

Last Stand – fight for survival in Banff

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The bear lies motionless, face down on his belly in between willows not 20 meters away from the railway tracks in Banff National Park.

“That’s where he collapsed after being hit by the train roughly around 1 a.m. in the night of the 14th to the 15th of May. The bear was a huge male grizzly in his prime. Five hundred and ninety-nine pounds or 272 kilograms”, explains Steve Michel, a human wildlife conflict specialist in Banff, as he flips through more pictures of the dead bear he had saved on his laptop.

Based on the photographs, the location he was killed, the time of the year and his exceptional stature, we both agree that it is quite likely the very same bear I photographed a bit over a year ago in an epic battle with the Bow Valley wolf pack.



This large grizzly, seen here in a battle with a member of the Bow Valley wolf pack, is believed to be the bear killed by a train in Banff park, May 14. The bear withstood an epic four-day battle with the pack during which no animals were killed. By Peter Dettling

Flash Back

It was late March 2008 when a huge grizzly bear battled the Bow Valley wolf pack for over four days in the heart of the Bow Valley in Banff National Park. Hopelessly outnumbered (nine against one), the big bruin stood his ground and battled the wolves successfully and gracefully. Luckily, no animals were seriously injured during the entire four days.

Now, 13 months after this epic battle, I stare motionless at Steve’s computer directly into the face of this brave, now dead bear. I still feel admiration for him, mixed with deep regret, sadness, frustration and anger.

Enough is enough. I say farewell to Steve and get onto the Trans-Canada Highway. While setting my cruise control at 90 km/h I am nearly crushed by the impatient drivers in their SUVs decorated with bikes, ATVs and motorboats. As dozens of cars speed by me, I have to think again about the bear, the wolves, and the way we are treating our national parks, Banff in particular.

In 1955, a park warden named John Woods made a report about the main causes of wildlife deaths in Banff park. He stated that "it is evident... that the railroad and highways are the greatest wildlife hazard in the park".

He went on to describe the known accident mortality for 1954. Fifty-three elk and six moose were killed, or injured and later destroyed, as a result of contact with railroad locomotives... 55 years later and following many, many statements from Canadian Pacific (CP), we still face the very same problems.

It is a very sad reality that since the white man set foot into the Bow Valley he thought about how to exploit it (hunting, trapping, mining or creating wealth through mass tourism).

By 1925, CP was already transporting about 100,000 tourists each year into the Bow Valley. Banff grew into an internationally-recognized landmark of Canada. Today, in 2009, Parks Canada is seriously considering opening up the national parks for more commercial use.

It is fairly common knowledge that at this time our planet is losing species after species worldwide at an unprecedented rate. Scientists speak already about the sixth wave of extinction facing this planet, caused directly or indirectly by humans.

If there should be a "stronghold" for nature, then it should be in Canada's "prime" national park, or so one would think. The sad reality is that key people with the ability to stand up and protect this unique "wild" jewel are allowing it to be destroyed.

From an ecological point of view, Banff Park is not the "crown jewel" of national parks, but more the opposite.

Think about it before denying it. One finds in the core of critical wildlife habitat of Banff three ski hills, one artificial dam, one golf course, an airplane strip, a major highway, a scenic road, one railway, a major town and millions of visitors. Open up for more commercial use? God help us! The fact of the matter is that we are not even able to keep the populations of such iconic and biologically important animals as grizzly bears or wolves at a sustainable level.

Meanwhile, Parks Canada is busy trying to "manage" the "problem bears", "habituated wolves" and the most dangerous of them all, the "town elk". Round'em up, chase them with dogs, shoot them with rubber bullets... Fantasy? Unfortunately, cruel reality for the "town" elk, the "problem" bears or "habituated" wolves.

The massive grizzly bear that so bravely took on the whole Bow Valley wolf pack stood no chance as he was crushed by the train, indirectly losing his life to the "number one problem species" in the Bow Valley – homo sapiens.

Does Park Canada need a new vision? You bet. But let's not get blinded by the economic downturn and scare talk. We are facing a serious worldwide ecological crisis and this one has nothing to do with money.

The economy is an artificial world that was created by us humans and we will find a way to turn things around as we have done before. But the world-wide loss of species is not slowing down.

Thus, the one place in the world where nature, with all its splendid scenery, flora and fauna, should have a legitimate stronghold and take precedence over the interest of humans, is a national park.

Eliminating or limiting, not opening up the parks for more commercial use, that must be the ultimate goal. Only then can a national park become a place where we humans can reconnect, redefine our own place on earth in solitude and not between the fumes of all those thousands of tour buses and millions of tourists.

We all would “benefit” from such a place. Unfortunately, at this moment in time, bears, wolves and all the other animals are losing their fight for survival in Canada’s Rocky Mountain National parks.

How to get involved:

- 1) Average Joe – Join the online discussion forum and propose changes. To access Parks Canada’s review Website, e-mail Parks.Chats@pc.gc.ca
- 2) Where are the grass roots organizations? Step up your efforts in the next few weeks and help shape a new, eternal vision for what a national park should stand for. Time is running out.