



Bow Valley Parkway Visitor Survey Summer 2020

Final Report

Abstract

Visitation in Banff National Parks has increased dramatically over the past decade, resulting in a series of social and ecological impacts. Conducting monitoring activities that measure visitor satisfaction and support for management options is important to implement data-based management decisions. In 2020, Parks Canada implemented a vehicle restriction along a portion of the Bow Valley Parkway to ensure physical distancing in an area of high visitation. This created a unique opportunity for visitors to recreate on the Parkway without vehicles. We conducted an online visitor survey assessing the visitor experience and support for future management options of the Bow Valley Parkway. Our survey was completed 3,100 times from August 13 to October 6, 2020. Results showed that respondents were: 1) highly satisfied with their recreational experience along the Parkway, 2) had a better visitor experience overall than when vehicles were permitted on the road, and 3) were supportive of closing this portion of road to vehicles in the future. We also assessed aspects of the overall visitor experience to Banff National Park and found that most respondents perceived Banff to be too crowded, which negatively impacted their day use enjoyment. We recommend the vehicle restriction along the Bow Valley Parkway continue with a public transportation option for people with limited mobility to access a popular trail on the Parkway. Our project demonstrates the importance of visitor monitoring in supporting and informing management decisions. We recommend that Banff National Park and its partners conduct visitor monitoring projects that assess visitor motivations, expectations, and support for management options in the future.

Introduction

Banff National Park has always been a popular tourist destination and is visited by over 4 million people annually. Between 2011-2012 and 2017-2018, visitation to Banff National Park increased by close to 30%. Over the past decade visitation has increased dramatically beyond objectives defined in current management plans. With this increase in visitation, many park users and managers have observed an array of environmental, social, and cultural impacts. National Parks are designed to offer an array of experience for visitors. While addressing ecological integrity is the priority, it is typically considered in the context of recreational and spiritual opportunities for people, as well as economic health for local communities. Continuing to provide a diversity of visitor experiences in National Parks is essential for cultivating support for their existence and funding.

Assumptions regarding visitor needs and perceptions of social (e.g., the number of people encountered) and resource conditions (e.g., the amount of human impact in an area) conditions are often made throughout the management process and based on the manager's perception rather than scientific information. Scientific efforts can provide protected-area managers with more reliable information by identifying participants (their needs and demographics), satisfaction management

(investigating supply and demand), and support for management options. Determining the attitudes and preferences of users in a particular area is also necessary if public support of management plans and associated regulations is important. Visitor monitoring projects help ensure evidence-based decision making by providing managers with data based on the visitor experience. Our project collected data pertaining to visitor satisfaction and support for future management options along the Bow Valley Parkway in Banff National Park.

Visitor Use and the Bow Valley Parkway

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated physical distancing requirements dramatically impacted how people use Banff National Park. In the summer of 2020, Parks Canada put in place several measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and ensure physical distancing. One such measure was to close the eastern portion of the Bow Valley Parkway to vehicles, which created additional space for people to walk or bike while adhering to physical distancing requirements.

The Bow Valley Parkway vehicle closure extended from Fireside day use area to Castle Junction (Figure 1); visitors were invited to park at either end and travel the parkway by non-motorized means, mainly by bike or on foot. This temporary change created the unique opportunity for visitors to travel the road without vehicle traffic. The 2010 Banff National Park Management Plan¹ provides direction to “reserve dedicated bicycle lanes on parkways as part of a broad approach to building a cycling experience product-line and reducing the energy and greenhouse gas costs of visits”. The Bow Valley Parkway Action Plan also encourages cycling and reduced speeds to facilitate and increase visitor appreciation of the beauty of the Parkway. Although the action plan put in place a seasonal closure of 17 km of the Bow Valley Parkway to all visitor use from Fireside Day Use Area to Johnston Canyon, this closure is not being assessed in this monitoring plan as it is an effective and permanent measure already in place.

The closure of the parkway from June to October in 2020 created a unique opportunity to test public support and compliance with different management actions that limit or alter human use patterns in sensitive habitats. Although the closure of the Bow Valley was only slated for the summer of 2020, it is valuable to test public support for this management option for future management planning of the Parkway and other areas of the park. CPAWS Southern Alberta recognized the importance of this monitoring work and took the initiative to conduct it so this important information was not lost. Our monitoring program was designed to examine visitor satisfaction with the closing of the Bow Valley Parkway to vehicles during the summer and fall of 2020.

¹ The Banff National Park management plan and related management documents can be found at: <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/ab/banff/info/gestion-management>.

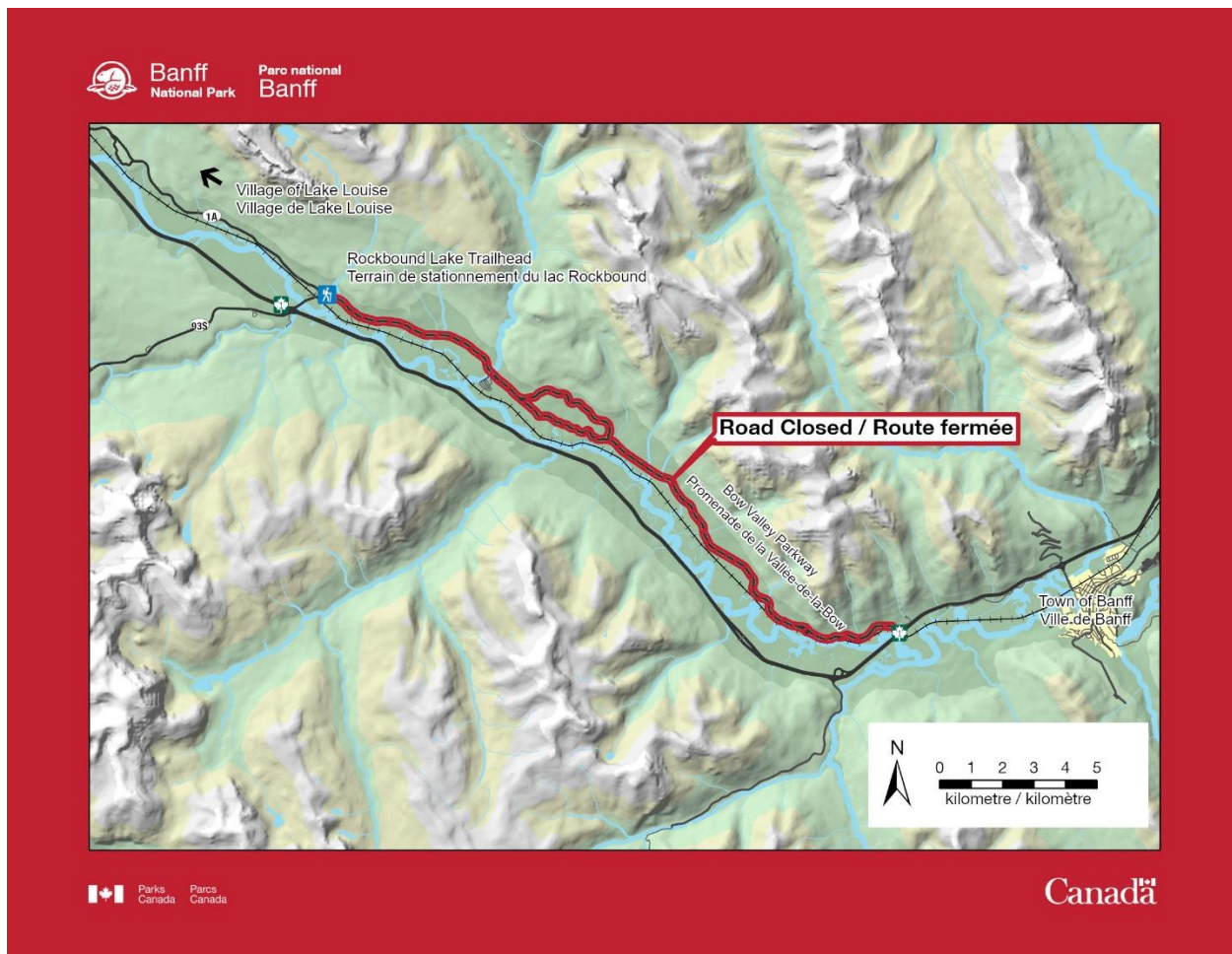


Figure 1: Map of the Bow Valley Parkway vehicle restriction from the Fireside trailhead to Castle Junction.²

Study Area

Banff National Park, located 100 km west of Calgary, is visited by 4.5 million visitors each year. It is Canada's most popular National Park. Many visitors recreate near the Town of Banff, which serves as a hub for visitor use in the eastern portion of the park. One of the park's most popular day use destinations from the Town of Banff is the Bow Valley Parkway.

The Bow Valley Parkway (hereafter the Parkway) is a 48 km long road that parallels the TransCanada Highway running from Fireside day use area (6.5 km west of Banff) to Lake Louise. The Parkway contains three commercial accommodations, two campgrounds, and several day use areas. The Parkway runs through important spring bear habitat and wolf denning habitat and is adjacent to a critical wildlife corridor known as the Cascade corridor. Each year, the Parkway is

² Parks Canada. 2020. Banff National Park Bulletins. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-ab/banff/bulletins/af98095d-a46b-4224-a2fd-000afa868c72>. Accessed April 13, 2021.

closed from the Fireside day use area to Johnston Canyon trailhead from March 1 to June 25; the commercial accommodation at Johnston Canyon is accessible from Castle junction during this time. This closure benefits wildlife movement and habitat use as demonstrated by doubled wildlife detection rates during the closure³. CPAWS Southern Alberta was and continues to be a significant supporter of this closure for its direct and measured contribution to enhancing ecological integrity. Summer use and traffic (after June 25) on the Parkway is unregulated aside from standard traffic laws.

The Parkway contains the most popular trail in Banff National Park, the hike to Johnston Canyon lower and upper falls. The one kilometre (km) trail to the lower falls is visited by thousands of people per day on weekends in the summer. Physical distancing along this trail is impossible given its popularity, closing the road to vehicles inherently reduced visitor volumes on this trail and other popular day use areas along the parkway.

The Parkway has been a popular cycling destination with the road-cycling community for several years. This popularity appeared to increase with the completion of the Legacy Trail from Canmore to Banff, which directly connects to the Parkway, making it possible to ride over 70 km from Canmore to Lake Louise without needing to ride on a major road or highway.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people recreate in the park and the measures Parks Canada put in place to ensure public safety. The pandemic provided Parks Canada an opportunity to experiment with a new management tactic for the Parkway, which also provided an opportunity to measure public support for a specific visitor use management action and its application to management planning and visitor experience rather than measuring support for hypothetical situations.

Project Objectives

This project aimed to measure visitor support and perspectives of the management action to reduce vehicle traffic on the Bow Valley Parkway based on respondents' recreational experiences. CPAWS defined the following objectives:

1. To determine what recreational activities visitors engaged in on the Parkway during the vehicle restriction.
2. To measure visitor support for closing the Bow Valley Parkway to vehicle traffic from Fireside day use to Castle junction.
3. To measure visitor satisfaction with their experience on The Parkway.
4. To determine visitor support for continuing some kind of vehicle restriction on the Bow Valley Parkway beyond 2020.

³ Whittington, Jesse, Peter Low, & Bill Hunt. 2019. Temporal Road Closures Improve Habitat Quality for Wildlife. *Scientific Reports*. 9, 3772. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-40581-y>

5. To determine how much the current road closure contributed to visitor motivation to visit the park and recreate on the Parkway.
6. To measure visitor perception of human use impacts across Banff National Park.

Methods

To address the above objectives, CPAWS delivered an online survey targeting people who visited the Parkway during the summer of 2020. The survey was completely anonymous and no personal information was gathered. The survey ran online from August 13, 2020 to October 6, 2020. People were invited to complete the survey based on any time they visited the Parkway between June 26, 2020 to October 6, 2020. Anyone who visited the parkway, regardless of if they were able to recreate as planned, was invited to complete the survey. Data generated by the survey is being used to inform CPAWS Southern Alberta's recommendations for the upcoming Banff National Park management plan as it pertains to the Parkway and visitors' willingness to support new visitor management strategies.

The survey was split into three sections and designed to take less than 10 minutes to complete. Section 1 focused on the logistical details of the respondents visit; Section 2 asked the respondent their levels of support for various management options; and Section 3 contained demographic questions.

The survey was posted online through the CPAWS Southern Alberta website using the Survey Anyplace web-based survey platform (Attachment 1: Online Survey questions). Respondents with questions, comments, or concerns about the survey were directed to the survey's author, Sarah Elmeligi, via infosab@cpaws.org.

The survey was marketed through the CPAWS website and social media and on public bulletin boards in Canmore and Banff. CPAWS also shared the survey with partner groups and encouraged them to pass it on to their members. In addition to being shared with Parks Canada staff, the survey description and link were emailed to the following partner groups:

- Alberta Wilderness Association
- Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative
- Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley
- Banff and Lake Louise Tourism
- Friends of Kananaskis Country

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using *Statistics Package for the Social Sciences*⁴. A Mann-Whitney U-Test was used to rank respondent support for various future management options. This test compares the

⁴ IBM Corp. Released 2020. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.

mean rankings of two or more independent groups (i.e., management options). Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to compare support for future management options and perceptions of visitation in the park across various demographic groups (e.g., form of recreation the respondent participated in, primary reason for visiting the park, age, gender, etc.). The Kruskal-Wallis test is a nonparametric test used to examine significant differences between a continuous dependent variable (level of support) and categorical independent variable with two or more groups (demographic group).

Survey Limitations

As the survey was posted online, the respondents do not represent a random sample of the population of people visiting Banff National Park or even visiting the Bow Valley Parkway. The survey was open for anyone to complete, even if they were turned away from the Parkway because they could not drive it. Several people who could not recreate as planned emailed CPAWS directly describing their experience or concerns; these emails are included in the data results as open-ended comments. Although some respondents who were turned away did complete the survey, it is impossible to know what proportion of people turned away actually completed the survey.

Given that CPAWS launched the survey partway through August, we asked people to identify the date they recreated on the parkway. People were able to complete the survey for more than one visit during the sampling period, which means that responses may not be completely independent from each other. We chose this route because weather, day of the week, and the number of people recreating on the parkway could alter someone's recreational experience. Therefore, respondents could answer the questions differently on different days. To address this limitation, future research should ask respondents if they have completed the survey previously for a different day.

Ultimately, these factors introduce an array of potentially confounding variables. Therefore, the survey results should be treated with caution. The results are not representative of a larger population and the sample size may be inflated as some respondents may have answered the survey more than once. The survey questions were designed with these limitations in mind, and the results represent some of the only data pertaining to the Bow Valley Parkway closure. The results may help inform the management planning process and could serve as the foundation for future visitor surveys that are designed to address the above limitations.

Results

In total, 3120 survey responses were received. The vast majority of respondents were able to recreate on the parkway as planned (n=3015), but 105 responses were gathered from people who were not able to recreate as planned. These respondents were not able to complete the majority of the survey questions because they had not recreated on the Bow Valley Parkway. They were, however, invited to complete questions pertaining to their overall perception of Banff National Park. The results of people who could not recreate as planned are discussed separately below as these responses form an important part of the overall visitor experience.

Description of Respondents

The majority of survey respondents were road cyclists or riding another kind of bicycle. Respondents were participating in an array of other recreational activities including roller-skiing, approaching another trail for climbing or hiking (either by foot or bike), and walking (Figure 1). Most survey respondents (81.2%) would not have recreated on the parkway in the same way if the vehicle restriction was not in place. Most respondents recreated on the Parkway for a half day (2-4 hours; 64.9%), but some recreated for a full day (23.2%). People recreated in various group sizes, but the most common group sizes were two (37.3%), three (17.0%), and four people (19.1%).

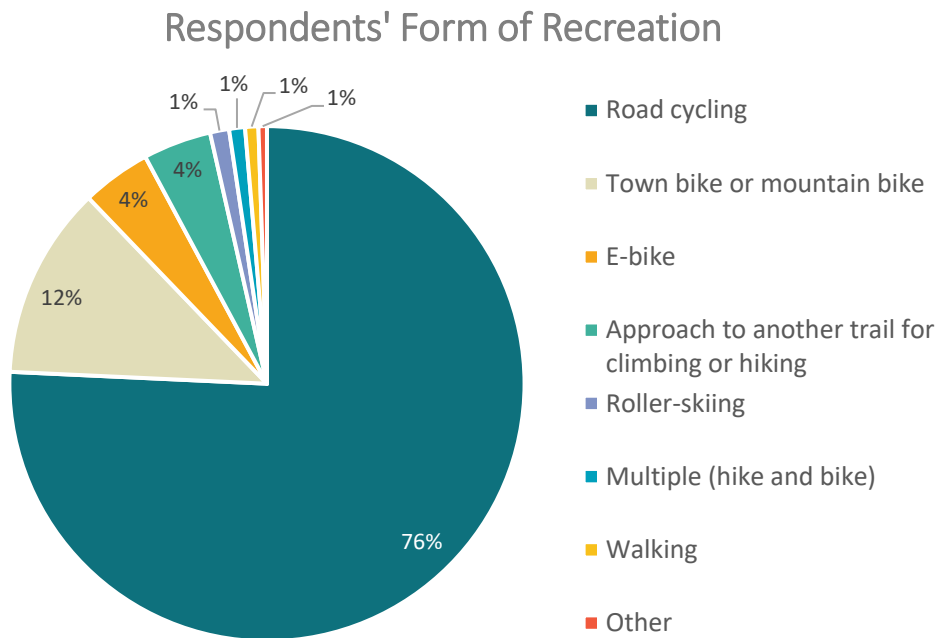


Figure 1: Survey respondents' form of recreation for the date that they completed the survey.

With the exception of three people, all respondents were repeat visitors to BNP. Nearly half of respondents visited BNP monthly (48.1%), with the second and third most common frequency of visitation being weekly (23.1%) and annually (16.7%). Just under 10% of responses were submitted from daily visitors (residents of the area). The majority of respondents stated that engaging in outdoor recreation was their primary reason for visiting the BV Parkway (84.4%), with appreciating nature and wildlife (7.9%) and spending time with family (4.5%) being the second and third most common reason.

Respondents were asked to complete the survey for the date they recreated on the parkway. Most respondents filled out the survey for dates in August and September (49.1% and 14.5% respectively), which is expected given the survey launch date at the end of July. Some respondents did complete the survey retroactively (8.5% of responses were for June) and responses carried through October (14.5%). Approximately two-thirds of respondents recreated during the week (66.4%).

Respondents were asked to identify their town and province of residence, but this question proved problematic in that not all respondents identified the town they lived in. With COVID-19 travel restrictions in place, we anticipated that most respondents would be from Alberta (91.6%). Due to the inaccuracy of this question and its bias during the pandemic, we opted not to include this demographic in analysis.

Most respondents were female (53.7%; male =44.0%, prefer not to say =2.1%). Survey respondents age distribution was largely between 36 and 65 years of age, with more respondents in the higher age groups.

Respondents' Recreation Experience

The majority of respondents heard about the closure through word of mouth, which included bike clubs and shops, as well as personal contacts. People also heard of the closure through social media and traditional media sources (Figure 2).

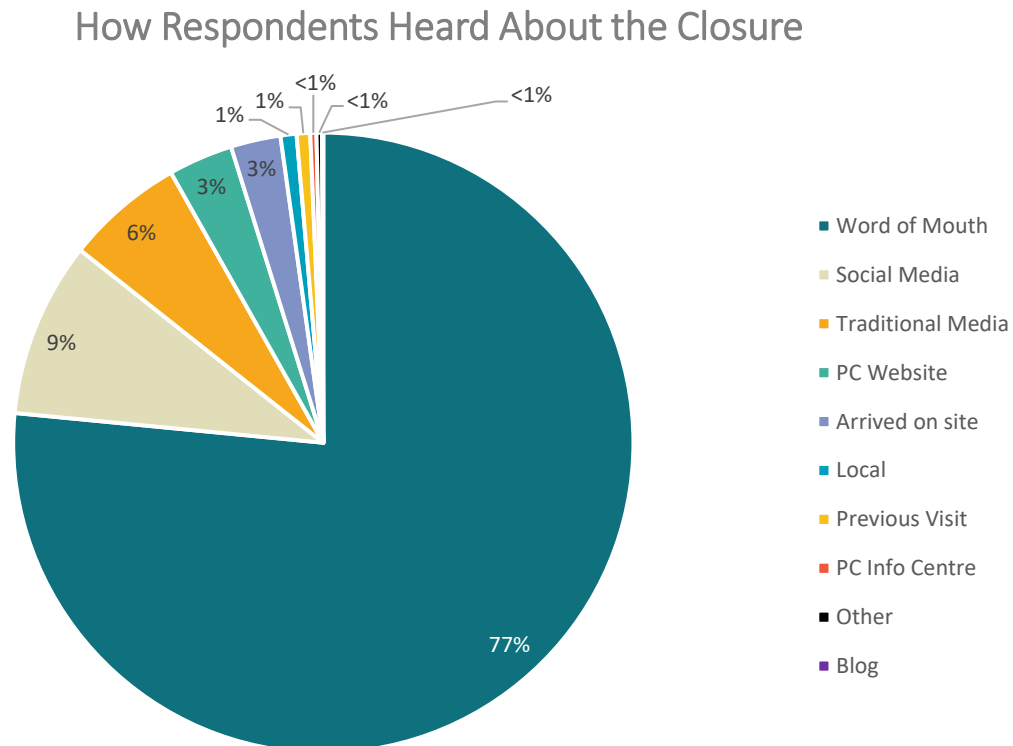


Figure 2: Mechanism by which respondents heard about the vehicle restriction on the Bow Valley Parkway.

Respondents were extremely satisfied with their recreational experience on the Bow Valley Parkway, with the vast majority saying that they were “extremely satisfied” (87.4%) or “satisfied” (8.2%; Figure 3). Comparatively few respondents rated their satisfaction as neutral or dissatisfied (2.2%). Similarly, the majority of respondents were “very likely” (92.2%) to recommend the Bow Valley Parkway for a non-motorized recreation experience to friends or family; less than 1% of respondents said they were unlikely to recommend this experience.

Respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with a series of statements pertaining to their recreational experience on the Bow Valley Parkway. Overall, people responded positively to the vehicle restriction saying that their recreational experience was better because of the closure and that the closure should continue in some form beyond 2020 (Figure 4). Most respondents came to recreate on the Parkway because of the vehicle restriction and very few respondents were annoyed by the vehicle restriction.



Figure 3: Respondents' level of satisfaction with their recreational experience on the Bow Valley Parkway.

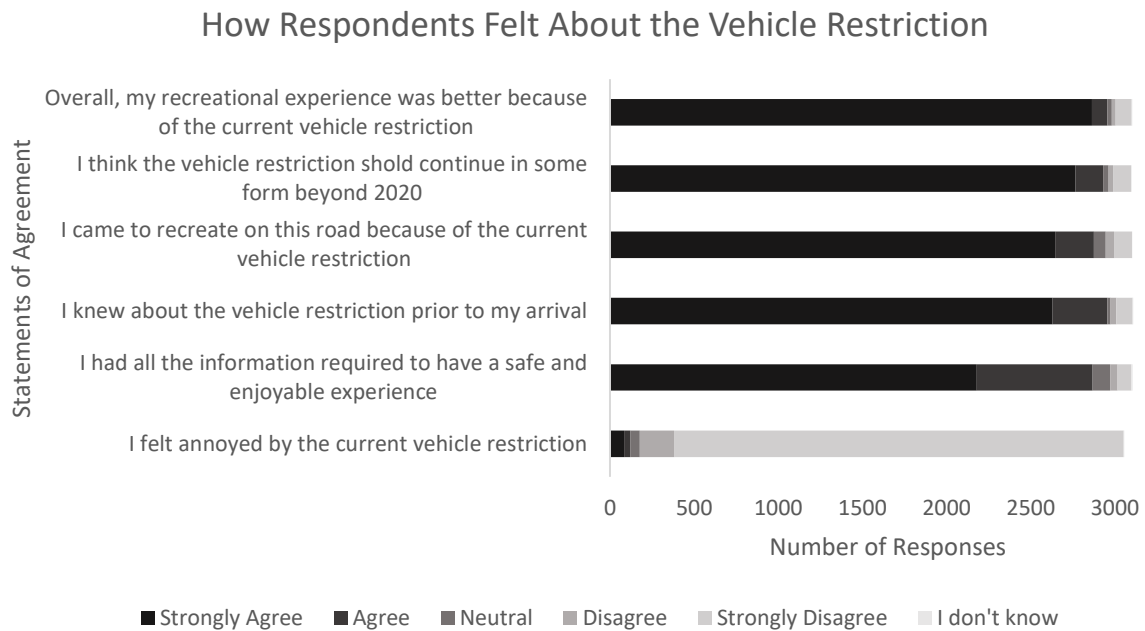


Figure 4: Respondents' rating of agreement with various statements pertaining to their recreation experience on the Bow Valley Parkway.

Road cycling and hiking along the Bow Valley Parkway have been popular recreational activities in Banff National Park for decades. We wanted to measure how the vehicle restriction impacted someone’s recreational experience in comparison to previous years that had no vehicle restriction. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements designed to compare recreating on the Parkway with and without the vehicle restriction in place. In all, there were 1429 respondents who had recreated on the Bow Valley Parkway in previous years. Most of those respondents enjoyed their experience more, felt safer, had more fun with family and friends, and felt more connected to the natural beauty of the area with the vehicle restriction in place (Figure 5). Respondents felt neutral or slightly concerned about running into wildlife with the vehicle restriction.

Respondents Comparison Of Previous Experiences and the Vehicle Restriction

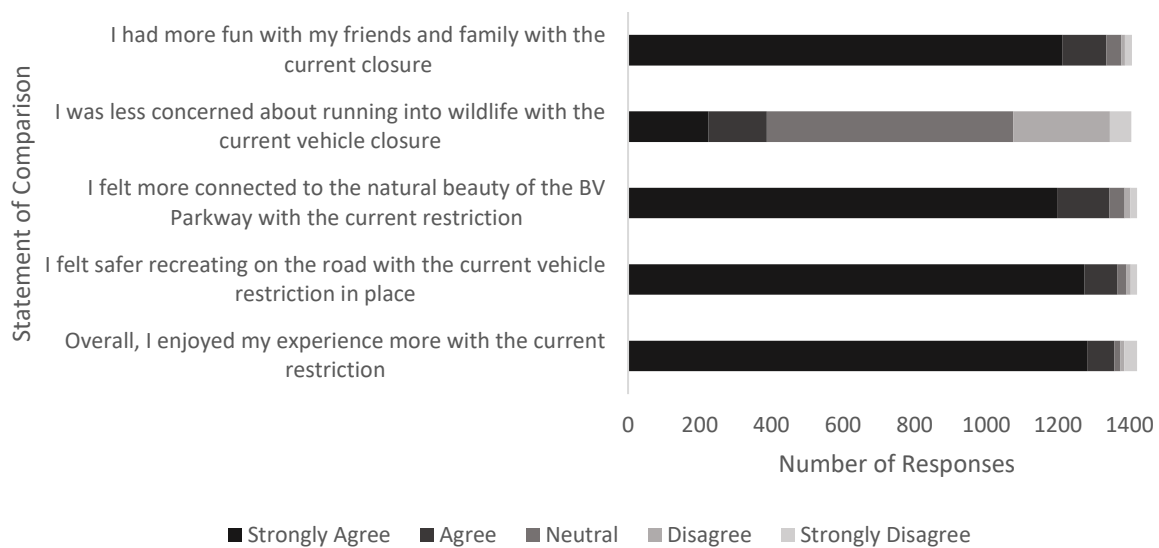


Figure 5: Respondents’ level of agreement with various aspects of their recreational experience on the Bow Valley Parkway with and without the vehicle restriction in place.

Future Management Options

One of the essential objectives of this monitoring project was to determine what kinds of management options visitors would be most supportive of in the future. We tested what kinds of management options visitors wanted to see on the Bow Valley Parkway in the future. The Mann-Whitney U Tests found that some management options were more supported with all respondents, as well as those respondents with previous recreational experience on the Parkway ($p < 0.001$ in both tests). The management response that ranked significantly higher than others among respondents was to keep the Bow Valley Parkway closed to vehicles every day, essentially continuing the same restriction forward ($p < 0.001$; Kendall’s coefficient = 0.453). The second highest ranked management options were those that involved closing the parkway to vehicles for several days in the week or weeks in a month (Table 1). Previous recreational experience did not impact how management options were ranked for support ($p < 0.001$; Kendall’s coefficient = 0.475).

Support for future management options differed between demographic groups and whether people were able to recreate on the Parkway as planned. When examining all responses, respondents were most supportive of closing the Parkway every day throughout the summer; support for temporary scheduled closures had less support and no closure was strongly opposed (Figure 6).

Table 1: Respondents' rank of management options. Each option was presented as a possibility from June 26 to October 1 annually. Two Mann-Whitney U tests using Kendall coefficients were used to test significance first on all survey responses and then those with previous recreation experience on the Parkway. Rankings were significant ($p < 0.001$) for both tests.

Management Option	Overall Rank Score	Previous Recreation Experience Rank Score
Vehicle restriction applied every day	6.05	6.13
Vehicle restriction applied for 3 scheduled weekdays	4.37	4.37
Vehicle restriction applied for 3 weekend days	4.33	4.35
Vehicle restriction applied for 3 scheduled weeks per month	4.03	3.99
Vehicle restriction should apply for 1 week per month	3.90	3.79
Vehicle restriction should apply for 4 hours per day	3.62	3.72
There should not be a vehicle restriction in place	1.70	1.66

Respondents Support for Future Management Options

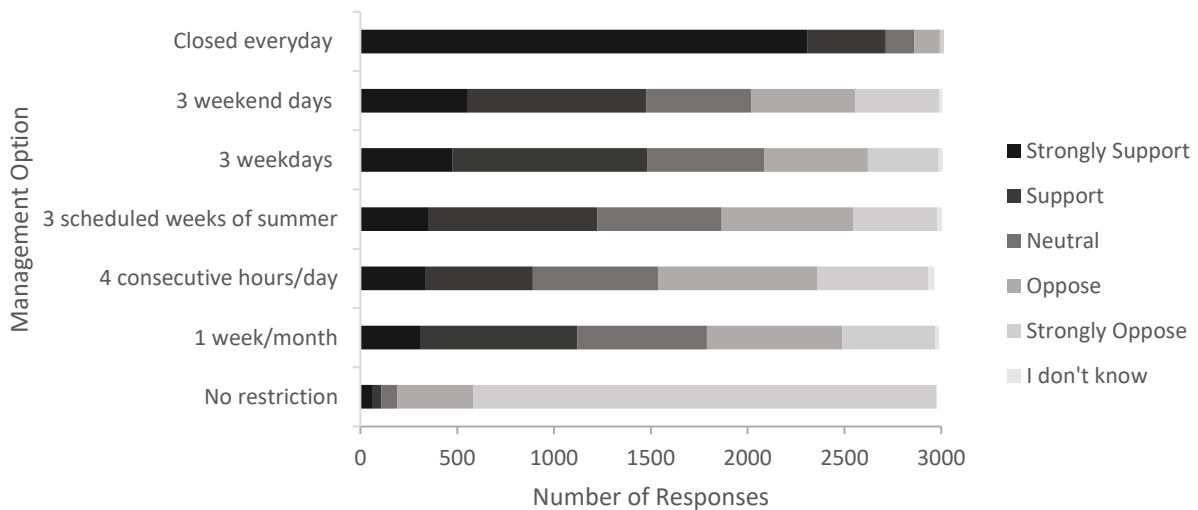


Figure 6: Respondents support for various future management options. Management options were proposed to take place from June 26 to October 1 each year.

However, when we examined the responses from people who were not able to participate in their recreational activity as planned, the opposite trend was observed. Even though there was some support for closures, respondents who could not recreate as planned appeared more likely to oppose closures of any kind and support leaving the Parkway open with no restrictions (Figure 7).

We did receive three emails and two phone calls from Park users expressing concern about the vehicle restriction because of reduced mobility issues and feeling that the restriction prevented them from accessing one of the few trails in Banff National Park specifically designed to meet various accessibility standards, namely the Johnston Canyon hike to the Lower Falls.

Support for Future Management Options if Respondents Did Not Recreate as Planned

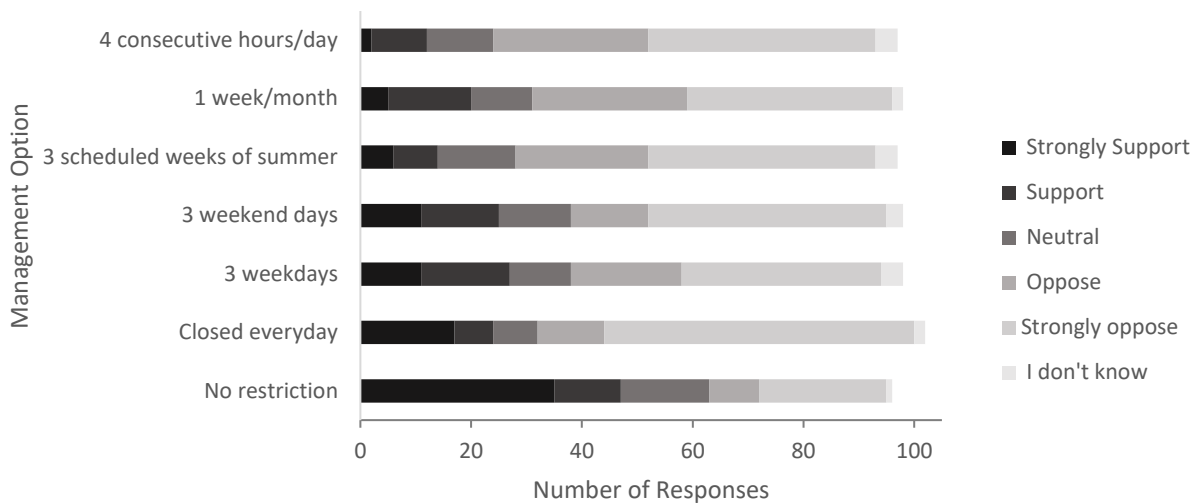


Figure 7: Respondents who were unable to recreate as planned support for various management options. Management options were proposed to take place from June 26 to October 1 each year.

Support for management options differed between demographic groups, although not always significantly. Table 2 presents the demographic group that demonstrated the highest level of support for the various management options. Respondents in the younger age categories were most supportive of restrictions, as were people who visited the park more frequently.

Table 2: Demographic groups that were most supportive of various management options as determined by Kruskal-Wallis analyses. Only significant differences included ($p < 0.05$); blank cells represent tests where no significant difference was found.

Demographic Category	Closed Everyday	3 weekend days	3 weekdays	3 weeks of summer	4 hours/day	1 week/month	No restriction
Frequency of visit	Weekly	Monthly	Weekly and Monthly	Annually	First time	Annually	First time
Primary reason for visit	Outdoor recreation	Time with family and friends				Time with family and friends	Vacation
Age		18-25	18-25	18-25	26-35	26-35	66+

Perceptions of Banff National Park Overall

Respondents were concerned that the current level of visitation to Banff National Park is negatively impacting ecological resources, and to a lesser extent social and cultural resources (Figure 8). Nearly three-quarters of respondents were concerned that the current level of visitation may be creating negative ecological impacts (72.6%), half of them were concerned about negative social impacts (48.4%), and 36.2% were concerned about negative cultural impacts. Two thirds of respondents felt that Parks Canada should implement long-term measures to reduce visitor use at popular areas (68.6%). Most respondents felt that Banff National Park was too crowded and that this has a negative impact on their overall park experience. These perceptions differed among demographic groups with daily visitors and younger visitors feeling more concern regarding current visitation levels (Table 3).

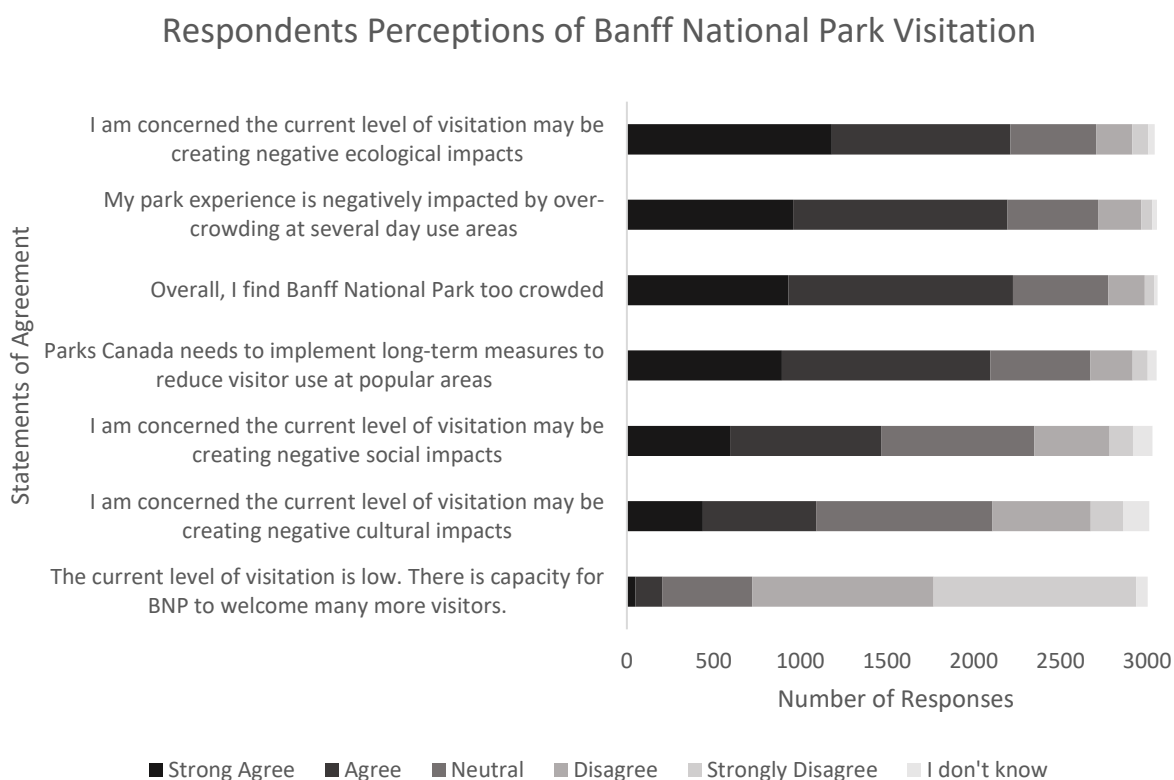


Figure 8: Respondents' perceptions of visitation impacts in Banff National Park.

Table 3: Demographic groups that were most concerned about visitation levels in Banff National Park as determined by Kruskal-Wallis analyses. Only significant differences included ($p < 0.05$); blank cells represent tests where no significant difference was found.

Demographic Category	BNP is too crowded	Over-crowding at day use areas	Long-term visitation measures required	Concerned about ecological impacts	Concerned about social impacts	Concerned about cultural impacts	Current visitation is too low
Frequency of visit	Daily and <1/5yrs	Daily	Daily and <1/5yrs	Daily	Daily	Daily	First time
Primary reason for visit	Appreciate nature	Appreciate nature	Appreciate nature	Appreciate nature	Appreciate nature	Appreciate nature	Vacation
Age	<18 and 26-35	26-35 and 66+	<18 and 66+	<18	66+	26-35 and 66+	

Discussion and Recommendations

With the exception of the quantifiable increase in visitation objective defined in the 2010 Banff National Park Management plan, current management plans and monitoring efforts in the Rocky Mountain National Parks focus more on the ecological components of the landscape, such as water quality, grizzly bear habitat security, avian population distribution, and invasive plant species. Yet management plans and park infrastructure are largely designed to direct and manage human use, or to create visitor experiences. Incorporating visitor use data in management plans more directly can address the impacts visitors have on ecological attributes, but it can also provide direction for Parks Canada staff to intentionally manage for specific visitor experiences at various scales across the park. In general, ecological monitoring includes determining the importance and value of natural resources, including rarity, diversity, and habitat condition. These same concepts can be applied to the visitor experience to integrate human use management in existing park management processes and decision making. This is achieved through understanding and identifying the diversity of human uses and their potential impacts on social and ecological systems, as well as increasing our depth of understanding of the visitor experience. This information should be a critical component of creating visitor experiences that meet visitor expectations while simultaneously addressing ecological concerns.

The global pandemic changed how and when people recreated in Parks, as well as how Parks Canada managed access to day use areas and recreational opportunities. Arguably, one of the biggest changes came in how Parks Canada managed the volume of people in certain areas in efforts to maintain physical distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19. One such measure was to restrict private vehicle access to the Bow Valley Parkway to reduce trail congestion and the risk of crowding at day use areas along this popular stretch of road near the Town of Banff.

The Bow Valley Parkway Vehicle Restriction

The Bow Valley Parkway has been popular among recreationists for several years. With the road closed to most private vehicle traffic, thousands of people were able to recreate on the Bow Valley Parkway in new ways like never before. Closing the Bow Valley Parkway in this way would likely have not been considered a viable management option prior to the pandemic. We were presented with a unique opportunity to monitor visitor perceptions of recreation in the Park and support for future management options based on a real experience rather than conjecture. CPAWS Southern Alberta implemented this survey as a means to generate discussion around future management options for the Bow Valley Parkway that were founded in data. While there are limitations to this survey, there was an abundance of data gathered that can be used to inform management decision making. Even with limited time to market our online survey, the response rate demonstrates that many people are interested in engaging in conversations around the future management of the Parkway, and likely the Park as a whole. This level of engagement is encouraging, particularly at a time when the Rocky Mountain National Park management plans are being reviewed and updated.

Our results clearly demonstrate that respondents were highly satisfied with their recreational experience on the Parkway and that most would like to see the vehicle restriction continue. This suggests that even though visitors may recognize the extenuating circumstances that led to the decision to restrict private vehicles on the Parkway, the satisfaction with their recreational experience is so high that they would like this section of road to remain closed to private vehicles. Some respondents commented that they would be supportive of the Parkway remaining closed to private vehicles during the winter and being track-set for cross-country skiing as well. Recreationists were also open to the possibility of the Parkway being closed for predictable days during the week or month. This demonstrates a flexibility among recreationists to create a schedule that prioritizes bike and foot access to the Parkway during a time when vehicles are restricted.

Feeling safer recreating on the Parkway was one of the reasons that repeat recreationists enjoyed the experience more than when the road was open to private vehicles. Respondents did, however, display a slightly higher level of concern regarding encountering wildlife on bike or foot. Cycling without vehicles on the road is clearly safer for cyclists, but it also likely leaves people feeling more vulnerable to the elements and wildlife encounters. There were also several calls to Parks Canada dispatch with people requiring advice and potential rescue because they did not adequately consider or plan for recreating the large distances that define the Parkway. This is problematic for various reasons including visitor safety and capacity of Parks Canada staff. The majority of visitors learned about the vehicle restriction through word of mouth, which may not entail specific safety or preparation information. This presents an opportunity for Parks Canada to create specific messaging regarding preparedness and safety advice for recreating on the Parkway during times of vehicle restrictions. Parks Canada should strive to be the primary messenger regarding travel restrictions on their trails and roadways either through their website, social media, or other means.

People who could not recreate on the Parkway as planned were not as supportive of vehicle restrictions. This could be because their recreational plans were thwarted, and they unexpectedly had to find an alternative. This could also be because the trail to Johnston Canyon Lower Falls is

one of the few trails in the park that is truly accessible to people with limited mobility. Without vehicle access to the trailhead, many people with limited mobility were prevented in accessing this trail. There are many factors to consider in managing the Johnston Canyon trail, which prior to 2020 could be used by over 1500 people on a weekend day in July. Being incredibly popular, this trail provides for an important visitor experience and is an important offer to Banff National Park visitors of varying hiking abilities. The trail also accesses an important backcountry trail network. People planning to recreate in the backcountry may also be annoyed by the vehicle restriction as it would either lengthen their hike in or require changing route to avoid the vehicle restriction. These users demonstrate a clear need to be able to access the Johnston Canyon trail via vehicle.

The Bow Valley Parkway contains sensitive wildlife habitat and reducing vehicle traffic undoubtedly increases habitat security for grizzly bears and wolves. The Johnston Canyon trail is also home to one of two places in the National Park with known nest sites of Black Swifts, an endangered species. Black swifts are sensitive to large volumes of people disrupting their nests and preliminary monitoring results suggest the reduced visitation did provide an opportunity for increased nest success for black swifts. Regardless of the vehicle restriction that Parks Canada puts in place, wildlife monitoring on carnivore habitat use along the Parkway and Black Swift nest sites in Johnston Canyon will need to be strategically monitored to maintain a high-quality visitor experience while prioritizing carnivore habitat security and black swift nest site protection.

We recommend that Parks Canada explore a public transit option where all visitors, including those with limited mobility, can still access the Johnston Canyon trail, the Johnston Canyon cabins, and the local campground without having to cycle 7 km one-way. Private vehicles should only be permitted for visitors who are sleeping overnight at either the Johnston Canyon cabins or the campground. Road access should only be permitted from Castle Junction, thus leaving the road from Fireside lookout to Johnston Canyon completely free of private vehicles for people to enjoy their non-motorized recreation experience. This compromise will address the desire of recreationists to continue the vehicle restriction while also ensuring access to the Johnston Canyon trail.

As Parks Canada continues to experiment with management options, monitoring in the context of adaptive management is crucial. As visitor use shifts, Parks Canada should continue to monitor how visitor use impacts wildlife habitat use along the Bow Valley parkway. This data will be critical to test the success of management actions from an ecological perspective. Visitor use on the Johnston Canyon trail and along the Bow Valley Parkway should be monitored for volume of visitors and chosen recreation sites. For example, it is unclear how many visitors stop at any of the day use sites along the Bow Valley Parkway regardless of what form of recreation they engage in. Visitor monitoring should include examining visitor expectations and motivations to visit the Parkway. The global pandemic appears to have shifted the willingness of park visitors to entertain new management options, thus granting Parks Canada new social license to test options. In the case of a vehicle restriction on the Bow Valley Parkway, park users are supportive and have a more enjoyable experience when portions of the road are closed to vehicles. Parks Canada has been

granted a rare opportunity to test management options and monitor their effectiveness in meeting ecological, social, and cultural objectives.

Future monitoring work should consider those visitors who are displaced from recreating on the Bow Valley Parkway as well. How supportive are park users overall of this kind of closure? Understanding if users are displaced to other areas of the park is also important to obtain a more landscape scale understanding of the management implications. CPAWS suggests that further study on the closure in the summer of 2021 be conducted to better understand the impact on visitors. The study would benefit from being implemented in June and remaining open for the duration of closures.

Managing Visitation in Banff National Park

At the park scale, most survey respondents were concerned about the impacts the current level of visitation has on the ecological resources in Banff National Park. This understanding is important for Parks Canada to consider when applying new management approaches and sets the stage for visitation management at the park scale. The majority of respondents felt that their park experience was negatively impacted by over-crowding at several day use areas. This and the fact that most respondents supported the vehicle restriction on the Bow Valley Parkway suggests that survey respondents are open to visitor management options that restrict the volume of people in certain high human use areas. While quotas may be one approach to limit visitor use in some areas, site design and enforcement are other ways to restrict the total volume of people in an area. In CPAWS' visitor use management strategy report⁵, we discuss the need to engage with stakeholders and the public in identifying visitor use management options across the landscape scale. Appropriate visitor management is a way to enhance the visitor experience by reducing crowding, as well as enhancing ecological integrity and protecting cultural resources.

Adaptive management and monitoring are essential in any visitor use management strategies. The global pandemic has created a situation where people overall have had to become more flexible and adaptable to changing management regimes and expectations (both inside and outside of protected areas). Parks Canada should leverage this openness to engage stakeholders and park users in a meaningful discussion around park management. Engaging park users will increase buy-in for alternative management approaches. This process can also provide an opportunity for Parks Canada to educate park users around the challenge of managing visitor use to protect ecological integrity and enhance visitor experiences.

⁵ CPAWS Southern Alberta Chapter. 2020. Managing Human Use in Canada's Rocky Mountain National Parks – Defining a way forward. https://cpaws-southernalberta.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CPAWS_SAB_VisitorUse_report_v2single.pdf. Accessed April 13, 2021.

Conclusion

These survey results have demonstrated the value of even simple visitor monitoring to inform management decisions. In recent years, Parks Canada has not conducted comprehensive social science or visitor monitoring programs aside from trail counters on some trails and general satisfaction surveys. Our survey suggests the need to reinstate more robust, comprehensive visitor monitoring to obtain data that can inform evidence-based decision making. The survey response rate demonstrates that park users are interested and ready to engage in park management in a meaningful way. CPAWS looks forward to working with Parks Canada and other stakeholders to increase visitor monitoring to meaningfully inform management and planning.



For more information:

CPAWS Southern Alberta
88 Canada Olympic Way SW
c/o Canada Olympic Park
Calgary, AB, T3B 5R5
infoSAB@cpaws.org
Phone: (403) 232-6686