "As an alternative, (we) support the ALR (Agricultural Land Reserve), the LRMP (Land Resource Management Plan), Nature Trust, Land Conservancy, Canadian Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited and the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program. These groups and initiatives continue to protect and conserve this great area while still allowing residents and the public to enjoy it."

While the GPRC also numbers staunch conservationists among its membership, it opposes the creation of the national park for a variety of reasons. Some within the group suggest the decision to focus the study on the South Okanagan Similkameen was more politically motivated than environmentally sound, as this site was not high on the initial list of potential candidates.

Local landowners and businesses that use areas within the proposed boundaries of the park, along with those who live and raise crops on its fringe, are understandably concerned. What will a national park reserve mean for them?



Already protected

Greg Norton has been involved with conservation issues for over 30 years and is well aware of the pressures facing critical habitat. He's one of the founding members of the Grassland Park Review Coalition.

"Our members are people who are giving something up, either through the recreational opportunities they're going to lose or through their livelihoods because they're ranchers or trappers or guide outfitters," he says. "We started asking questions and trying to find out what this park could mean to us and we tended to get a lot of different answers to our questions depending on who we talked to."

The GPRC is also looking for more transparency around the initial site selection process. "We cannot get our hands on the initial study done to establish the Zone 3 park,"

Greg says, questioning how such an extensively developed area could best meet the criteria for representing the Interior Dry Plateau. "It's too far gone for that." And in terms of protecting what's unique to the Okanagan-Similkameen, he says that most of the species at risk are in the low-lying areas which are already developed beyond redemption or placed under protection by the landowners—including orchardists, farmers, and cattlemen.

Greg is convinced that the designation of essential habitat areas has already been achieved through the LRMP public consultation process, but the follow-through hasn't happened. "We do need a provincial government more willing to stand up for it," he says, "and there's no question we need better enforcement."

Joan McKay, president of the Okanagan Region of the BC Wildlife Federation, agrees. "Through the long, drawn-out process of the LRMP we set aside areas that needed protecting and what we need now is for our provincial government to enact that and put them into Class One parks rather than leaving them as just protected areas."

In addition, Joan fears that creation of a national park will actually have an adverse effect on wildlife when hunting is banned. "Overpopulation of wildlife can lead to disease. Hunting maintains a balance of wildlife to habitat. Hunting is crucial to wildlife management."

While Joan admits that concessions may be made—like the 30-year hunting rights grandfathering at Wapusk National Park in northern Manitoba—she's looking further to the future. "They can appease this generation, but what will be there for our grandchildren to enjoy?"

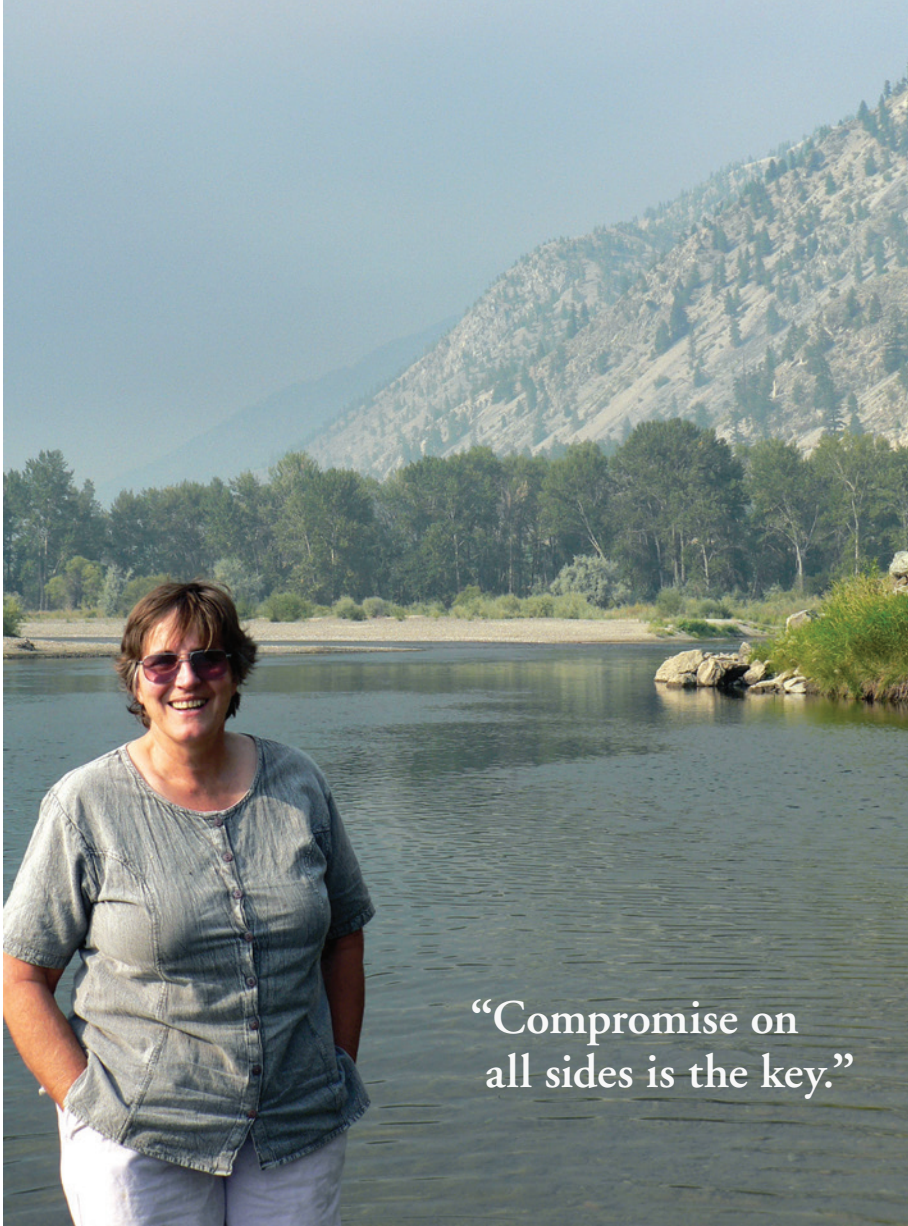
And Joan maintains that hunters have traditionally played a significant role in protecting wildlife and their habitat. "The best conservation that you can have is



Grassland Park Review Coalition members Greg Norton and Joan McKay say the creation of a national park will result in unjustified loss of lifestyle.

from hunters and sportsmen. We do more hands-on work for wildlife than any other group I can think of," she says, noting that members of the BCWF discovered the sheep die-off during their annual sheep count.

Although Joan finds it difficult to speak specifically to the potential impacts while the boundaries are still not finalized, she is particularly concerned about Snowy Mountain. "It's pristine California Bighorn sheep habitat," she says. "You get a national park in there with trails... to me, it's going to destroy the area."



“Compromise on all sides is the key.”

Organic farmer Lee McFadyen says things can be worked out, there just has to be a will. “Fifty years down the road, this is what this area needs. Now, let’s make it happen.”



Make it happen

Lee McFadyen, who has lived for 40 years on Mariposa Organic Farm bordering the Chopaka West protected area, would be delighted to see a national park reserve in the area.

The land is vitally important to Lee, who’s looking well beyond her own lifetime and wants to be sure her great-grandchildren can enjoy some of what she’s watching slip away. And she’s already taken action. Many years ago, Lee and her husband considered expanding their operation. But after taking a good look at the land, they changed their minds.

“I have 200 acres which I’ve never let a thing happen to and I’ve treated it as a wildlife preserve,” Lee says. While the property has attracted substantial offers from a variety of developers, she’s not willing to sell. “To me the real value of that land is the

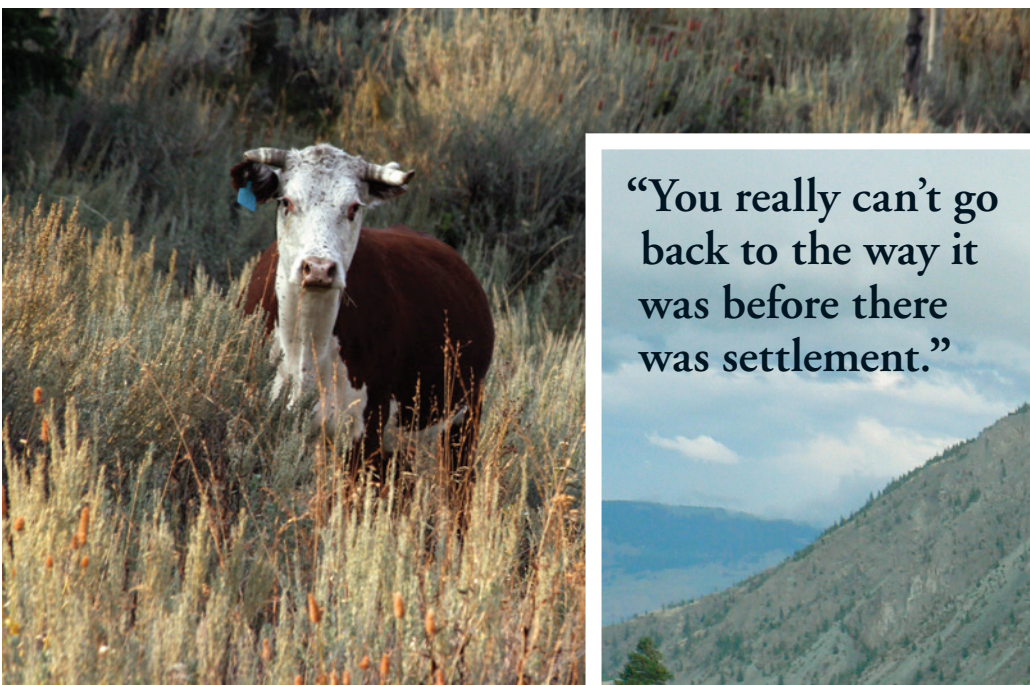
land exactly as it is, providing habitat for creatures that have no room to move to.”

She understands the concerns of her neighbours. “I could accept the provincial parks if the provincial governments took their mandate for parks more seriously,” she says. “The people who were working on the LRMP did an excellent job and they provided the best protection available to them at the time.” However, she believes the national park designation will garner more resources and be less subject to the whims of changing governments.

The issues around range tenure must be resolved and she firmly believes that the cattlemen’s needs can be properly looked after. She also admires the local sportsmen and praises their substantial ongoing conservation efforts, but thinks heading farther away to hunt is a compromise some of them may have to make. In fact, according to Lee, compromise on all sides is key because, although creating a park in such a heavily developed area won’t be easy, it can and should be done.

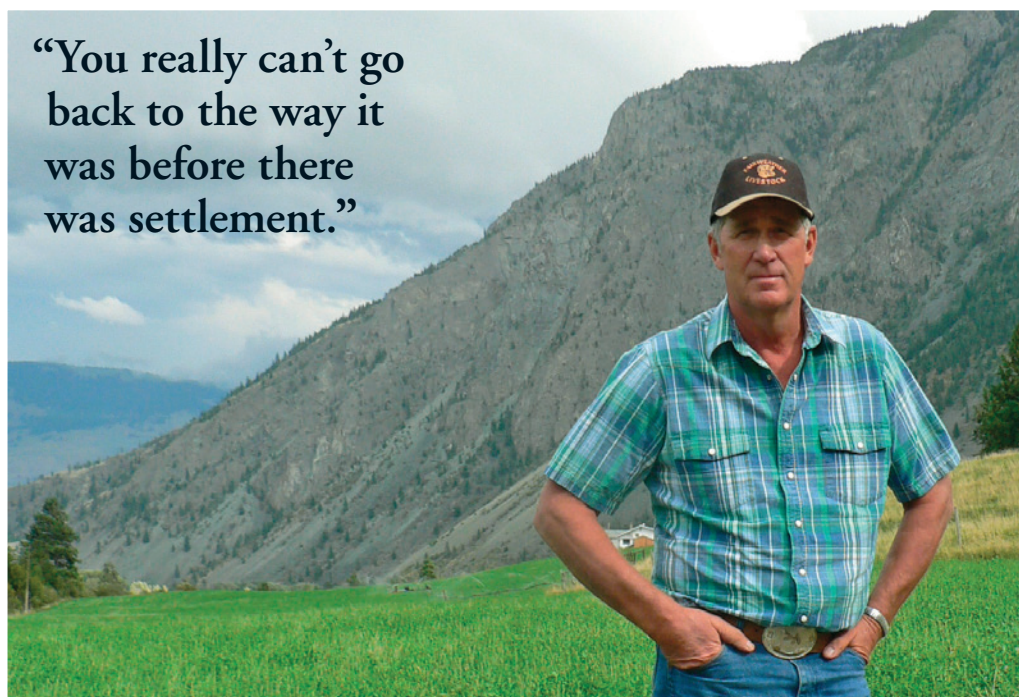
As to the increased traffic and population that a national park may generate, Lee declares herself a realist. “I understand the impact of more people and am prepared to accept this with the thought that wild places will be protected.” Lee figures that the current trend of population increase and tourism will generate more visits to the wild areas anyway, without the restrictions a park would impose. With a national park “the hills will not be randomly run over with all terrain vehicles, logging will not happen and grazing will have a different face.”

Lee says, “A park is not going to be without problems. “No major change like that is. But if it’s done with thought and with the concerns of the people living in the area addressed as much as possible, and if everybody compromises a little, it can be a very good thing.”



Cattle grazing is normally not permitted within national parks, but may be used on a controlled basis for fire prevention. Accommodating ranchers is a key element of the park debate.

“You really can’t go back to the way it was before there was settlement.”



Wildlife biologist and rancher Mark Quaedvlieg maintains that protection initiatives are already in place. “The job has been done, and it’s been done in balance.”



Cattle country

Mark Quaedvlieg’s family has been ranching in the Keremeos area for four generations. Always interested in the great outdoors, Mark became a wildlife biologist and worked extensively in the field before returning to take up the family business. He’s been involved with a wide variety of land management initiatives and has a solid grasp of how difficult it is to bring all the interested parties together and hammer out sound conservation solutions that work for everyone. While Mark is a firm supporter of national parks, he has a number of reasons for believing this is not the place for one.

Foremost is the obvious concern over the loss of his chosen livelihood and lifestyle. He also fears that “as the grazing tenures are taken, the validity of the ALR (Agricultural Land Reserve) will come into question and ranches, a number of which are already divided into smaller parcels, will be divided into non-productive and less environmentally-friendly ranchettes.”

In addition, Mark argues that a national park doesn’t work well in this circumstance because high real estate values will result in a highly fragmented park boundary. And in any event, the biologist-rancher believes that the environment is already well protected. “If you follow what’s in the range

use plans (LRMP), it’s a lot better fit for this land base than a national park,” he says.

However, Mark also understands why this might not satisfy those in favour of a national park. He admits that overgrazing did continue in some areas, leading to the deterioration of indigenous plants on which other species depend for survival. “The cattlemen and possibly the Ministry of Forests were a little bit at fault in that there wasn’t a high enough level of compliance,” he says, adding that in their frustration, parks proponents “chose to go to a form of protection that would totally exclude us.”

Regardless, Mark thinks that it’s too late to try to turn back the clock. “There are still relic areas where there’s been no livestock grazing and you can manage to that. But you really can’t go back to the way it was before there was settlement,” he says.

“The valley bottoms where the game used to winter are just not available, so you’re not going to have the numbers of ungulates to attain the balance that was there. Another thing is, we’ve had 50 years of fire suppression, and this ecosystem is fire maintained.”

SILENT MAJORITY

Cowboy Andrew “English” Fane is typical of the many residents who are waiting for more information before making a decision.





Eva Durance, Federation of BC Naturalists, contends that national parks offer the best protection for different ecosystems because access depends on what's appropriate for the ecology.



Moral question

Eva Durance, who has acted as an ecological reserve warden and as parks and protected areas coordinator for the Federation of BC Naturalists, doesn't think current initiatives are enough.

"The existing provincial parks and other protected areas are insufficiently large and well enough protected to provide viable, connected habitat for a range of wildlife. The lack of government concern and funding for parks, especially for the conservation of biodiversity within the parks, gives no confidence in the long-range protection of these lands against human overuse and destructive activities.

This is a moral question, says Eva. "That we humans do not have the right to destroy other species with whom we share this planet and the habitats they require for survival. As it is, thanks to our greed and negligence, this area has the dubious honour of having over 50 per cent of BC's threatened and endangered species. The great majority of these species require habitat that would be covered by the national park reserve and, in time, improved to help these creatures survive."

Eva wants to see accommodation for local concerns as part of the package while hoping to see a large area protected. If not, she predicts, "it's going to be condominiums and hotels right up to the edges of the current parks."



Doreen Olson says when we are aware of the landscape around us we make better decisions.



Every little bit

Doreen Olson enjoyed riding her horse in the rural landscape around Surrey for only a few years before it was completely lost to development. She relocated to a property near White Lake and prepared to build paddocks—plans

she quickly set aside when she discovered her little bit of paradise was best left untouched.

Although the property may be small, it spans eight distinct habitat types: aquatic, riparian, Douglas fir forest, grassland, ponderosa park, talus slope, rocky outcrop and desert—from the creek bed to the top of the hill. And it's the proximity of these areas to one another that makes conditions perfect for the kind of biodiversity that's found in the Okanagan and Similkameen.

Doreen placed a legal covenant on the most sensitive part of her property to protect it from future development. Then she set out to educate others about what she says we have—and how close we are to losing it.

Through the Meadowlark Festival and Landscapes Alive, Doreen has pursued her goal. "I try to change one person's attitude about the environment, each month," she says. It might not sound like much, but if each of them goes on to influence another person or two, the job will get done.

While Doreen feels a national park would complement existing conservation initiatives, she believes that understanding the impact of all human activities on the environment is vital to making good decisions.



Flight school up in the air

Canadian Helicopters runs what is considered to be the world's best advanced mountain-flying school. Each year, nearly 300 students tackle increasingly difficult terrain in close proximity to the company's base at the Penticton airport.

"Eighty to 90 per cent of our training area lies within the proposed park boundaries," says manager **Jan Rustad**, who explains that the company currently operates its training programs outside tourist season with a provincial park permit.

"The superintendent of Parks Canada has suggested that within the guidelines of the Parks Act they would look at permitting (our school)," he says. However, since aircraft fly over national parks under severe restrictions and landings are allowed only rarely, on a case-by-case basis, it appears that the flight school would require an unprecedented exception.



Canadian Helicopters manager Jan Rustad fears national park restrictions could ground his flight school.



Landowner Ernie Dumais wants to know what will *really* happen to grazing, water rights and fire management.



Fire and water

Fire particularly concerns **Ernie Dumais**. The retired shop and electronics teacher has lived in the Oliver area since 1967. His property on Fairview Road borders the proposed park on the west. Immediately to the east is the his-

toric Fairview town site, which in 2003 was targeted in a rash of as-yet unexplained fires.

"Within five minutes the fire had rushed up the hill and surrounded my shop," Ernie says. Fortunately, the building, sided with cement board, survived.

Like Mark Quaedvlieg, he finds it hard to believe that in a region considered one of the most volatile in the province, wildfire risks won't increase once grazing is discontinued. The Parks Canada fire management proposal suggests that there may be some grazing allowed, "when required." However, both men are sceptical that ranchers will happen to have a hundred or so head available on an as-needed basis for an occasional one-year licence.

Ernie also worries about water. While he acknowledges that cattle can also damage habitat while accessing water and that this was a problem in the past, he says that cattlemen have done good work to protect riparian areas.

"Water," he points out, "is the new mother lode." The creek running through his property flows from the proposed park area. If a national park is created, what becomes of traditional water rights? Like grazing tenures, they are currently under provincial jurisdiction and there are still no firm plans for what happens during any transition period or after land is transferred to Parks Canada. This leaves residents and business owners wondering what they will still have and what they could lose.

POLITICIANS POINT OF VIEW



John Slater
Mayor of Osoyoos



Ron Hovanes
Mayor of Oliver



Jake Kimberley
Mayor of Penticton

What are your major reasons for wanting/not wanting the park?

Clarification still required—see impact on locals below.

Waiting to get all the facts when the feasibility study is complete.

Everyone has to be concerned about what we're doing to the environment. Even the opposition is saying this. We have to protect the area from development. It's essential that we start protecting. However, I've read with interest the opposition. I understand their concerns will be addressed and if concerns are addressed, I'd be in favour. I hope that people realize what the designation of this park is all about.

What do you see as the major economic benefits/damage?

Historically, national parks have had a huge economic boost for the surrounding communities. I feel that this park will do the same for the Okanagan and Similkameen.

There could be huge benefits for a small community. It's hard to ignore the Fitzpatrick study showing the benefits. It's also hard to ignore people like the helicopter company and ranchers.

If the park is created, what do you think will be the biggest impact on locals?

The committee needs to identify the area more precisely, this will take away some of the guessing by the general public on how the park is going to affect them. The public also needs to know how their current activities in the park will be dealt with and how long the transition will take. Current tenure holders in the park also need to know how their interests will be affected.

We haven't yet heard how they will deal with all the concerns.

There are benefits to destination parks. Those who are interested in touring the landscape travel many miles. Many people would be coming in to explore our area, bringing dollars. Look at other parks to see the benefits.

What is your opinion of the Parks Canada process currently under way?

It's taking too long and as stated above, they need to identify the area quickly.

I strongly support the process and suggest to people with strong opinions to wait until it's finished. It's exhaustive. They're really trying to do their due diligence. I think we have to work with the study. I really strongly believe we have to support the process. You still need to go to those open houses to gain understanding and to express your points. You can make a made-in-the-South-Okanagan park. It's not going to have to be the template of Banff.

I don't think it's going to impact local people much at all.

I haven't followed it all that closely since it started before I took office.

What is your biggest hope/fear if the park is created?

My fear is the general public won't support the proposal for fear of losing the free access that they have today.

I fear people taking a strong stand without all the facts. When we know exactly what it's going to look like, then make up your mind.

No fear. I'm pleased that the government is taking the initiative. I hope that it will protect that environment for generations and generations to come. I worry that the world is being damaged and if not protected now, we'll never get it back. You don't tear houses down to plant trees.



Clarence Louie

Chief, Osoyoos Indian Band

Bill Barisoff

MLA

Ross Fitzpatrick

Senator

Ecological and wildlife protection and preservation; job creation and tourism potential with all the spin-off benefits like restaurants, gas stations, stores and hotels. Other sectors, such as cattlemen, see disadvantages.

I want the protection side but with that we have to make sure we accommodate ranchers, the helicopter company, recreational users. With protection, make sure we deal with the people who have been using the area for the last 50 to 100 years.

The major reasons I want the park are because I believe it is the single most important initiative for the Okanagan Similkameen in this decade. It not only will protect the most ecologically diverse and threatened regions in Canada it will also provide major economic benefits in accordance with the green sustainable economic principles which have been recommended for the region. It will provide the right kind of jobs and protect against the extinction of animal and plant species and prevent the breakdown of one of the richest ecosystems in North America. To me it's critical that we act.

See above. Like anything in economics there are pluses and minuses. Put it on a scale and see which way it tips. It's never 100 per cent to the good or to the bad.

Economic benefits of having a park in the area, but are we accommodating those mentioned above?

Highlights from News Release of June 16, 2006: A national park in the South Okanagan would produce \$72 million in investments, 832 full time equivalent jobs, \$56.3 million in income, \$120 million in expenditures and \$39.9 million in government tax revenues, according to a report released today by the South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Steering Committee.... The study indicates the park could draw as many as 300,000 visitors annually by 2015 ... the "multiplier effect" of the proposed National Park reserve could be approximately 7:1 on the local economy—indicating that a national park would return \$7 to the local economy for every dollar invested.

Look at the pros and cons of each industry. Some negatively (guides and outfitters, non-native hunters and fishers) and some positively. Look on the plus side—jobs and spin-off in tourism. More First Nations involvement and co-management.

Usage of the area. There are pluses and minuses to it. Lots of unanswered questions.

Like any government process, it's slow—like it would be when dealing with so many stakeholders. It has a long way to go before people like me can say I'm totally for it. Right now, I'm just leaning in favour.

No answer.

It will preserve one of the most diverse and unique areas in North America and will keep a vibrant green sustainable economy.

Hope for all those pluses. I fear promises in the settlement as far as protection of Aboriginal title and rights will be more of the 400-year history of breaking promises and breaking agreements. Sometimes you have to look at the bigger picture. Some people draw a line in the sand to protect their own corner. There's no consensus even among First Nations. It's a good concept. Now, can all the details be worked out? I hope government can come up with creative ways to lessen the impact on those who are opposed.

It keeps going back to the same issues. My hope is usage by people in the area is accommodated. In all my years in politics, I've never received a bigger petition (from park opponents). Some is fear of the unknown. What happens when the park is created and you can't use it? We've been told there will be accommodation, but until we see it, there's a fear of what government does after the fact. People have to understand that at the end of the process, decisions have to be made. Whatever the end result, we have to make sure that people are listened to and accommodation is provided. People want to see it protected but they also want to make sure that it's useable.

The Parks Canada process has been objective and thorough. They have carefully reviewed the large study area and outlined a realistic potential park reserve. They have applied good science to the process and have consulted widely with stakeholders. They have provided the opportunity for the general public to have input through their open houses and information centres.

My biggest hope is that the park reserve is created in the next 18 months and my biggest fear is if it isn't created at all we will lose one of the most precious ecosystems in Canada. With its loss the corridor for migration of important species, which the provincial interior depends upon, will be destroyed, which could negatively impact the whole province.



Parks Canada project manager Tom Hurd says, “the feasibility study is to determine if a national park reserve is the best way to protect this environment.”

ENTER PARKS CANADA

Canada’s national park system dates to 1885 when 26 square kilometres of land was reserved around the Banff hot springs to protect them for the public interest and make them unavailable for “sale, settlement or squatting.” Our country established the world’s first national park service in 1911 and the whole system was formally codified in 1930 when the first National Parks Act became law.

The rationale and guiding principles for our national parks continually evolved over the following decades. Among the milestones were the government’s decision in 1970 to set the objective of representing all of Canada’s 39 natural regions within the national park system and the 1988 amendment to the National Parks Act that formalized ecological

integrity as the guiding principle.

This was further codified in the new Canada National Parks Act of 2001 that sets out “maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity, through the protection of natural resources and natural processes,” as the first priority. Parks Canada literature says: “above all, the priority is healthy intact ecosystems (“ecological integrity”), with the complete range of characteristic native components (plants, animals and non-living features), and ecological processes that are likely to persist over time.” National parks are “dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment.” The visitor experience is an important component — offering presentation and education services — provided that they don’t “impair natural and cultural heritage values.”

In 2002 the federal government announced its intention to establish 10 new parks and five new national marine conservation areas by 2008. A year later, agreements were signed to create the first two: BC's Gulf Islands National Park Reserve and Ukkusiksalik National Park in Nunavut —bringing the total number of parks created since 1885 to 41. The same year, a memorandum of understanding was signed with the BC government to study the feasibility of establishing two marine conservation area reserves (Gwaii Haanas and Southern Strait of Georgia) and one national park —the South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Reserve.

Feasibility study

The memorandum of understanding set a formal process in motion, but there is no guarantee that a park will be created. John and Mary Theberge, the original

“...above all, the priority is healthy intact ecosystems...”

proponents of a national park for the South Okanagan Similkameen, currently give the project a 50/50 chance.

The feasibility study will take at least four years to complete with a formal report to the Federal/Provincial Steering Committee targeted for the fall of 2007. Included in the process are scientific and socio-economic studies; consultations with stakeholders such as environmental groups, ranchers, business people, hunters and First Nations; and public open houses and communications.

Heading the project team is Tom Hurd, a 25-year veteran of the national park service, who has recently taken over on a two-year assignment from his job as natural

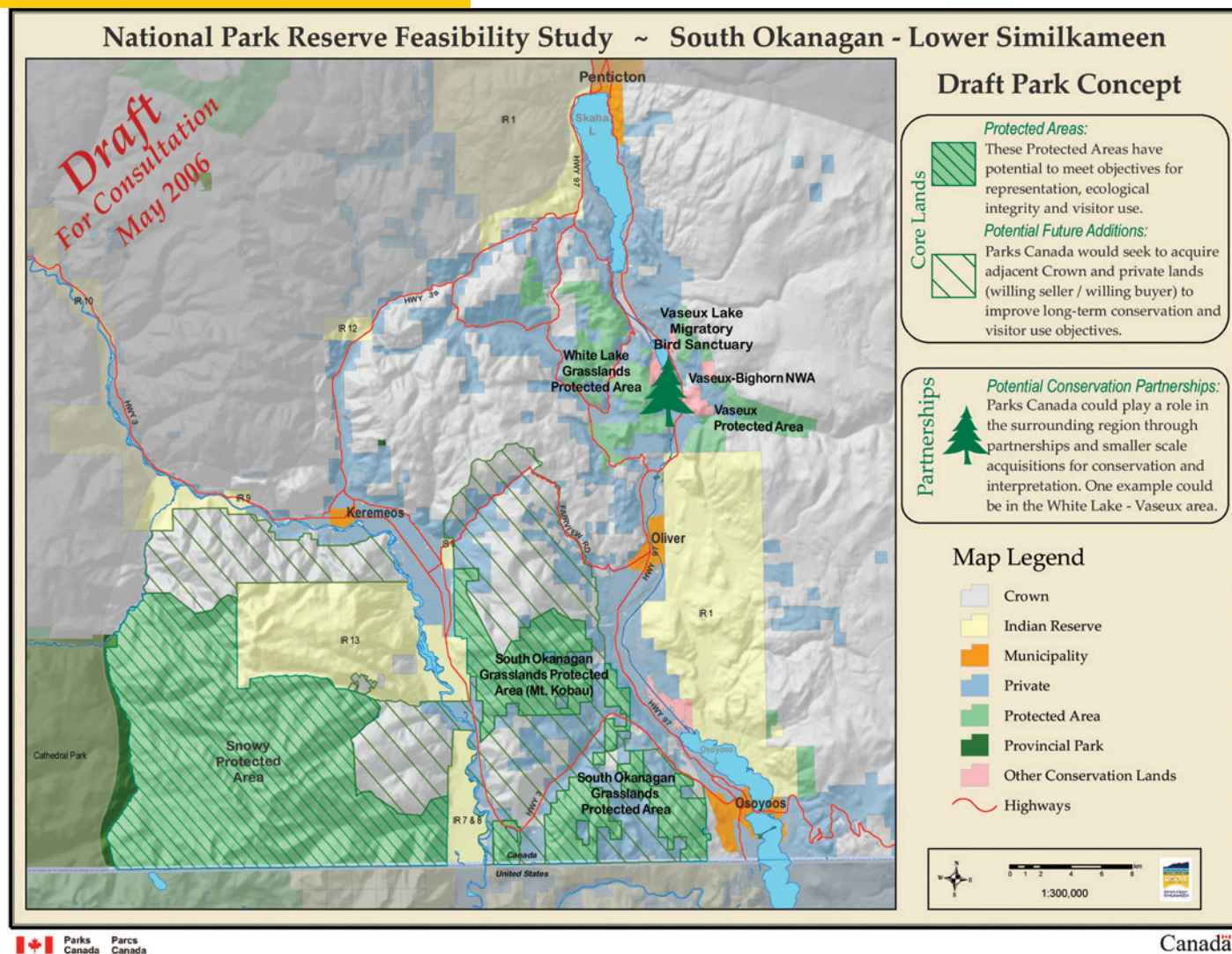
resources manager at Banff. A biologist specializing in environmental assessment, Tom has worked in the newly established remote northern parks and did a five-year stint with the Yukon Forest Service.

Tom says, “This is about land use and land use changes. There are a lot of ideas out there, a lot of opinions. So the feasibility study is to determine if a national park reserve is the best way to protect this environment.”

Many believe that adequate protection is already in place under provincial park status or the Land Resource Management Plan (LRMP). Tom explains that the difference between those and national parks



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is "related both to the level of organization and management and to typical uses — the level of integration of science management and visitor experiences."

While there are similarities in recreational activities — fishing, riding, biking, hiking, nature viewing, interpretive exhibits and facilities on- or off-site, Tom says a major difference is that grazing, hunting, trapping and guide outfitting would eventually be phased out if a national park is created. Mining isn't allowed in either.

Also, says Tom, "consider the resources that Parks Canada would apply — 15 person-years of employment in administration, field staff, natural resources protection, maintenance, interpretation — \$2 million to \$3 million a year for park management. Typically, the commitment is much lower in provincial parks that do have field staff but with larger areas to cover. They're present, but infrequent."

Tom admits that studying this area for national park status is unusual because of the relatively developed population base, but he says that there are also "tremendous conservation values here and opportunities for educational experiences." The number one priority, however, is ecological preservation and determining whether or not that priority can be met is the guiding principle for the feasibility study.

The initial study area encompassed about 2,400 square kilometres of the South Okanagan and Lower Similkameen region excluding municipalities. (The National Parks Act specifically prohibits any new parks from including municipalities within their boundaries.) This large study area, while necessary for a thorough investigation, caused much confusion and raised many fears.

It wasn't until May of this year that the parameters were narrowed to the point where a map showing potential boundaries (marked "Draft — For Consultation") was released.

"We began by focusing on existing protected areas," Tom says, "but no one protected area could meet all the criteria, so we began looking at combinations. The best combination was Snowy and South Okanagan Grasslands (Mt. Kobau–Chopaka–Kilpoola), although, that still fell short — leaving out the wetlands, riparian areas and lakes."

Consequently, the May 2006 Draft Park Concept includes a "partnership" component by which Parks Canada could play a role in the surrounding region for conservation and interpretation. Areas like White Lake and Vaseux fall into this category along with potential partnerships with First Nations, conservation organizations, tourism groups, ranchers and municipalities.

As currently outlined, the park

would encompass 600 square kilometres of which 300 square kilometres are now protected areas under the LRMP (slated to become provincial parks but delayed because of the feasibility study), 150 square kilometres are provincial Crown land and 150 square kilometres are privately held.

The lines have been drawn to exclude virtually all of the wineries, orchards and small farms in the valley bottom. "Intensive agriculture is not included," says Tom, "because the valley bottoms are already so extensively developed that it would take an enormous amount of effort to restore them to a conservation state." He says that this version of the plan also allows for the westward expansion of Osoyoos.

Within the currently proposed boundaries are 14 ranches with grazing tenures. Tom says that the project team is exploring options to minimize the potential impact. Some possibilities under consideration are: moving the boundaries; moving the tenures outside the park; and considering the use of grazing inside the park as a management tool — and if so, to what extent.

If a national park is created the transition period will likely take many years. No privately held land can be expropriated. Private property will have to be acquired on a "willing seller, willing buyer" basis and be incorporated into the park as it becomes available.

Clearly, a comprehensive transition plan will be required.

PARKS CANADA RESPONDS TO CONCERNS

Residents and stakeholders have raised a number of serious concerns during the course of community open houses and discussions. Parks Canada responded in the summer of 2005 and the following excerpts are quoted from the Parks Canada Info Sheets.

Park fees

Fees paid by a park guest are retained in the park they visit to help pay for the services and facilities. Parks Canada charges a fee for services such as overnight backcountry use and heritage presentation programs like guided hikes. The current charge for fishing in a national park is \$8 per day. Some national parks also charge entry fees. In British Columbia, entry fees range from no fee to \$8 per adult. User fees would not be introduced until minimal levels of services and facilities were in place. There would be no fees charged for through travel on highways that cross the park area. Frequent visitors can obtain an entry pass that provides for unlimited access for the entire season...sold in May at a substantial discount.

Sport hunting and wildlife use

There is a concern that wildlife populations would increase, which may result in damage to agricultural lands, over grazing and winter starvation and disease.

Parks Canada has commissioned a preliminary wildlife study that focused on deer populations within the southern portion of the study area. Parks Canada will continue to seek advice and work with wildlife experts to identify proactive approaches to solve wildlife management issues during the feasibility study process. The economic and social implications of a potential no-hunting restriction will also be addressed in the future social, economic and environmental assessment. Wildlife would also be a major focus for research and management should a national park reserve be established.

Local business, farming and ranching

Social, economic and environmental information has been gathered to establish a baseline of information (including demographics, labour force, population growth projections, commercial and non-commercial uses of Crown land). Tom Hurd says that after the current socio-economic assessment they will be "in a position to have better numbers on exactly who will be impacted along with the costs." He also says Parks Canada is looking for ways to accommodate those who would be affected. As an example, Canadian Helicopters has been sent a "letter indicating a willingness to work with the company on accommodation." Tom expects "more discussion on what accommodation would be."

Fire

If a national park reserve is established in the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Parks Canada would follow an approach similar to that of BC for both fire suppression and fuel management. In fact, an existing agreement between Parks Canada and BC already provides for joint planning and sharing of personnel and equipment for fire fighting. Trained staff from Parks Canada would add to the existing fire management expertise of provincial and local agencies, First Nations and other groups to prepare for and respond to wildfires.... Prescribed burning and mechanical methods such as tree thinning and shrub removal are used. Increased supervision and enforcement of safety regulations also helps to reduce risks associated with human-caused fires.... If the risk of grass fires becomes a concern in specific areas, Parks Canada may implement livestock grazing on a controlled basis while fuel management strategies are developed. Other methods such as prescribed fire are also effective in controlling fine fuels.



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SHOW US THE MONEY

Like every other facet of the national park debate, the question of economic benefit/damage elicits strong opinions. While proponents point to government and private sector investment plus visitor spending, opponents raise the specter of individual business closures and communities hit hard by the loss of ranch-related revenues.

The SOSNPSC commissioned an independent analysis of the potential economic benefits. The study concluded that the primary impact would fall on the communities of Penticton, Osoyoos, Oliver, Keremeos, Okanagan Falls, Kaleden, Cawston, Olalla, the Lower Similkameen Indian Band, the Osoyoos Indian Band and the Upper Similkameen Indian Band.

By 2015, the study projects: up to 300,000 annual park visitors; total investment of \$72 million for park set-up (including a visitor reception centre,

administration and maintenance of buildings, hiking trails and habitat preservation), new hotels, residential, campgrounds, recreation, retail, restaurants and tourist attractions; 832 full-time equivalent jobs and \$56.3 million total income; \$121.1 million spent for accommodation, food & beverage, retail, recreation and transportation by visitors plus employee expenditures and \$39.9 million in tax revenue.

However, Parks Canada isn't taking these numbers as definitive. Tom Hurd says the socio-economic study, which is being conducted as part of the feasibility study, "will have its own objectives and will be more consultative, including getting stakeholders' input on what factors to include." He expects the study to be very comprehensive — to more fully address all economic sectors.

And there's no shortage of opinion within the community at large.

Joan McKay: Joan feels the SOSNPSC study has inflated the returns and not taken the negatives into consideration. "Loss of use of this area could impact the local economy due to the loss of hunters and fishers that would normally come to this area and purchase goods and services relating to this activity."



Valley bottoms, already so extensively developed that returning them to a conservation state is impractical, remain outside the proposed park boundaries.

business profile



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Opponents say existing protection through provincial parks and the LRMP makes more restrictive national park status unnecessary.

Eva Durance: “It would add greatly to the ecotourism component ... help diversify the economic structure of the valley and provide jobs at a number of levels of skill and training.... As to damage, there will be some activities that will be affected over the long term, primarily ranching. However, there will be compensation for loss of range; the opportunity for ranchers wishing to exit the business or retire to sell the home ranch; and a phasing-in period for these changes even in the initial core area. Hunting and other extractive activities would also be affected, but with ample Crown lands nearby, it would not be an absolute end to them.”

John Theberge: “At the global level, the linking of economic and environmental sustainability is very close ... you need sustainable environments to maintain stable economies and they’re self-reinforcing. So we would hope that the national park is building a component of the economy of the South Okanagan on a fully renewable and sustainable base and that’s good.”

Mark Quaadvlieg: “The major economic damage will be a disruption of the present more balanced agri-tourism Because of higher land values in the South Okanagan and Lower Similkameen, a national park would likely be fragmented. A number of ranches and their range tenures would be split and a considerable amount of fence on the interface would have to be built and maintained Extinguishing ranches to create a national park will destabilize the remaining ranches As a fourth generation family

ranch, with gross annual sales in excess of one million dollars, our ranch will be extinguished along with our chosen lifestyle.”

IF YOU BUILD IT

A national park in the South Okanagan Similkameen would bring significant change — there’s little disagreement on this point. Some argue that pressures on the environment could be aggravated by the inevitable development that will be needed to accommodate more tourists. Currently the service industry is struggling to find enough workers, Hwy 97 is often congested, vacancies are low and construction costs are high.

Others contend that population pressures are a reality, regardless. “More people, more noise, more garbage, more traffic ... a change in our country lifestyle,” says Lee McFadyen. “However, this is happening anyway, with no consideration for wild places and wild lives.”

Joan McKay laments the potential impact on local residents and tourists who have long enjoyed fishing, picnicking and camping at the many small lakes currently maintained by sportsmen’s clubs. “Families love them,” says Joan, “but there would not be fishing, as lakes within national parks are not stocked.” And she worries that families would now have to pay fees “to enjoy these precious areas.” Eva Durance counters that fees are nothing new. “Our provincial parks



business profile



POSH

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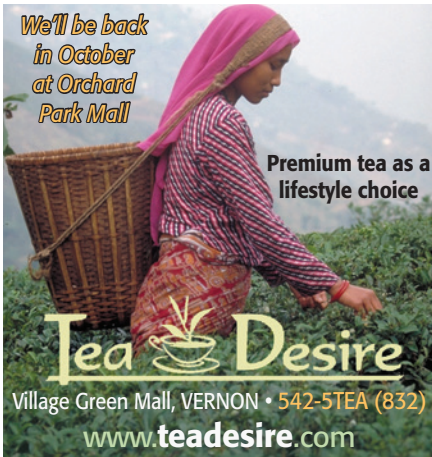
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Conservationists like John and Mary Theberge accuse Parks Canada of thinking small. They hope that the White Lake and Vaseux areas will be included, that there's "adequate ponderosa, not too many fragmented pieces so there's connectivity...so ecological processes and the wildlife can continue and this national park actually achieve the integrity it should." They adamantly oppose any cattle grazing saying that before ranching began this ecosystem never supported large ungulates like the bison on the plains and citing studies that "report on the ecological destructive influences of cattle grazing."

Ranchers like Mark Quaadvlieg fear their heritage will be lost. And although there is discussion about making exceptions to the National Parks Act to accommodate local concerns, he and others think this should not happen. Instead of watering down the Act to make it fit, he says we should continue to support, strengthen and enforce the many conservation initiatives already in place.

Many First Nations people are in a wait-and-see mode. While there are high hopes for the potential of a park to bring native and non-native communities together to share their history and culture and work jointly on the tasks of environmental management, there remain unresolved issues that could get in the way.

Large numbers of people in the non-native community are equally cautious. Cowboy Andrew "English" Fane says he "doesn't really understand the issues too fully" and he's waiting to get more information before making a decision. And that's really the point.

DOWN TO THE WIRE

Tom Hurd says the Parks Canada study team is looking at the habitats most associated with rare and endangered species, then mapping these habitats to see how much is included in the proposed park area. They're working to determine how well this site can represent the Interior Dry Plateau and the ability to manage for long-term ecological integrity.

How big would the park need to be to meet the needs of vegetation cycles and species that need winter and summer range? How much bunchgrass; what types of grasslands; habitat for species and species movement between the proposed park and adjacent protected areas such as

the Pasayten Wilderness in Washington State and Cathedral Provincial Park; the number of intact watersheds and the level of fragmentation — in short, they're working to "capture the local ecological character." These Ecosystem Conservation Planning Targets will be available to the public by request later this fall.

The feasibility study is now in a critical phase, undertaking the socio-economic assessment that will go hand-in-hand with the final boundary proposal. When this study is complete, Tom says, "We will be in a position to have better numbers on exactly who will be impacted along with costs."

A further round of public open houses is scheduled for the spring of 2007 to gather community input.

The project team will get direction from the Federal/Provincial Steering Committee and will work with the provincial government and stakeholders "to develop detailed options on transition" regarding issues such as grazing, sport hunting and mining and exploration.

In general, Tom says, "National parks are about the future. They may be one of the best instruments available for long-term conservation. The challenge for the public is to look beyond the short-term implications and benefits and to think about the national park proposal in terms of future generations."

However, Tom recognizes that there are a variety of perspectives. "Members of the study team are still undecided because not all the information is available yet. Currently efforts are concentrated on getting that information.

In total, the feasibility study final report will detail the extent to which the proposed park can meet conservation targets, the potential for quality visitor experience, socio-economic impact, terms and conditions to accommodate stakeholders and, critically, the extent of local and First Nations support.

Which raises the crucial point — the reason for this *Okanagan Life* feature — public input. Creation of the South Okanagan Similkameen National Park is one of the most important public debates in the history of the Valley. Your opinion matters. We urge you to get informed and get involved. Learn all you can about the issues, attend the public open houses and make your views known. ■

CONTACT INFO

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