

## A NATIONAL PARK ?

A guest piece this time from John & Mary Theberge, biologist's from Oliver B.C. John & Mary's recent book, *The Ptarmigans Dilemma* expands on grasslands issues in North America. We recommend the book, and the opinions contained in their letter below that first appeared in the Oliver Chronicle September 11 2015. That book and *Wolf Country: Eleven Years Tracking the Algonquin Wolves* are available at amazon.ca

Followed by an article by Bob Handfield, past-president of South Okanagan Naturalists; Club

## National Park – Reasons for Concern - The Position of 2 of the Proposal's Initiators

John and Mary Theberge  
Oliver.

We are 2 of 4 biologists who initiated the South Okanagan national park proposal back in 2002.

During the public feasibility study, we put in years of effort to inform the public about its high priority, ecological rationale, including staging a 2-day public science forum to explain the meaning and values of a national park in this area.

But a problem arose. The BC government pushed Parks Canada into the untenable position of abandoning its foremost principle of maintaining ecological integrity. With cattle grazing, the lands before and after national park establishment would look and feel very little different.

National parks are meant to preserve and protect nature in as unimpeded a way as possible, to be places where we stand back, for ethical and moral reasons, and let nature have its way.

Livestock grazing, along with commercial logging and mining are prohibited, by Act, Policy and Regulations. While any legal or procedural changes to accommodate livestock grazing in a South Okanagan national park undoubtedly would be restricted to this particular park, a dangerous precedent would be set. History has shown that once you entrench rights in any park, national or provincial, the legal prospects of removing them are in doubt.

We have already made far more concessions to outside commercial interests than has the U.S. National Park system.

For decades we have championed national parks. As a university teacher, John has helped train many of the Agency's senior employees in ecological park management, and chaired a national task force for the federal Minister of the Environment on finding ways to complete the national park system. The minister wanted to be able to make national parks without being held to ransom by the provinces, as had happened so often before. Here, it has happened again.

As ecologists, we recognize that livestock grazing, even managed as well as possible, is invariably extremely destructive in the dry southern interior. These lands never supported bison, which are roughly ecological equivalents to cattle, and so are not adapted to the presence of a 1,200 pound grazing and trampling herbivore. Delicate soils that depend on cryptobiotic crusts for nitrogen, sensitive riparian habitats, the ubiquitous presence of seed sources of invasive plants, all make livestock grazing and ecological integrity totally contradictory.

Parks Canada's statement in 2011 that they would manage "continued livestock grazing in the park concept area in a manner consistent with ecological objectives and park values" is scientifically absurd.

Now, however, the game has changed with the province's recent press release of a proposed jurisdictional split into national park and provincial park/conservancy lands, and its call for public comment by Oct. 12. Taking a big chunk out of the national park proposal, BC would likely continue to despoil the lands it manages, but it may withdraw the offending caveat on provincial crown lands it hands over to Parks Canada. A real national park, not a bastardized one, could happen. Similar to Grasslands National Park in Saskatchewan, it would accumulate gradually, probably over decades, assembled only as ranchers willingly decide to sell. But no land included in a national park would remain cattle pasture. The Act, Policy and Regulations, and the whole ideal of national parks, would stay intact.

Unhappily, we do not know if that is in the cards. Far too little information was provided in the province's press release. If a real national park without grazing is in the offing, we support it. If not, we continue our objections and hope that people concerned with protecting and restoring the wild beauty of an intact ecosystem, will object too.

With the current ambiguity, and especially after the years of unresolved debate over appropriate land uses, this request for public comment is almost insulting. Ideally, BC together with First Nations, should make clear what land uses they foresee, and extend the period of public comment. But related to a national park, at a minimum, Parks Canada should exploit the opportunity, right now, to determine if the province has backed away from the livestock grazing ransom, and issue a press release reassuring Canadians that it will not entertain commercial ranching in any lands that may become a national park.

**John and Mary Theberge,  
Oliver B.C.**



Figure 1 pic courtesy Gwen Barlee, wilderness committee.org



Bob Handfield article follows:

## **Suspicious of National Park Intentions, by Bob Handfield**

Residents of the South Okanagan Valley have been hearing about the pros and cons of a South Okanagan Similkameen National Park fairly intensely for about 13 years with Parks Canada spending much of that time doing a feasibility study of the park concept.

The Okanagan First Nations spent more than a year doing their own feasibility study. However the Provincial Government pulled out of the park study group in December 2011 saying there was insufficient support for a park. A recent Freedom of Information request by the Osoyoos Times revealed that in fact the cabinet had made the decision to pull out of the talks in January 2011 but kept that decision secret for just about one year.

Since then the provincial government has been adamant in its opposition to a National Park. Local MLA Linda Larsen said only one year ago that she couldn't understand why park supporters insist on "flogging a dead horse." She went on to say that tourism wasn't that important and she would much rather have ranchers than tourists.

Bob Handfield is a columnist for the Western News and past-president of the South Okanagan Naturalists' Club but the views expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of the club. This article appeared in the Penticton Western News Sept 4 2015

However on Aug. 13 the provincial government released what it called an intentions paper titled *Protected Areas framework for British Columbia's South Okanagan*. The "dead horse" seems to have gained new life, at least temporarily. The intentions paper proposes that the level of protection be significantly upgraded for three areas of the South Okanagan- basically all of the areas proposed by Parks Canada for a park plus some additional areas. In fact they suggest that two of the three areas be considered by Parks Canada for a national park. How original!

While the intent of the province opens the door to a renewed conversation about the possibility of giving some of our rarest landscape national park status, there is a great deal about this intentions paper that smells very fishy to me. I don't think it is a coincidence that the paper was released just two weeks after a

federal election campaign got underway and with no advertising of the concept to the public. No open houses or information sessions were scheduled for the public to become informed or ask questions on this very important land use issue. In addition only 60 days is being allowed for public comment so anyone wishing to comment must do so by Oct. 12.

Not only are we in the midst of a federal election, but school is just starting up and agricultural people are tied up with fruit and grape harvesting. The park issue has been around for at least 13 years- why the big rush now to get public comment within 60 days. In addition, the government has provided several questions for the public to consider in responding to the intentions paper. To my mind, some of the questions are so generalized and require so much specialized knowledge of the areas in question that very few people, me included are in a position to provide a meaningful response. The government has requested that all public comment be submitted by way of their website and using only their questions. There seems to be no provision for people without internet access to be involved. A suspicious mind might think it is a ploy by the provincial government to keep comments to a minimum.

In discussing whether some of the area should become a national park, the intentions paper appears to put so many conditions on the park proposal that the same suspicious mind might conclude that the provincial government is actually hoping Parks Canada will find the proposal unacceptable and then the provincial Liberal can blame Parks Canada for their not being a South Okanagan National Park.

I really hope I'm wrong about all of this. Bob Handfield

Tags: South Okanagan National Park, South Okanagan Similkameen National Park, John & Mary Theberge, The Ptarmigan's Dilemma, Protected Areas Framework for British Columbia, Bob Handfield