

Guardians of the Rockies

By PearlAnn Reichwein

The origins of current debates over wilderness preservation in Canada and the future of the national parks are in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet the history of Canada's early conservationists is not well known. Women conservationists, such as Elizabeth Parker and Mary Schäffer, have been particularly overlooked. These members of the Alpine Club of Canada promoted wilderness conservation during a formative period in park development. The vision of activists like Parker and Schäffer helped shape the national park idea and the future of the Canadian Rocky Mountain parks.

Between 1890 and 1914 Canada changed from a largely agrarian society to an urban, industrialized nation. Against this backdrop of change some people saw the national parks as calm retreats from the rude intrusions of a technological age. True wilderness, however, could not resist the far-ranging effects of modern expansion.

From the 1880s, commercial tourism made inroads through the Canadian Rocky Mountain wilderness. The development of national parks began in 1887 with the creation of Rocky Mountains Park — later part of Banff — fostered by the transcontinental extension of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Tourism was one of the primary purposes behind creating Canada's early national parks. The scenic beauty and natural wonders of the mountains evoked the awe and curiosity of many Victorians who travelled to the "Canadian Alps" in search of leisure.

Nonetheless, the national park idea was still in a formative stage. Members of the ACC were particularly instrumental in shaping this idea. Parker and Schäffer said parks should preserve wilderness as a national resource. They placed the ultimate value of nature in nature itself, rather than in its economic exploitation. Today's national park idea derives in part from a con-

servation tradition represented by these guardians of the Rocky Mountain wilderness.

Parker interpreted the Canadian "mountain heritage" as a "national asset." As a professional journalist and founding secretary of the ACC, she institutionalized Canadian alpinism and promoted an aesthetic rationale for the preservation of Canada's mountain wilderness. It was largely due to Parker's nationalist impetus that a distinctly Canadian alpine club — the ACC — emerged in 1906. Her vision of the Canadian Rockies foreshadowed the tension between use and preservation in Canada's national parks.

Born in Colchester County, Nova Scotia in 1856, Elizabeth received teacher's training at the normal school in Truro. She taught school for one year before marrying, at age 18, Henry J. Parker. The couple lived with two sons and a daughter in Halifax before moving to Winnipeg in 1892, where Henry Parker worked as a railway clerk. Steered toward a career in journalism by her interest in poetry, Elizabeth Parker became the first literary editor of the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1904. Travelling in the Rockies galvanized Parker's interest in wilderness, and she was one of the first journalists to publicize the mountains to Canadian readers.

Parker first saw the Canadian Rockies during a train trip in the late 1880s, followed by another visit in the 1890s. Her health was never robust, and in 1904 she and her children left Winnipeg for a restful 18-month holiday in Banff. Their jaunts through the Rockies and British Columbia's Selkirk Range launched several newspaper articles. In these travel accounts, Parker emphasized the power of nature experienced by the "mountain pilgrim".

Until the 1890s, few Canadians bothered to challenge the mostly American and British alpinists accomplishing the first ascents of Canada's snow-capped mountains. Many Canadians were unenthusiastic about



The unspoiled beauty of the mountains near Glacier House captured in a photo by the Notman studios.

*‘The tourists have destroyed
all that bloom — miserable vandals!’*

— ELIZABETH PARKER





Founding of the Alpine Club of Canada at Winnipeg, March 1906. Elizabeth Parker stands with a rope over her shoulder in the front row with Arthur Wheeler at her left and her daughter Jean behind her.

mountaineering. Parker believed the time had come for Canadians to awaken to their mountain heritage. In September 1905, she called for the creation of a Canadian alpine club.

Mountaineer-geographer Arthur O. Wheeler had proposed in his book *The Selkirk Range* (1905) that Canadians form a wing of the American Alpine Club. Reviewing his book for the *Free Press*, Parker rebuked Wheeler for losing hope of forming a Canadian club: "We owe it to our own young nationhood, in simple self-respect, to begin an organized system of mountaineering on an independent basis. It is simply amazing that for so long we have cared so little". Joining forces, Parker and Wheeler renewed the drive for a Canadian alpine club. According to Wheeler, "Parker's cultured and forcible style of writing, her keen sense of vision and invariable accuracy of statement" were vital in promoting a Canadian mountaineering club.

In the spring of 1906, Parker arranged an organizational meeting of a Canadian alpine club in Winnipeg. Six provinces were represented among the 26 conference delegates and on 28 March 1906 the Alpine Club of Canada was formed.

Unlike the English Alpine Club, the ACC admitted women as well as men. In this respect, the ACC was

characteristic of North American mountaineering clubs. Women formed a growing proportion of the ACC membership during its initial years. Of the 250 memberships registered for 1907, one-third belonged to women; by 1917, women held half the ACC memberships. The annual ACC publication, the *Canadian Alpine Journal (CAJ)*, recommended mountaineering as an excellent recreation for women, reflecting the more vigorous roles adopted at the turn of the century by middle-class Canadian women. Parker was a career woman in her fifties by the time the ACC became active. She described herself as one who "scales the rock and cuts the ice-stairway in imagination only," yet she infused the ACC with a distinct philosophy.

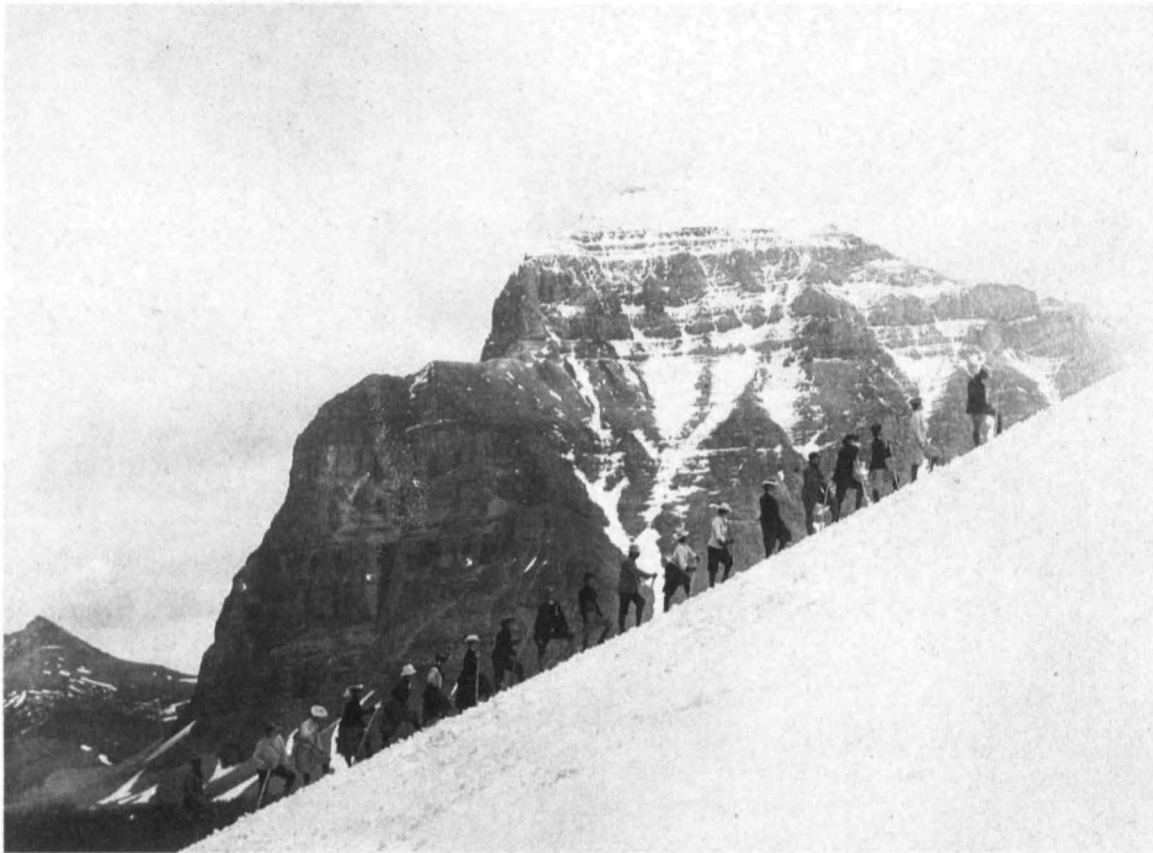
Parker served as the ACC secretary from its inception until 1910. During the club's early years, the temporary headquarters and growing ACC library, administered by her mountaineering daughter Jean, were located in their home in Winnipeg. Parker contributed many articles and book reviews to the annual magazine, first published by the ACC in 1907. Her articles about the Canadian mountains were also printed in several British publications. In 1912, Parker was co-author of an ACC guidebook with the club's first president, A.O. Wheeler.

From its outset, the ACC was intended as a multipur-

pose alpine organization, rather than a simply athletic mountaineering club. Its 1906 constitution listed scientific, exploratory, creative, and educational objectives. Among these objectives, two statements were pertinent to conservation and the Dominion parks. On one hand, the ACC sought to encourage “mountain craft and the opening of new regions as a national playground”: on the other, the club enshrined in principle the “preservation of the natural beauties of the mountain places and of the fauna and flora in their habitat.” These objectives would have paradoxical outcomes: increased human

alpinism, which the club promoted as a school for pluck, morality, and nobility of character. According to Parker, mountaineering was an excellent moral corrective to the decadence of modern society. She recommended walking, and maintained that it was the ACC’s business to promote the use of non-motorized transportation in the mountains: “It would be a great thing for young Canadians if all the automobiles vanished into space and walking for pleasure became the fashion.”

Like her American contemporary John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, Parker espoused an ethic of aesthetic



Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

On the Horseshoe Glacier, 1907. Elizabeth Parker set a policy of liberating dress for women alpinists: "What applies to one sex applies to the other in all matters of clothing for actual climbing."

use and its subsequent impact on the mountains would ultimately come into conflict with the club’s devotion to wilderness preservation.

The paradoxical objectives of the ACC paralleled those of Dominion parks legislation. From the outset, both the ACC and the national parks attempted to manage the contending forces of human use and wilderness preservation. By the 1940s, mass tourism brought the conflict to a head.

As the ACC secretary, Parker instilled a vision of Canadian alpinism as “an ennobling, ethical and aesthetic pastime,” musing that Canadians “ought to become a nation of mountaineers.” Parker projected the nationalist values of middle-class Anglo-Canadians onto

conservation. Parker saw God in the beauty of nature. This transcendental impression of the aesthetic and spiritual value of the mountain wilderness was further reflected in her affinity for the Romantic poets.

In the first issue of the *Canadian Alpine Journal* Parker voiced a strong stand on wilderness preservation:

By virtue of its constitution, the Alpine club is a national trust for the defence of our mountain solitudes against the intrusion of steam and electricity and all the vandalisms of this luxurious, utilitarian age; for the keeping free from the grind of commerce, the wooded passes and valleys and alplands of the wilderness. It is the people’s right to have primi-



Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

Summer Camp in Paradise Valley, 1907, Elizabeth Parker at the centre beside a pipe-smoking Arthur Wheeler. The annual camp was described as "the altar and hearthstone of the club." In 1907, 150 members and guests attended.

tive access to the remote places of safest retreat from the fever and the fret of the market place and the beaten tracks of life.

For Parker, nature represented an "oversoul" transcending modern materialism. Wilderness, in its raw beauty, offered the purest expression of nature. The function of the parks, not unlike that of the ACC, rested in preserving wilderness from the excess of the age.

Evidently, Parker did not view the ACC mandate to promote alpinism and encourage "the opening of new regions as a national playground" as conflicting with preservation. In certain respects, her support for wilderness preservation and use coincided with the ambiguities of park policy, but what Parker and early alpinists only vaguely sensed, later generations would consider a striking clash of values.

Parker lived during an important transition in the history of the Canadian Rockies. As the first ACC secretary and one of the founding members of Canada's national alpine organization, she institutionalized her aesthetic philosophy of the mountains. The Canadian mountain wilderness was a source of spiritual enlightenment and inspiration. As the preserve of a shrinking natural world, the national parks offered safe haven to wilderness. Unlike those who argued nature could be scientifically managed to accommodate commerce,

Parker saw a value in a nature beyond its potential for economic exploitation. Through the ACC, Parker expressed this biocentric rationale for the preservation of nature.

The ACC continued to grow and by the First World War the club had branched across Canada and abroad. Many of these original clubs still exist. The journal has been published annually since 1907 and remains an enduring record of the history of twentieth-century Canadian alpinism. Through its journal, the ACC "added a worthy something to Canadian literature, art and science" as Parker anticipated. However, through its business with outfitters, hotels, and railways, the ACC furthered the growth of commercial enterprise in the mountains and, unwittingly, the demise of true wilderness.

Co-operation between the federal government and the alpine club at the turn of the century provided the basis for a long-standing partnership in the use and management of the national parks. The ACC continues to be a preferred park user today. The ACC developed a system of alpine huts. In 1931, Canadian Pacific donated two cabins near Lake O'Hara. They were named in honour of Elizabeth Parker and continue to operate. By 1986, the club operated more than 50 huts in Alberta and B.C. Because of heavy use, debate has



The quest for Maligne Lake: Mary Schaffer and her outfitter Billy Warren, circa 1907. They later married and lived in Banff.

arisen over the compatibility of this program with national park values. The conflict between use and preservation, only vaguely sensed by Parker, is now at the fulcrum of Canadian parks policy.

As the 1920s drew to a close, Parker lamented the changes caused by increased tourism in the mountains. At age 73, she reminisced about “the brief golden age of Lake Louise,” recalling the solitude and remoteness which had characterized her early visits to Banff, Glacier House and Lake Louise. She observed that popularity had exacted its toll on the flowers in the alpine meadows: “The tourists have destroyed all that bloom — miserable vandals!” Parker deplored the impact of growing tourism and commercial development. As a member of an earlier generation of tourists, she observed firsthand the effects of human use on the Rockies, and saw the rising need for controlled man-

agement to preserve her beloved mountain solitudes.

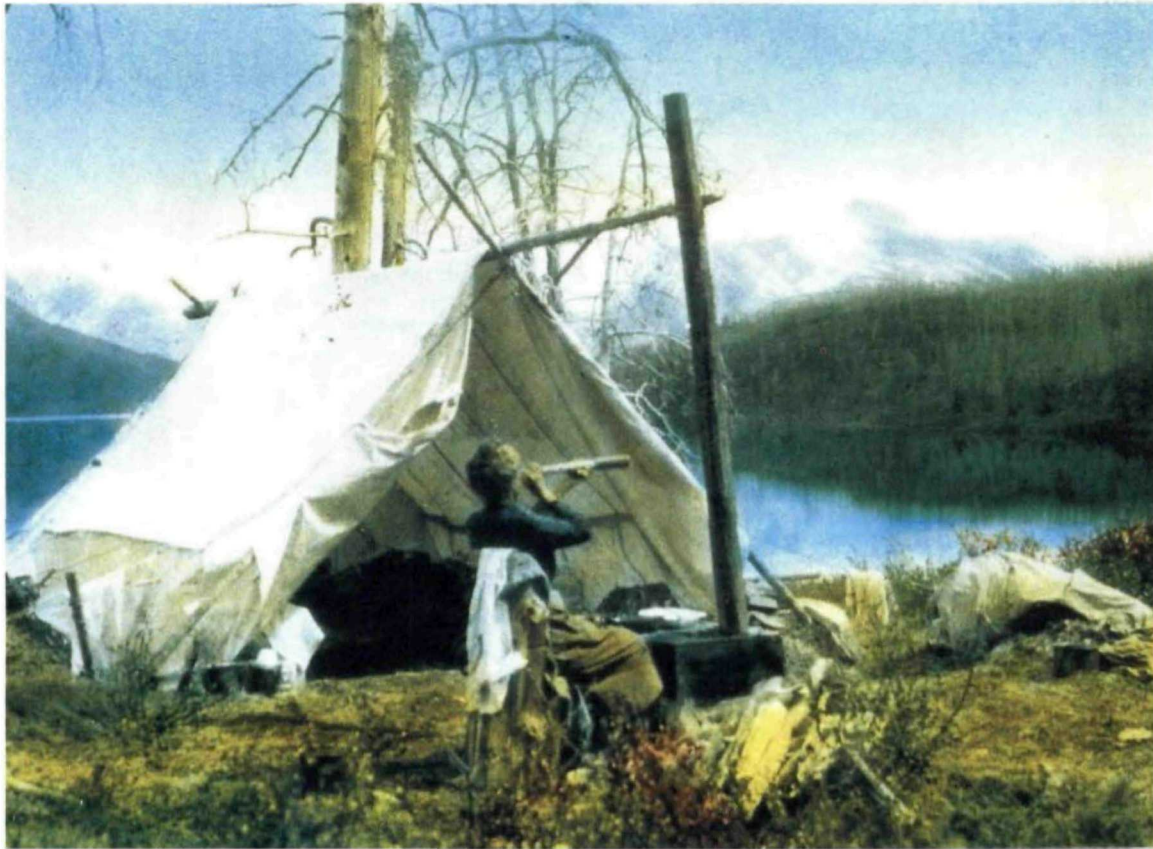
Meanwhile, government and the ACC grew increasingly pro-development as they sought to extend recreational accessibility to more visitors. This change was evident two months after Parker’s death in the 1944 ACC proposal for park development. Postwar ACC policy shifted the balance of values toward wilderness use at the expense of preservation. This change compromised one of the fundamental ACC objectives and was unlikely to have met fully with Parker’s idealistic views. For Parker, the unrestrained vandals of mass tourism posed a threat to the mountain solitudes. Mass recreation required control. Park management strategies would ultimately need to address the preservation of wilderness values, as postwar automobile tourism swept through the mountain parks.

By the 1910s, Canadians had learned to appreciate



Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

The Mary Schäffer packtrain fording a mountain river, date unknown.



Maligne Lake, 1908.

the wonders of their mountains, but increasingly, they chose to do so within the confines of commercialized tourism or from the comfort of their automobiles. Thus, elite alpinism rooted in nineteenth-century natural science was overwhelmed by mass tourism, which, in the minds of enthusiasts like Parker, diminished the moral value of alpinism and ultimately jeopardized the wilderness.

Although the ACC succumbed to the aspirations of mass tourism, Parker's aesthetic conservationism persisted through another institution. In 1923, the ACC spawned the Canadian National Parks Association (CNPA), which expanded on ideas originally expressed by Parker. The CNPA grew to be a significant parks advocate, urging "the conservation of the Canadian National Parks for scientific, recreational and scenic purposes, and their protection from exploitation for commercial purposes." These objectives for the national parks were those Parker had pronounced 16 years earlier. Although Parker's idealism contrasted with the changes that transformed the solitude of the Canadian Rockies, her ideas regarding the aesthetic value of alpine wilderness brought about a new generation of conservation in Canada through the CNPA, one which would stress natural resource preservation as the primary mandate of the national parks.

Parker was not the only conservationist among the

founding women of the ACC. Mary Schäffer was a wealthy member from Philadelphia who explored hundreds of miles on horseback through remote regions of the Canadian Rockies. She knew the wilderness well and regretted that railway expansion through the northern Rockies heralded the end of an era. Her reports of the outstanding Maligne valley contributed to its eventual inclusion within the boundaries of Jasper Park.

Schäffer was born in 1861, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the third of five Quaker children. Her father's enthusiasm for geology, a family affiliation with the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, and the Quaker emphasis on natural history and sexual egalitarianism encouraged Mary Sharples' early interest in nature. In 1889, her holiday with members of the Academy in Rogers Pass, British Columbia, resulted in two significant encounters. During their stay at the CPR chalet, Glacier House, the Vaux family introduced Mary to botanical painting and wildflower photography — and to her future husband, Dr. Charles Schäffer, a Philadelphia medical doctor and botany enthusiast.

Mary Schäffer returned to the mountains many summers to help with her husband's botanical study of the Canadian Rockies. She produced detailed botanical paintings and photographs for the book. Following the death of her husband in 1903, Schäffer collaborated with Stewardson Brown, Curator of the Herbarium of

the Academy of Natural Sciences, to finish the work, which was published under the title *Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rocky Mountains* (1907).

During her forties, Mary Schäffer embarked on an adventurous phase of life that carried her far from the beaten track of tourism in the Canadian Rockies. In search of consolation and without domestic ties, Schäffer embarked on summer-long packtrips through the wilderness. In 1907 and 1908, Schäffer and her hired outfitters rode hundreds of miles by horseback from the CPR station at Laggan (Lake Louise) north through the country now encompassed by Jasper National Park.

On the second journey, the expedition located the elusive *Chaba Imne*, known today as Maligne Lake. Schäffer published accounts of these expeditions in her work *Old Indian Trails* (1911). In her book, Maligne symbolized wilderness untouched by the outside world: "We were to have the pleasure of stealing the first secrets of a primeval wilderness."

Prior to the extension of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR), knowledge of what lay in the wilderness of Jasper Park was limited. Through articles written for newspapers and periodicals, books published about natural history and trail life, botanical watercolours, and photographs, Schäffer relayed her experience of the backcountry to the outside world. While wintering in Philadelphia, she gave lectures about her travels to scientific groups accompanied by her celebrated lantern slides — projections of hand-tinted photographs. This publicity conveyed the knowledge of the Canadian Rocky Mountain wilderness to a wider audience.

Although her visit to Maligne was not the first on record, the publication of Schäffer's explorations distinguished her as the first traveller to locate Maligne Lake since 1875. Schäffer gained public recognition as an authority on some of the more remote areas of Jasper Park. Having proven her credentials as a Rocky Mountain adventurer, Schäffer was drawn into the issues of national park management and wilderness conservation.

In 1911, Schäffer conducted a topographical survey of Maligne Lake at the request of Dr. D.B. Dowling, a member of the Geographic Board of Canada. According to Schäffer, he insisted that she do the survey because she had "discovered" the lake. In her characteristically unassuming manner, the explorer gave credit to her guides and emphasized that her party had "only RE-FOUND it as it had long been a famous hunting ground for Stonies from Morley and the Crees of the Athabaska". Schäffer had no experience as a surveyor, and it was highly unusual even to suggest that the Department of the Interior select a woman to lead a survey in the Canadian West. However, the magnitude of her public reputation was undeniable. Dowling and

parks officials agreed that sending Schäffer to survey Maligne Lake might advertise the Jasper area as a tourist destination.

Schäffer's survey coincided with important changes in the administration of Canada's Dominion parks. On 19 May 1911 the *Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act* officially created separate departmental branches for the administration of federal forest reserves and forest parks, designating for the first time a distinct parks branch.

As part of the 1911 administrative reorganization, extensive changes were made to the national park boundaries, resulting in large-scale reduction of individual and total park areas. The total area of Canada's seven Dominion parks dropped from 11,136 square miles to 4,019.5, a total loss of 7,116.5 square miles. As a result, Jasper Park was reduced from 5,000 square miles to a narrow 1,000 square mile strip running parallel to and extending 10 miles on either side of the GTPR. Many significant features, including the drainage of the upper Athabasca and Sunwapta Rivers, Mount Edith Cavell, Medicine Lake, and Maligne Lake no longer fell within the boundaries of Jasper Park.

Schäffer realized that the Maligne Lake region had been excluded from the new Jasper Park boundaries and that civilization, represented by the advancing railway, was consuming the wilderness. A sense of sadness pervaded her desire to see the lake again "before it too fell under that fatal breath of 'improvement'." Her survey trip conveyed an active message to the public



and the federal government in favour of reinstating the Maligne region within Jasper Park and protecting its wilderness under the jurisdiction of the national parks.

During the summer of 1911, Schäffer and her outfitters surveyed and mapped Maligne Lake and named its surrounding peaks. They began the task of measuring the lake on 22 June using a rowboat made of cedar planks packed by horse into the backcountry. Despite setbacks, including dropping the survey spools to the bottom of the cold lake and breaking Schäffer's only



A post card view of Maligne Lake, Jasper National Park.

pair of eye glasses, a reasonably accurate survey was completed on 24 July.

During the return stop in Edmonton, Schäffer's expedition was extensively reported in both daily newspapers. Schäffer was "indignant over the government's action in cutting off such large areas from the park and removing the game protection laws from the best breeding ground for goats, sheep, deer, and moose." The press reported her visit to Howard Douglas, Chief Superintendent of Parks, and made her views clear: "Mrs. Schäffer deplores the reduction of the Jasper park in area as it will throw open what have hitherto been the best game preserves in America." In Schäffer's opinion, Maligne Lake's inclusion within Jasper Park was vital to its protection.

Schäffer suggested that the government "have a steam launch put in commission" on the lake and argued "there is no finer tourist ground in America." She believed that tourism might be one means of restraining development in the wild country. Her recommendations reflected the dominant ambiguity of parks policy and her desire to preserve a quickly disappearing wilderness within protective national park boundaries. Schäffer's public comments emphasized the wilderness beauty of Maligne Lake, which would draw tourism to the area, and thus prompt the Dominion Government to return the lake to the jurisdiction of Jasper Park.

By throwing her weight behind the protection of Maligne Lake, Schäffer stirred public demands for the restoration of park lands. Following Schäffer's survey, the boundary changes to Jasper Park caused significant protest. In the spring of 1912, the GTPR, the Canadian

Northern Railway, the ACC and the Camp Fire Club of America objected to the reduction of Jasper Park. Parks Branch administrators also sought to reverse the changes, and channeled interest-group pressure and internal politics to this end. Finally, on 24 June 1914, an Order in Council sanctioned the restoration of lands to Jasper and Waterton Parks, expanding the area of Jasper to 4,400 square miles, once again encircling Maligne Lake and its valley.

Like many other early twentieth-century developments in Canadian public policy, the national parks system was the product of a complex interaction of interest groups. The dual mandate of the national parks caused a struggle to balance the values of public use and environmental protection. In principle wilderness values are now given priority in national park management, but competing values continue to challenge policy with demands for increased development within the parks, as with recent controversy over expanding Sunshine Village Ski Resort in Banff National Park.

Through their vision and active dedication to the future of Canada's mountain parks, Parker and Schäffer bridged the transition from true wilderness to modern park management. Their work laid the foundation for the growth of a twentieth-century approach to environmental conservation. The tension between Parker's idealism and Schäffer's pragmatism persists when it comes to measuring the value of wilderness and the function of the national parks. Today Canadian conservationists are heir to their legacy as guardians of the wilderness. ♦

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