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EDITORIAL

Kananaskis Country management plans badly in need of update

Once a somewhat hidden gem, Kananaskis Country is a secret no more.

While it can be considered part of Calgary's backyard, the multiple provincial parks, recreation areas and public land use zones have become well-known across the country. With it likely to see more than four million visitors a year – rivalling Canada's premier national park in Banff – a key aspect to its maintenance and preservation has long been overlooked.

Management plans for national parks are relatively well-known due to the roughly every 10-15 years they're updated and the tremendous amount of work that is needed to see them across the finish line.

In Kananaskis Country, however, its management plans have layer upon layer of dust gathering as they simply no longer reflect the reality of what's needed for the multiple provincial parks.

The plans, which are likely even unknown to exist to many locals, are mostly from a bygone era. Elbow-Sheep Wildland Provincial Park was last done in 1998, Peter Lougheed and Spray Valley provincial parks are from 2006 and Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area was released in 2004.

Many of the plans are old enough to drive, able to legally drink and would've graduated from post-secondary school, but the reality is they are still the outdated guiding documents for the region.

In contrast, Parks Canada management plans for areas such as Yoho, Kootenay and Banff national parks have extensive public engagement, release "what they heard" reports from the public and ultimately publish a concise document that outlines the priorities for the next 10-15 years for that park region.

Few people would argue they're perfect, but even fewer people could successfully push that they don't outline the expectations from the federal agency. From conservation of wildlife and the environment, an emphasis on public transit and the priority of Indigenous relations and reconciliation, the plans put forward a vision for a specific region that best reflects modern times.

In 2022, an estimated 4.2 million people took in

Kananaskis Country – a significant increase since one million people visited in 2000.

The recreational area has become an international destination for some and subsequent provincial governments have pumped investments into the area for trails and campgrounds, while a Kananaskis Conservation Pass has itself become an election issue.

But while investments have come forward, Alberta Parks budget has been left to wither on the vine at times. The latest provincial budget has a \$106 million increase for Environment and Protected Areas budget to \$553 million in 2023-24, but it plummets to \$499 million in 2024-25 and \$357 million in 2025-26.

Obviously much can change for each budget, but how you forecast future budgets can be as much of a tell as the importance of an area to the actual funding it receives.

It comes at the same time as the province has made outdoor recreation a potential cash cow for economic growth through tourism, with \$196 million set aside to refurbish and expand infrastructure in said areas.

Too much has changed in Kananaskis Country to ignore the priority needed to be given to the management plans. The easiest fix would be to legislate a timeline for new plans, similar to the province's federal counterparts. Though it's easy to put requirements into law, the supply of adequate resources is equally important.

A management plan offers a guideline for the here and now, but also for the coming years.

In a recent decision by the Land and Property Rights Tribunal, a 20-unit glamping project in Kananaskis Public Land Use Zone was allowed to go ahead. The decision cited plans that were more than 20 years old, including one nearing 40, in aiding in its decision.

A plan that was written in 1986 such as the Kananaskis Sub Regional Integrated Resource Plan or the Kananaskis Recreation Policy of 1999 simply aren't adequate in coming to decisions in 2023.

Regardless of which party is in power in Alberta four weeks from now, if Kananaskis Country is going to be of continued importance for residents and visitors work needs to begin on new management plans before the year is out.

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