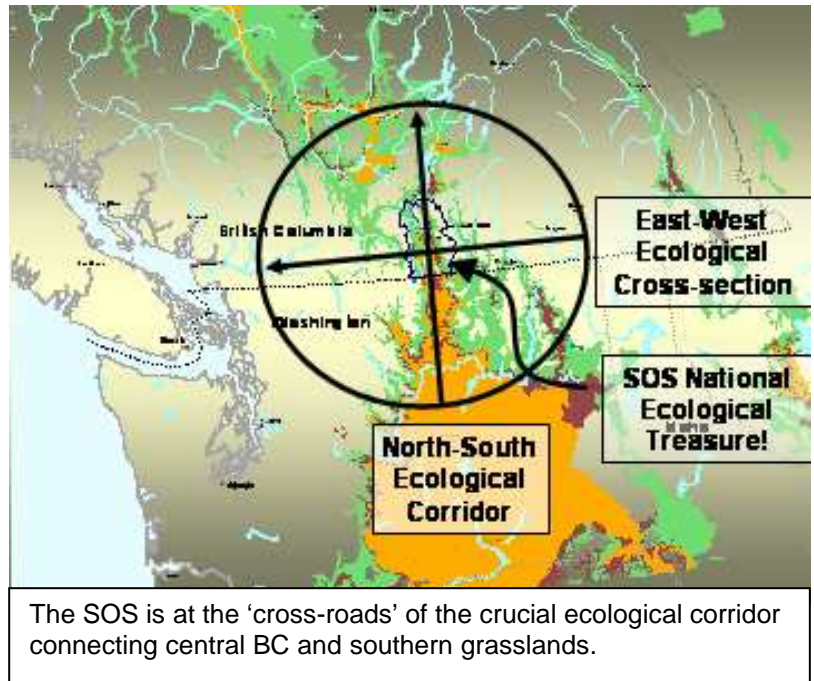


Backgrounder:

South Okanagan – Similkameen “at the Cross-Roads” **Support the SOS National Park Reserve Proposal**

People of the South Okanagan – Similkameen are at a crossroads. As illustrated in this map, we live at the ecological crossroads crucial to habitats throughout the central interior of our province. In another sense we are at a crossroads for shaping our future. Collectively we have been gifted with a major opportunity to protect and sustain the natural beauty, and biological richness of this nationally significant region – for us and for our children’s children. A study is assessing the feasibility of a national park reserve in the SOS. Together we have only a short time to capture this ‘one-time-only’ opportunity. If forfeited it will not return. A national park established in the SOS will be a tribute to the foresight of those dedicated people that help bring it to pass.



Executive Summary:

Building upon the multi-year work of the Okanagan-Shuswap Land and Resources Management Plan (LRMP), a national park reserve has been proposed in the South Okanagan – Similkameen. The concept is to consolidate, infill and provide enhanced ecosystem integrity within and around Protected Areas proposed by the LRMP. The national park proposal area abuts the international border between the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys. Because the border cuts mid-slope across grasslands in that area, the concept also presents a valuable prospect for an ‘international park’.

There is sound scientific evidence supporting a National Park in the SOS. If established a national park reserve here will be a significant advance towards:

- ***completing Canada’s national park system;***
- ***secured biodiversity conservation during climate change (wildlife will be moving along this narrow corridor , plus, important East-West ecological linkages);***
- ***First Nations participation;***
- ***enhanced quality of life for residents and visitors;***
- ***substantive cultural enrichment; and,***
- ***a strong regional economy.***

Time is short. Autumn of 2007 the park feasibility study will recommend to governments either ‘for’ or ‘against’ creation of the South Okanagan – Similkameen National Park Reserve

Ecological Attributes of the South Okanagan – Similkameen – the ‘4 Rs’

The South Okanagan – Similkameen is distinguished from other ecologically linked arid areas to the south (eg Columbia Basin Shrub Steppe), and from grasslands in British Columbia further to the north by having a higher rating of:

- *Species Richness*, the abundance of different species in a given area;
- *Species Rarity*, species found in the SOS and not known elsewhere; and,
- *Species Resilience*, pioneer individuals that prosper in adversity at the margins of distribution of their species, hence, inherent genomic resilience crucial to adaptation to ecological stresses such as climate change – such individuals are an important key to conservation.

These three ecological attributes make the South Okanagan – Similkameen an especially concentrated opportunity for representing the broadest spectrum of BC’s *Interior Dry Plateau* biodiversity and for conserving a *‘national treasure of biodiversity’*.

The South Okanagan – Similkameen is also distinguished from other areas by having a higher rating of:

- *Species Risk*

Provincially, the Conservation Data Centre¹ (CDC) lists more than 250 species at risk that depend on habitats found in the SOS. Nationally, the Committee on Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada² (COSEWIC) lists more than forty species that depend on habitats found in this area. This concentration of species at risk makes the South Okanagan – Similkameen *‘one of the 4 most endangered ecosystems in Canada’*.

Collectively these ecological attributes are *‘the 4Rs’* of the South Okanagan – Similkameen.

The arid habitats of the South Okanagan – Similkameen are easily damaged and slow to heal. People have collectively wrought major changes on our landscape. On the eve of the 200th anniversary of European arrival to the Okanagan³ we must change our management of biodiversity in the region, or, continue losing our natural heritage. A number of species have been extirpated. Management experience has shown it is more ecologically effective (and cost-effective) to conserve species while they still persist, rather than attempt recovery once locally adapted individuals have been lost.

The South Okanagan – Similkameen ‘crossroads’ title of this article refers to the north-south ecological corridor crucial to ecological adaptation to climate change throughout central interior BC, and, an east-west chain of conservation areas constituting an ecological cross-section of the ‘Pacific Northwest’. The ‘crossroads’ title also refers to the one-time-only opportunity to conserve, or forfeit, the natural heritage of the region that enriches our lives. At these crossroads people must now decide for or against the proposed South Okanagan – Similkameen national park reserve.

1 CDC - “Conservation Data Centre” -- British Columbia’s Scientific Authority

2 COSEWIC - “Committee On the Status of Endangered Wildlife In Canada” -- Canada’s National Scientific Authority

3 In 1811 explorer David Stuart was the first ‘white man’ to use a time-worn path through the Okanagan, later to be known as the fur brigade trail.

Parks Canada

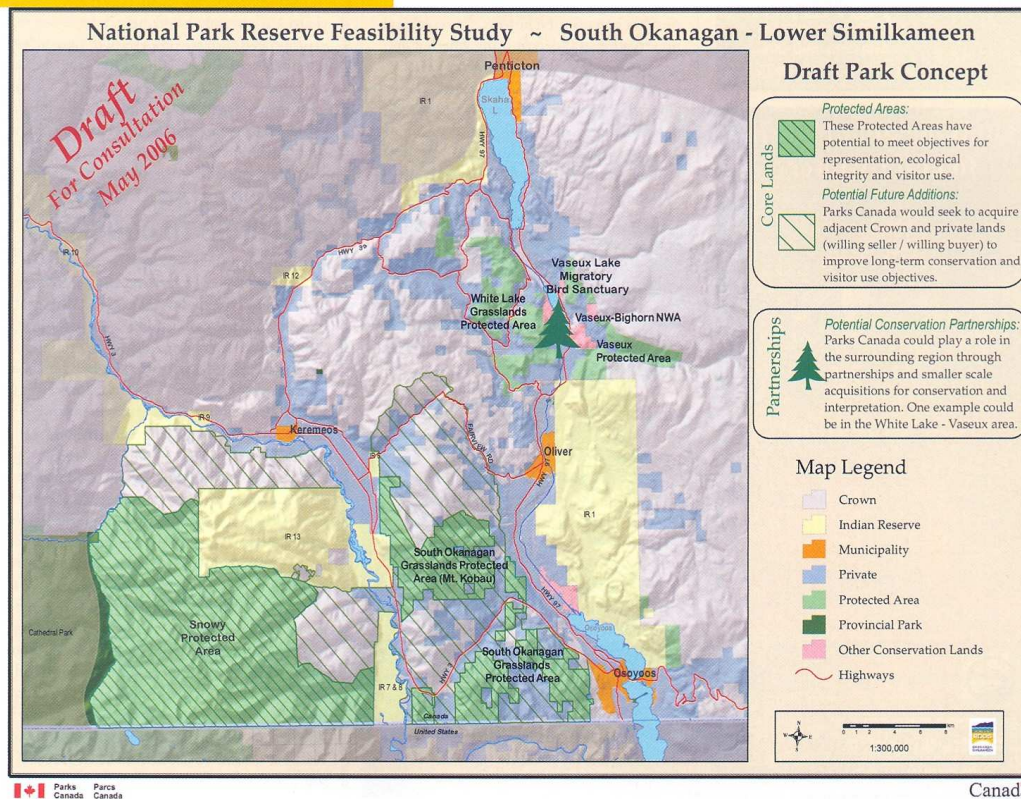
In the 2002 'Throne Speech' the Government of Canada committed to establishing ten new national parks within the next five years. Completion will substantially complete the national parks system. The goal is to represent each of Canada's 39 Natural Regions with at least one national park. The *Interior Dry Plateau* of British Columbia is not yet represented by a national park. Parks Canada's system plan refers to that ecological area of BC as *Natural Region 3*.

An assessment has been launched by Parks Canada to evaluate feasibility of a national park reserve⁴ in the South Okanagan – Similkameen. 'Ecological representation' is a principal pre-requisite for a national park. Being on the post-glacial corridor through which plants and animals have, and still are, occupying BC's *Interior Dry Plateau*, the SOS has a high index of ecological representation and is thus the best candidate for a national park reserve in Natural Region 3.

Given the constraints of data acquisition and assessment a preliminary "study area" was designated to provide the necessary scope to identify within it lands that may meet the ecological and other assessment criteria required for a national park. From within that study area, in May 2006 a draft concept of park boundaries was presented to the public. That concept consists of 35,000 – 40,000 hectares including Snowy and South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Areas (recommended by the LRMP) as well as some additional 'infill'. It also includes 'partnership management' in the White/Vaseux Lakes area. Incorporating public input a detailed proposal should be available for public comment at Parks Canada open houses in June 2007.

Parks Canada is doing a good job. The hard working feasibility study team is gaining community trust, including First Nations communities. Momentum of support for a national park reserve is growing.

PROPOSED BOUNDARIES



⁴ "Reserve" status prevails until land claims are resolved through treaty with First Nations.

Regional Context

According to Statistics Canada⁵:

- The Okanagan- Similkameen region has the fastest growing population rate of any other river valley in Canada
- The Okanagan – Similkameen has the most people for each square kilometer of surface water than anywhere else in Canada.
- The human population in the Okanagan- Similkameen river basin has jumped by more than 137% in just thirty years.

Thus, time is short before options and opportunities are forever lost.

International Context

The border between the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys cuts mid-slope across grasslands. Plants and animals pass freely across. Prospects are promising for the adjacent area in Washington State to also be secured for conservation. That would be of great value in habitat continuity and through that synergy enhance conservation efforts on both sides of the border. Shared by two nation neighbors an 'international grasslands park' would also complete the last remaining link in a chain of conservation areas spanning the border representing ecosystems from the 'driest dry' to the 'wettest wet' – from the 'Pocket Desert' of Osoyoos to the temperate rainforest of the Skagit. That chain of conservation areas would constitute a valuable ecological cross-section of the 'Pacific Northwest' of our continent.



Continuity

The proposal of a national park reserve in the South Okanagan – Similkameen is consistent with:

- United Nations *Earth Summit* Agreement in Rio de Janeiro, 1993
- The *National Accord for Protection of Species at Risk*, 1996
- Recommendation in George W. Scotter Report, 1998⁶
- Conservation priorities in the WLAP Core Review and Service Plan, 2001
- *Okanagan – Shuswap Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP), 2001

⁵ Statistics Canada - 2003

⁶ "Preliminary Assessment of the Natural Resources and Land Uses of Potential National Park Areas of Interest in the Interior Dry Plateau of British Columbia, Natural Region 3"

- The strategic goal of 35+ conservation organizations of local, provincial, national and international scope (SOSCP), 2001⁷
- Prime Minister's 'Johannesburg commitment to National Parks, 2002
- Adjacent Washington State conservation initiatives
- High scores in all 9 Parks Canada evaluation criteria

Conflict Resolution

Notwithstanding consistency with all these priorities and commitments, establishment of a national park in the SOS will not be easy. One might say Parks Canada has left the hardest to last. Unlike 'rock and ice' of remote mountain areas, grasslands are among the first habitat types occupied by arriving people. The SOS is just such a grassland. Today the SOS is an 'urban interface area'. People are now part of these ecosystems. The feasibility study will assess resolution of conflicts with people, as well as assessing opportunities for representing the culture and history of people in those lands. Parks Canada is showing exceptional flexibility and innovation in resolving adverse impacts on the lives of people and creating terrific cultural benefits of a park reserve.

Never-the-less Parks Canada will be a fair adjudicator of the feasibility study – a positive park recommendation for the SOS is not a foregone conclusion. Following the feasibility study a recommendation will go to provincial and federal governments. A strong show of broad public support enhances prospects of a favorable recommendation.

Public Support

Independent Opinion Poll Research⁸

300 people of the SOS were interviewed by a professional polling company regarding conservation views and priorities:

- 93% of residents polled feel that it is important to protect the natural ecosystems, plant and wildlife species in the South Okanagan in order to maintain our quality of life here.
- 81% of residents polled feel regional and local governments should do more to protect species at risk and their habitats.
- 71% disagree with the statement that we have protected too much land in the South Okanagan – Similkameen already; of those, 36% strongly disagree.
- Residents describe quality of life here to be related to a small town feel, with open spaces, less traffic, low density development with wilderness and agricultural areas nearby.

There is strong support from the majority of local mayors and Regional District Okanagan Similkameen councillors.⁹

BC's Premiere and government is supportive of the South Okanagan – Similkameen Park Reserve.

Park Opponents

Apparently hoping familiar land use privileges merely carry on as in the past, a coalition of fearful people lobbied to have the national park feasibility study suspended. Opponents failed to recognize that changes in land use privileges are inevitable in the face of a burgeoning human population growth in the South

⁷ South Okanagan – Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP) strategic goal - "A healthy environment that sustains the diversity of indigenous plants and animals while enriching people's lives". The national park reserve proposal is highly consistent with that Goal.

⁸ Synovate Poll, November 2004. Osoyoos & Oliver 75, Keremoes (including Cawston & Olalla) 25, Penticton (including Naramata, Kaleden, East-side Road, McClean Creek and Okanagan Falls) 200, Total 300

⁹ A few have interim reservations until conflict resolution commitments by Parks Canada become known.

Okanagan – Similkameen. Indeed, a national park reserve is the best way to conserve many of the land values they cherish, such as natural viewsapes. By attempts to have the feasibility study suspended it seemed opponents did not want people to have relevant information for an informed public consensus regarding the park reserve proposal.

To incite public apprehensions the coalition of opponents exaggerated or distorted a number of fears. Examples:

- misrepresentation of the relatively large “study area” as the “park proposal”;
- risk of catastrophic wildfire substantially exaggerated;
- continued livestock grazing cited as wildfire control (notwithstanding contrary advice of wildfire experts);
- characterizing the park proposal as a disaster for ranchers. (Instead it is more likely a national park in the SOS would be a substantive boon to ranchers with an interest in conservation of grasslands; enhanced public profile for the history of SOS ranching; *or in particular*, enrichment of the real-estate market for ranches.);
- asserting Parks Canada will force people from their homes (Parks Canada not expropriate any land. No one will be forced from their home. Purchase of private land will be exclusively on the basis of a willing seller volunteering their land.);
- characterizing the park proposal as betrayal of consensus gathering work of the *Okanagan – Shuswap Land and Resources Management Plan*. (The park national proposal is consistent with the LRMP. Conservation of species at risk is a priority of the LRMP. Also, that LRMP agreement specifically contemplates new opportunities such as this national park reserve proposal.);
- characterizing the park proposal as undue hardship on hunters. (Given this area is one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada, sportsmen’s support for the national park reserve would enhance their self-characterization as ‘conservationists’ before ‘hunters’. Hunting opportunities forfeit would be small in comparison to conservation gains.)

If a national park reserve is ultimately approved Parks Canada will minimize disruption in the livelihoods of people. There will be financial compensation for Crown land tenure holders that may be adversely impacted by a park reserve. There will be a relatively long transition period during which certain activities may be “grand-fathered” as an interim use as long as required. For example:

- Canadian Helicopter Company has been given written assurance regarding continuation of helicopter mountain-flying training.

Park Benefits

Benefits of a national park reserve in the South Okanagan – Similkameen are many and diverse. A national park reserve here in the SOS would be good for the environment, good for people and good to pass on this area’s natural legacy for our children and future generations to also enjoy.

Samples of SOS national park benefits include the following:

- consistent with a public opinion survey in the SOS by professional pollsters (showing very strong public support for conservation – it would provide what a majority of residents want);
- quality of life enriched for residents and visitors alike – providing a ‘natural area’ in the viewscape;
- people’s enjoyment (of park services, and, scenic natural areas);
- public education (enhancing both ecological knowledge and cultural knowledge);
- security of the ‘national park designation’ (more secure than provincial designations of land);
- habitats within the park managed to highest ecological standards;

- creation of habitat benchmarks (to which management practices elsewhere can be compared);
- access to a national pool of ecosystem management expertise;
- enhanced funding for management of species at risk ;
- enhanced ecosystem research funding/capacity (eg working with schools, colleges and universities);
- improved weed control;
- prescribed burns (benefiting certain natural ecosystems, as well as benefiting public safety);
- enriched stewardship in surrounding buffer zone (eg by demonstration of successful habitat management techniques developed within the park);
- elevated public profile of conservation initiatives in surrounding buffer zone (eg enhanced fund-raising potential for conservation NGOs);
- international consolidation of conservation efforts (enriching habitat values and security through synergy with adjacent conservation areas in Washington State);
- keystone in north-south ecological corridor (for central BC ecological adaptation as climate changes);
- complete final link in a chain of east-west conservation areas forming an ecological cross-section of the north west portion of the North American continent (a cross-section from dry to wet);
- conserve water quality (ie protect the headwaters of numerous community watersheds);
- First Nations collaboration;
- enriched attendance at regional festivals and community events (eg Meadowlark Festival, Star Party, IronMan Triathlon, music festivals, fireworks shows, etc);
- evidence businesses may relocate to region (to provide a quality-of-life attracting staff);
- synergistic consolidation of ‘nature tours’ with ‘winery tours’; and,
- very large economic benefits

Economic Benefits Study¹⁰

This is a summary of an independent analysis of the economic benefits for the proposed South Okanagan – Similkameen National Park Reserve sponsored by the South Okanagan – Similkameen National Park Network Citizen’s Committee. The forecast economic benefits are very large.

Primary impact on the following communities: Penticton, Osoyoos, Oliver, Keremeos, Okanagan Falls, Kaleden, Cawston, Olalla, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Upper Similkameen Indian Band

Capital Costs

\$10,000,000 in total costs with \$2 million in soft costs including planning and \$8 million in hard costs for a range of items including a visitor reception centre, administration and maintenance buildings, hiking trails and habitat preservation.

Investment

Total investment of \$72.0 million during the 2006 - 2015 period comprising:

- \$28.7 million for hotels
- \$22.6 million for residential
- \$10.0 million for the proposed National Park
- \$3.5 million for campgrounds
- \$7.1 million for *other* projects including recreation, retail, restaurant and tourist attractions

¹⁰ Development Consulting Group and Land Strategies Ltd, September 2005

Employment

Total employment of 832 FTE¹¹ during the 2006 - 2015 period comprising:

- 386 FTE in construction
- 446 FTE in operations including 195 FTE for the proposed National Park and 60 FTE for the local area hotels and motels

Income

Total income of \$56.3 million during the 2006 - 2015 period comprising:

- \$32.7 million in construction
- \$23.6 million in operations including \$11.5 million

Expenditures

Total expenditures of \$120.1 million during the 2006 - 2015 period comprising:

- \$27.8 million by visitors for accommodation
- \$25.2 million by visitors for food & beverage
- \$13.9 million by visitors for retail
- \$13.2 million by visitors for recreation
- \$12.0 million by visitors for transportation
- \$28.0 million by employees

Tax Revenues

Total tax revenues of \$39.9 million during the 2006 - 2015 period comprising:

- \$10.0 million of federal GST
- \$7.9 million of federal income tax
- \$3.9 million of provincial income tax
- \$2.9 million of provincial PST
- \$1.6 million of provincial hotel tax
- \$2.9 million of municipal property tax
- \$0.3 million of municipal hotel tax

First Nations

- The National Park Reserve is expected to offer numerous Parks and tourism related investment and employment opportunities
- Positive impacts on numerous existing and proposed projects including the Ashnola campground, Nk'Mip RV park, Nk'Mip Desert Heritage Centre, Nk'Mip Cellars Winery, Desert Canyon Golf Course and the Mascot Mine.

¹¹ FTE – Full Time Equivalent job

Local Economic Example – the Revelstoke Experience

At well attended public meetings in Keremeos and Oliver, Alan Mason, Director of Community Economic Development for Revelstoke and Area presented “*Benefits Of National Parks For Revelstoke*¹²”. Providing real-world local experience regarding impacts of having a national park on one’s doorstep, Revelstoke is a nearby ‘gateway community to a national park’ – Mount Revelstoke National Park¹³. His principal message; “*In Revelstoke the benefits of a national park far outweigh negative impacts*”

Benefits Of National Parks For Revelstoke

Community Background

- 8,000+ Population

Major Sectors of economy:

- Forestry
- Tourism
- Transportation
- Public sector

Direct Benefits of National Parks to Local Economy

Employment Benefits:

- number of jobs: 82.74 FTEs
- Annual value of wages: \$6.6 million

Expenditures:

- Value of goods and services purchased locally: \$2.4 million

Tourism Benefits

- Number of visitors: 600,000 (70% stay one night)
- Tourism expenditures: \$9.7 million
- Community “leverages”: international marketing and reputation of National Parks
- High number of European tourists: 66% of those who visit National Parks

Research Benefits

- Number of researchers: Approx 12 per year
- Research expenditures: \$110,000 per year

National Parks As Business Amenity Attraction

- Public recreation opportunities
- Spectacular locations to recreate are protected

Ancillary Benefits

- Skilled and well-educated workforce
- Good core of community volunteers
- Environmental benefits
- Reduced land use conflicts
- Excellent data sources

Summary Analysis

- Benefits of National Parks far outweigh the negative impacts
- National Parks contribute to our economic diversification through directly creating jobs, purchase of services, and attracting tourists to the community
- Proximity of National Parks encourages people to move to Revelstoke for lifestyle

¹² December, 2005, Sponsored by SOSNPN

¹³ Glacier National Park is also nearby

Requested Help:

1. White Lake and Vaseux Lake areas

Inclusion of the White Lake and Vaseux Lake areas in the park proposal with full fledged national park status and tenure, rather than mere ‘partnership management’. *(The White Lake and Vaseux Lake areas encompass the most important and threatened ecosystems in the SOS. It is the strong conviction of independent scientific review, including the scientific review by Parks Canada, that the White Lake and Vaseux Lake areas are crucial to achieving Parks Canada objectives of ecological representation. These two areas are proposed Protected Areas and thus should be included in the park proposal as were other Protected Areas.)* Help is needed to include these areas in the park proposal having full fledged national park status and tenure.

2. International Grassland Park

An international grassland park between the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys would produce large synergistic ecosystem values, as well as, completing the final link in a chain of conservation areas share by two nations representing the ‘Pacific Northwest’ of the continent of North America. *(In that area grasslands in Washington State south of the international border are managed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and hence are ‘public lands’. Consensus of high level politician counterparts in both Canada and USA is essential to create an international park.)* Help is needed to initiate discourse on this possibility between politician counterparts in Canada and the USA.