



Environmental Law Centre

Opinion Editorial Submission (For Publication): Parks and recreational areas are a public trust, an economic opportunity, and not red tape.

By Jason Unger, ED, Environmental Law Centre

June 15, 2020 - Orderly development and conservation of parks and recreation areas should be treated as a public trust with the potential for great economic spinoffs. They let us get outside, interact with nature and are a valued part of our quality of life. This is particularly the case during a pandemic where getting outside can ease stress associated with these difficult times. The decision of the Government of Alberta to close and privatize a long list of recreation areas and parks in Alberta is one that may undermine Albertan's future opportunities and undermine our experiences at these sites.

So where does the red tape come in? Bill 22, the Red Tape Reduction Act, was tabled in the legislature last Thursday and aims to repeal a little-known law, the Recreation Development Act. This Act states that the "Minister shall promote and encourage the orderly development of recreational activities and facilities for the betterment of the people of Alberta". In support of this function the Act continues to outline a variety of mechanisms the Minister might pursue to further the Ministerial Function.

The function of the Minister has two notable parts in my view: 1) that recreational facilities will be developed in an "orderly" fashion and 2) it will happen "for the betterment of the people of Alberta". Both these things are sensible and likely what most Albertans want to see from their government in managing their public lands and the recreational opportunities they have on them.

In this regard, Albertans might rightly see the long-term management of parks and recreational areas as a public trust, something that requires the government to discuss with Albertans the challenges and opportunities for these sites. This includes investigating opportunities for how these sites may be managed better in the long term, how to promote these sites for economic outcomes and, when strategic opportunities arise, whether incorporating the private sector is the right option. A carte blanche approach to parks and recreational areas is not orderly and carries significant risk; while it may work in some instances, it may very well backfire in others.

It is for this reason that the Government of Alberta should halt the current process related to the recreational areas and parks, step back and take some time to evaluate, strategize, and pursue orderly development of these sites for the betterment of Albertans. If there is something broken in how we manage these sites let's take an opportunity to engage Albertans in fixing them. We should not be repealing the Recreation Development Act; we should be living up to its underlying intent. It's not red tape reduction we need in this case but some strategic application of duct tape. (And let's not underestimate Albertan ingenuity when it comes to effective use of duct tape).

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