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PRIORITIZING RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR PROTECTED AREA AGENCIES: A CASE STUDY OF PROVINCIAL PARKS IN ALBERTA, CANADA

ABSTRACT

Although there are frequent and recurring calls for the use of evidence to support conservation, recreation, and planning in a range of sectors, the transition to actually doing so can be challenging. In Canada, both national and provincial parks systems have faced budgetary and practical challenges to management, yet establishing linkages to support the strategic application of research and evidence has remained a long-standing priority. In Alberta, this priority is set by the provincial Plan for Parks, and a Science Strategy. However, while these documents do provide direction, they do not include a mechanism for identifying the practical and research priorities, themes, and questions to better link parks management with the scientific community, nor do they necessarily outline a way to establish complementarity between regional, provincial, and research communities. As a practical means of addressing this gap, between 2012 and 2014, Alberta Parks initiated a collaborative project with the University of Alberta (based in Edmonton, Alberta) in order to create both regional and provincial lists of priority research and policy questions. Drawing from the methods used elsewhere by Sutherland and others in Europe, the USA, and Canada, this project asked: What research and/or policy questions, if answered, could advance the knowledge base for policies, management, and research strategies that would support the relevance, accessibility, and decision-making of Alberta Parks.

Based upon a series of well-attended workshops held at both the provincial and regional scale with parks' management, researchers, and local stakeholders, this article presents the "Top 20 Questions" process, and results, within a broadly comparative framework across regions, and between province and regions. While the results point to priorities of parks' conservation, experience management, and mandate fulfillment more generally, there are also differences between regions. These differences are most pronounced in terms of larger issues of management and climate change, but at the same time there are also commonalities between regions in terms of better assessing user needs, public support and the implications of socioeconomic and demographic changes. A key finding of this project is the prevalence of questions grounded in the social, rather than ecological, or environmental sciences, and the subsequent need to identify and operationalize methods to better link the social sciences with parks' management and research.

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