

Pipe dream

O Canada National Wilderness

Appeared in Wild Lands Advocate, 1997, and in Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape, a collection edited by Pamela Banting and published by Polestar Press, 1998.

Probably it should be in the Rockies. Yes, definitely it should be in the Rockies. I'll bet that if you went across the country asking Canadians what they thought of when they heard the word "wilderness," lots would say, "The Rockies, of course." So that's where we'd have O Canada National Wilderness. In the Canadian Rockies.

Just picture it: Lake Louise, surrounded by snowy peaks. In the foreground there's a Mountie astride a horse in front of an imposing hotel, the Canadian flag snapping smartly in the glacial breeze. Downright patriotic, this place. You can almost hear the national anthem.

Ah, but wait. That's Banff National Park, not O Canada National Wilderness. O Canada National Wilderness would be all this—minus the Mountie, the horse, the flag and the hotel.

Just the lake and the mountains.

Here's what it would be like to go to O Canada National Wilderness. You'd take a deep breath and step across the boundary. Then you'd look back to what you were leaving behind: the parking lot, the car that brought you there (smell of hot motor drifting across the invisible line) and the large warning sign.

Entering O Canada National Wilderness No services next 67,000 square kilometres

Instead of a paved trail leading to a bridge over the first creek, you would see a simple path. That path would have been established many millennia ago by moose and elk and bears. They would have waded the creek, no problem. You, being a water-hating primate from the African savanna, would teeter across on stepping stones, getting one of your feet wet. If you had arrived an hour later, the glacier upstream would have poured another five cubic metres per second into the channel and you would have had to do like the moose.

But still, the farther you went, through windfalls and boulderfields and bogs, the more you would smile. You would smile because of all that would *not* be there. There would be no motorcycles or 4X4s, none of those nasty little "quads," currently the conveyance of choice for serious wilderness abusers. No machines would be allowed in O Canada National Wilderness, period. Not even mountain bicycles, one of which I own and love.

Nor would there be any pooping, mudhole-creating horses. The moose and the elk and the bears would have pooped some and churned up the trail a bit in wet sections, but nothing like horses do. Horses, like 4X4s and quads, are not native to North America.

No helicopters full of tourists would buzz your campsite, because no scenic overflights of O Canada National Wilderness would be permitted. You would see no spent cartridges in the woods or discarded fish heads by the streams or snarled monofilament line on the lakeshores. Nor would you take a bullet in the back from some hunter who had made a mistake. No killing of anything bigger than a mosquito, not even a fish, would be permitted in O Canada National Wilderness. The wherewithal would not be allowed.

You simply wouldn't have to think about these things. You would know that O Canada National Wilderness was what the sign said it was, real wilderness, the nation's best, in which the normal human activity of wrecking everything was suspended. Any human entering O Canada National Wilderness would have to do so benignly; that is, self-propelled and self-provisioned, without motors, wheels, axes or weapons.

There would be nothing between you and a charging grizzly bear except your ingenuity (and perhaps a canister of pepper spray). But on the other hand you would probably see grizzly bears, because they would live there unmolested. You might see wolves and wolverines and lynx and cougars, the kinds of creatures that prosper only in truly wild places.

No nicely prepared tent site in a designated campground would await you at the end of the day in O Canada National Wilderness. You couldn't light a campfire except in an emergency. But you could go anywhere you pleased and you could camp anywhere you liked.

Nobody would be looking out for you except the other people in your party. If you chose to go alone, no one would be looking out for you at all. Warden patrols would be few, and only wardens would have radios and sat phones. Or maybe they wouldn't. Could you carry one of those cool devices that beams your location up to a satellite and posts it on the Internet? That has a "Come save me!" button on it? Would you want to?

Scary, this. But spicy, and strangely desirable. We have an archetypal craving for such a place. After all, the conditions there would be rather like the conditions under which our species lived for all but the last 10,000 years of our 350,000-year existence. (Updated from earlier figure of 200,000.) The conditions would be primitive, in the best sense of the word. Humans are first-rate primitives, having evolved to be full-time professional hikers, travelling about on foot in little family groups through vast primeval landscapes. We're not particularly happy in our impossibly crowded world, with its impossibly reduced turf. For us, going to the wilderness is like going home.

Of course, we couldn't stay home for long in O Canada National Wilderness. We'd start wrecking it. So our visits would have to be limited to a certain number of days or weeks. Our numbers would have to be limited, too, so the grizzly bears would not feel overly watched.

And there would be other constraints. No roads, of course. Trails allowed, but only natural ones, and no signs to tell you which way to go. You'd have to use a map or your GPS receiver. Inevitably someone would write a guidebook to the place, which would be decried, no doubt, but on the other hand it would help to keep the visitors out of trouble.

There would be no commerce in O Canada National Wilderness. Well, maybe you could hire a guide. On second thought, no. This could easily get out of hand. I'm a guide, and I know what we're like. Bunch of territorial little pissants who like to grab places for ourselves, even on Mount Everest. Nobody would pay a fee to anybody in O Canada National Wilderness.

Fees! Lots of fees in Canada's national parks. The government dings you at the gate, dings you again for your overnight permit, dings you to go in the hot springs, dings you for whatever they can. None of that in O Canada National Wilderness. Nor would it be needed to defray costs. Once established, O Canada National Wilderness would be cheap to run, requiring only a minimal outlay of the citizens' taxes. There would be no infrastructure to build and maintain. No need to buy trucks for the wardens or build patrol cabins. Or even pay much in the way of salaries, because there would be plenty of people—I'm sure of this; look at the growth of volunteerism in the American national parks—who would offer to walk the place for free in exchange for supplies, decent gear and the right to be an authority. Main cost would be training these volunteer wardens not to be backcountry twits.

Given such rules and rigors, the number of people willing and able to reach the very heart of O Canada National Wilderness would be small. They would have to struggle through the torrents and stagger over the high passes and claw their way through the untracked green hells.

Well, the high passes of the Rockies are typically beautiful, green hells are uncommon, and every valley has its natural trails. But we do have torrents aplenty. Unbridged, these alone would ensure that all but the most persistent humans were filtered out. And even if they were fully committed humans bent on laying waste, or just the dumbest campers around, there would not be enough of them to do much damage.

Are there any O Canada National Wildernesses on Earth? At the moment, none that I know of. None quite like this. But we could have one. This one. The wildest place in the world. Even wilder than Antarctica—aircraft and snowmobiles and permanent human enclaves are allowed in Antarctica—yet climatically a whole lot more agreeable.

Would it work? We'd have to try it to find out for sure.

Rather than setting up some dinky pilot project, which would merely put off establishing the real thing until that wasn't possible anymore, we need to set the land aside ASAP. It would have to be a lot of land, and it would have to be isolated. Where could we find a place like that?

Well, we already know that it has to be in the Rockies. And the northern end of the Rockies, the part between the Peace River and the Liard River, is practically untouched. It's also big—67,000 square kilometres—and it's still pretty isolated. Good. We could turn all that into O Canada National Wilderness.

And if we set it up the way I have described it, I really doubt that O Canada National Wilderness could ever become very much like Banff National Park. O Canada National Wilderness would have got started with the right philosophy: don't do anything to make it easy or convenient for humans to be there. Since humans have already got in, with their chainsaws and their hammers and nails, then we would start by undoing the damage. We'd blow the bridges. We'd dismantle the outfitters' camps. We'd quit clearing the trails. Nature would take the hint and continue restoring the area without any further help from us.

This would effectively discourage the crowd that has turned Banff National Park into such a haven for ski-area operators, hoteliers, tramway tycoons, etc. Many of these scenery-peddlers proudly trace their ventures to some opportunist, way back when, who got a government permit to build something in the woods, just something small, you know, like the cabin that became Chateau Lake Louise. O Canada National Wilderness would not be a place for incipient industrial tourism, at all.

Yes, I think O Canada National Wilderness might actually work.

That's why it's such a dangerous idea.
