

Parks and Wilderness



Noteworthy:

- Albertans rank nature as one of the most important factors in terms of quality of life.
- 93% of Albertans support a protected natural areas network with no provisions for industrial use.
- 12% of Alberta's land base is currently considered protected.
- The area of land protected in Alberta declined between 2002 and 2003.
- The distribution of protected areas across habitat types (regions) in Alberta is not even.
- The Foothills, Parkland and Grasslands are hugely under-represented in Alberta's protected areas network.
- Industrial and motorized recreational vehicle activities take place within the borders of numerous parks in Alberta.

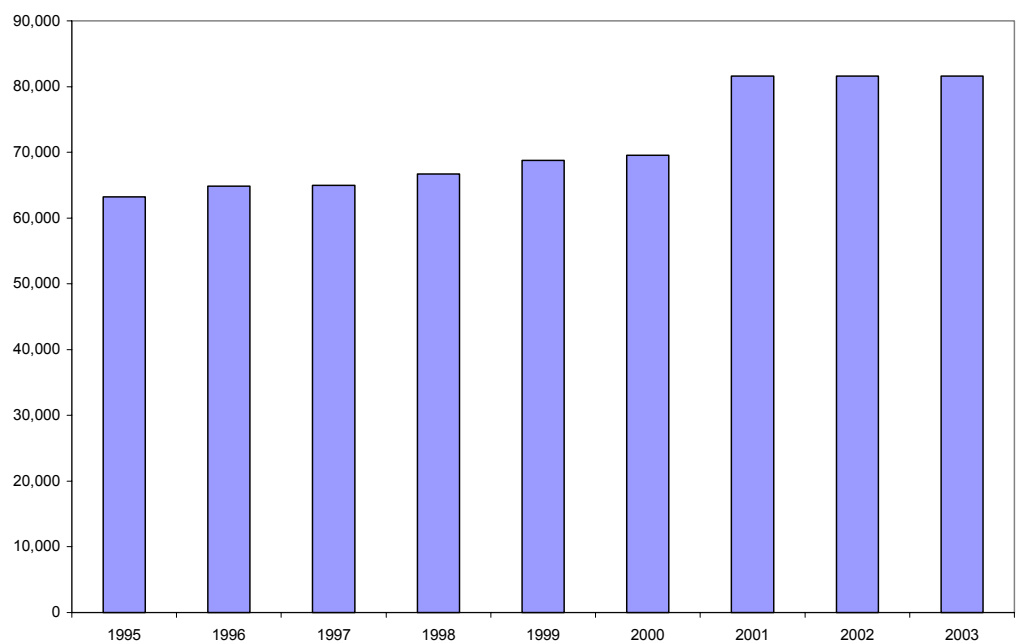
Natural Landscapes in Alberta: Protected?

Just over 12% of the area of Alberta is currently considered protected. The figure below shows the trend in the area of protected land in Alberta from 1995 to 2003. The figure demonstrates that while there was an increase in the area of protected land between 1999 and 2000, very little land has come under provincial protection since 2001. In fact, between

2002 and 2003, there was a decline in the area of land protected from 81,626 km² to 81,612 km². Loss of habitat is the major cause of species decline and protecting adequate areas of natural habitat is essential to preserve biodiversity. Even provincial parks and other areas that are nominally protected in Alberta contain industrial activities such as oil and gas wells. Indeed, there are

many examples of protected land with industrial and motorized recreational vehicle activity taking place. The Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve, for example, has the highest level of protection in the province, but still has two gas wells on it, and is surrounded by numerous others on its borders.

Area of Alberta Protected, 1995 to 2003



Source: Alberta Community Development.

So What?

The integrity of a parks and protected area system is defined not only by the amount of area that is protected, but also by the mix of habitat type that is protected. Currently in Alberta, the following portions of regions are protected:

- 58.11% of the Rocky Mountains;
- 13.21% of the Boreal;
- 15.47% of the Canadian Shield;
- 1.38% of the Foothills;
- 0.88% of the Parklands
- 0.82% of the Grasslands.

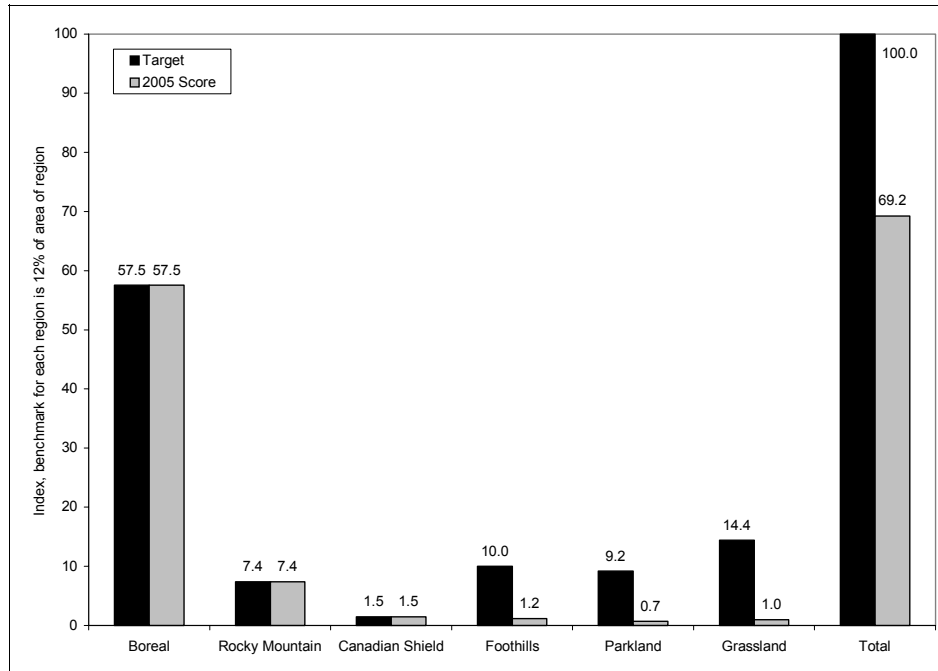
The Foothills, Parkland and Grassland regions of the province remain hugely under-represented in Alberta's protected areas network. The lack of properly protected areas of adequate size affects the sustainability of species and is especially critical for large mammals such as the grizzly bear and woodland caribou.

While the government has allocated one-third of the province for timber harvesting under Forest Management Agree-

ments, the area the government has protected is only a small fraction of that. Despite the fact that woodland caribou are an endangered species, no large core areas of prime caribou habitat have been protected in the province. In the Castle Region of southern Alberta, which contains north-south corridors essential for wildlife moving through the Rockies, the government has not even given proper protected area status. Its designation as a Forest Land Use Zone still allows forestry, energy developments and off-highway vehicle use that fragment habitat and disturb wildlife. We can't put a true price on what has been lost as a result of inadequately protecting our natural landscapes. There are few monetary estimates of the ecological, recreational and other values of protected areas. Alberta parks and recreation areas added an estimated \$1 billion to the provincial Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1993/94, or 1% of the GDP. A British Columbia study put a higher price on ecological values than recreational values, suggesting the \$1 billion recreational value should be doubled.

The index for protected areas is based on the target of protecting 12% of each region identified above (Rocky Mountains, Boreal, Canadian Shield, Foothills, Parklands and Grasslands). For each region, if 12% or more of the region has been protected, the score is set equal to the area of land in the province covered by the particular region. So, for example, the boreal region makes up 57.5 % of the province. Given that over 12% of the boreal is under formal protection (13.21% as described above), the score assigned to this sub-region is 57.5. The same approach is taken in the other regions. Thus, the scores of 7.4 and 1.5 for the Rocky Mountains and Canadian Shield respectively, demonstrate that 12% or more of these areas are currently protected. For each region in which the 12% target has not been met, the index score is pro-rated according to the portion of the target that has been achieved. The total score of 100 represents the equivalent of 12% of each region being protected in Alberta. As the final bar in the figure demonstrates, in 2003, due to inadequate protection for grasslands, parklands and foothills, the province scored 69.2 out of 100. It is important to remember however, that it is not just the area of land that determines an integral system of parks and protected areas, representation from various habitat types is also necessary. This may partly be why in the Sierra Club's annual report card, Alberta scored an 'F' for biodiversity.

Index of Alberta's Record of Protecting Special Places



A value of \$1 billion per year for parks and wilderness is derived from very broad extrapolation based on recreational values. If ecological values were included, it could double.

As an index, parks and wilderness ranked 69.2 on a scale where 100 is equal to protecting 12% of each region of the province.

