

## O Canada National Wilderness

By Ben Gadd, published in *Wild Lands Advocate*, 1997, and in *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*, a collection edited by Pamela Banting (U of A English Dept.), Polestar Press 1998, pp. 249–252.

Probably it should be in the Rockies. Yes, it definitely 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 ice-covered peaks. In the foreground there's a Mountie astride his 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 O Canada 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), the large warning sign—

**Entering O Canada National Wilderness  
No services next 50,000 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 back 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, or any 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.

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 guns.

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 get to *see* grizzly bears, because lots of them would live there. You'd see wolves and wolverines and golden eagles and on and on.

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 or sat phones. Or maybe they wouldn't.

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 200,000-year existence. The conditions would be primitive, in the best sense of the word. Humans are first-rate primitives, having evolved to be full-time professional campers, travelling about in little family groups through vast, primeval landscapes. We're not particularly happy in our impossibly overcrowded world, with its impossibly reduced turf. For us, going to the wilderness is like going home.

Of course, we couldn't stay home long in O Canada National Wilderness or we'd start wrecking it. So we'd have to be visitors, eating out of our packs and heating up our coffee with fuel we carried in. We'd be obliged to suffer a bit. Given the rigors of O Canada National Wilderness, most of us would get our fill fairly quickly.

And, given those rigors, the number of people willing to reach the very heart of O Canada National Wilderness would be small. Those people would have to struggle through the torrents and stagger over the high passes and claw their way through the untracked green hells.

Well, okay, 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 wreck this place.

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—they allow snowmobiles in Antarctica—yet climatically a whole lot more agreeable.

Would it work? Hard to say. It would have to be very large, 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 establish O Canada National Wilderness there.

But what if too many people decided to go?

Okay, we'd have to restrict the numbers.

What if people were camping and pooping everywhere?

Okay, we'd have to have rules about where you camp and how you poop.

What if too many people were breaking the rules?

Okay, we'd have to have more enforcement.

What if too many people got hurt way back there?

Okay, we'd have to have more patrols and more helicopter rescues.

Isn't this beginning to sound just like Banff National Park?

Whoa.

Let's see. What are things like in Banff National Park?

- First, there are roads. Right; no roads in O Canada National Wilderness. Trails allowed, but only natural ones, and no signs to tell you which way to go. You'd have to use a map. (GPS would be fine, too.)
- Second, there is commerce. Way too much commerce. Right; 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. Right; nobody would pay a fee to anybody in O Canada National Wilderness.
- Fees! Lots of fees in Banff National Park. The gummint 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. As Edward Abbey might put it, updated from something he wrote nearly forty years ago, "All citizens would have the right to get sunburned, blistered, bug-bitten and grizzly-mauled in their national wilderness, regardless of their credit ratings."

Besides, O Canada National Wilderness would be cheap to run, requiring only a minimal outlay of the citizens' taxes. It would be low-maintenance, and the citizens wouldn't have 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: training these people not to be backcountry twits.

Now that I think about 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 for human beings to go there. In fact, if humans had already got in, with their chainsaws and their hammers and nails, then we would start by undoing the damage. We'd blow the bridges (Edward Abbey's dead, but he would have *loved* that) and we'd dismantle the outfitters' camps. We'd quit clearing the trails. Nature would take the hint and continue restoring the place 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 the town of Banff. 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.

\*\*\*