

Editorial -

Banff's Trans-Canada Plan Integrates Needs of Humans, Needs of Nature

by Dave Poulton, Executive Director

Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) - Calgary/Banff Chapter

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As an unabashed environmentalist and park advocate, it feels strange to find myself speaking in support of a plan to expand a highway through Canada's flagship national park. But Parks Canada's recently announced plan for the twinning and improvement of part of the Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park merits such support.

Banff Park administrators operate under a legal requirement to manage the park so as to maintain or restore its ecological integrity. They share this with their colleagues across Canada. Unique to Banff, however, is the challenge of doing so when the heart of the park must necessarily host the major national transportation corridor, the Trans-Canada Highway and a booming tourism economy.

That challenge has motivated a bold long-term experiment in reconciling human transportation needs and the needs of wildlife and nature. It is an experiment that has attracted world attention and earned Canada a place of leadership in the field.

Between 1981 and 1997 the Trans-Canada was twinned between the east park gates and Castle Junction, a total of 49.5 km. of road. The work took place in three distinct phases as funding permitted. In each phase, fences were installed to keep wildlife off the road, and underpasses and later overpasses were constructed to provide for wildlife movement across the highway.



Overpass crossing structure on the divided TransCanada Highway in Banff National Park. Raised berms on the naturally vegetated overpass prevent animals from seeing the highway as they cross, adding to their sense of security.

These were important measures in controlling the death of animals on the road, and maintaining integrated wildlife populations and communities. Close study in the intervening year has indicated that the measures were fairly successful. Over 60,000 crossings by wildlife of various species have been recorded on the 23 existing crossing structures during the past seven years. While some questions and problems remain, it is apparent that we are on the right track to sustaining both human and wildlife needs respecting the park and highway.

Now the highway between Castle Junction and the British Columbia border is clearly in need of improvement. Its single lanes form a bottle-neck for traffic. Driver restlessness brings unsafe driving behaviour and traffic conditions. And animals have died by the hundreds through the years. All these things will grow worse as traffic increases in the coming years, as it is almost certainly bound to do.

Against that background, in the fall of 2003 the federal government gave Parks Canada the go-ahead to plan the upgrading of the remaining 33.5 km. of highway in Banff. The planning process has not only yielded a positive result, but has been a rare demonstration of how the environmental assessment process can operate to spur on better environmental decision-making.

The full plan calls for the twinning of the road, for good (if not perfect) wildlife fencing, and for 18 wildlife crossing structures of various sizes. The design and location of the crossing structures have been based upon the scientific research on the existing structures, assuring that we use the valuable knowledge we have paid to learn.

The larger structures are slightly larger than those which currently exist, an accommodation of the needs of the sensitive species which tend to prevail more in the upper Bow Valley, especially grizzly bears. Many of us had hoped for at least one much larger structure, as an aid to both wildlife and scientific understanding, but I for one can live with the prudence Parks Canada planners have shown in this situation.

Money, not surprisingly, is a problem. The entire project, as currently planned, is forecast to cost approximately \$160 million. The federal government has to date only provided \$50 million. As a result only part of the project can proceed in the short term.

Examination of the pattern of traffic accidents, and human and animal fatalities, shows that the need for upgrading is strongest on an approximately 11 km. stretch of road just east of Lake Louise. Accordingly, a preliminary plan was announced early last summer to twin and fence that portion, including 6 wildlife crossing structures and 2 crossings for people. That plan was submitted for environmental assessment.

The assessment courageously identified several weaknesses in the preliminary plan, saying its net effect could be significantly negative for wildlife. Most seriously, it expressed grave concern with the roadside fence ending by the Bow River just to the east of Lake Louise. That plan, it said, would allow wildlife onto the highway in a very dangerous spot. It would also funnel wildlife toward the town of Lake Louise, where there is a growing problem of human-wildlife interaction. Again, grizzly bears were a special concern for obvious reasons. This is why the recommendation has been made to include the town on the highway side of the fence when fencing proceeds that far.

In response to the environmental assessment, the plan was improved. The fence was extended to the west to include the highway past the town of Lake Louise. Large culverts are to be built at the fence ends to give wildlife a way to avoid crossing the road.

And substantial design improvements were made in traffic measures, including an acceleration/deceleration lane for the entrance to Harry's Hill, the small community opposite Lake Louise on the highway. The independent highway design expert consulting to the project agreed that the changes would make the highway safer yet for traffic. And the extra fencing would allow the reduced speed zone at Lake Louise to be removed, making for better traffic flow and more efficient transportation.

Some commercial interests have suggested that we are spending money needlessly on wildlife, at the expense of traffic safety. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the improved project is a true win-win for all park users, human and non-human alike. That means that tourism operators can rest assured that their greatest attraction, the wildlife in the park, will be there in the future. That surely is a wise investment.

The highway plan is an elegant integration of the human needs of safety and efficient transportation and the safety and mobility needs of wildlife. It deserves close and positive consideration. It may just be an example of what truly sustainable development looks like.