

Thumbs-up to Wildland Park for Castle and logging it panned by adjacent residents

By Debbie Houghtaling, Editor, May 10th, 2011

A "vast majority" of residents living around the Castle Special Place favor creation of a Wildland Park there and oppose logging inside it, a new survey by The Praxis Group of Calgary shows. The Castle, technically called the Castle Special Management Area and one of the province's 81 designated Special Place protected areas, is located between Waterton Lakes National Park and the Crowsnest Pass, within Alberta's portion of the international Crown of the Continent ecosystem and geotourism area.

The area surveyed is the southern part of MLA Evan Berger's Livingston-Macleod constituency and statistically selected from almost half (48 per cent) of the constituency's residents. Berger is Parliamentary Assistant for Sustainable Resource Development, the government department under Minister Mel Knight, who approved the logging.

Of the 774 residents surveyed between April 3rd and 12th, three-quarters (74 per cent) agree with the Castle Special Place Working Group's 2009 proposal to the Government of Alberta, that the province should legally establish a 1023 square kilometer Wildland Park to better protect the 1041 square kilometer Special Place.

As well, three-quarters (77 per cent) oppose plans by Spray Lake Sawmills of Cochrane to block-cut log the area between Beaver Mines Lake, Castle Falls and Lynx Creek starting in June. Block-cut logging is the industry's term for what is publicly known as clear-cutting.

"The results weren't a surprise because the working group is made up of 35 local residents and user groups, and it kept in touch with municipal governments and residents while developing the proposal," said Gordon Petersen, who represents a local environmental organization on the Castle Special Place Working Group. "But it's really helpful to see it come out so conclusively in this survey and consistently for the individual communities too, not just the total aggregate."

The Castle Special Place is located in the mountainous, public Forest Reserve between Waterton Lakes National Park and on the north, the divide between the Castle and Crowsnest watersheds. Its east-west borders are the Forest Reserve and B.C. boundaries.

The province added it to its network of protected areas in 1998 as the new Castle Special Management Area, but special management has not proven effective in protecting it. Hence the recommendation of the working group for Wildland Park legislation, which is in keeping with that already in place and working effectively for the other 80 Special Places.

David de Lange, Praxis senior associate who supervised the survey, says he doesn't find the results a shock.

"The numbers are consistent with surveys in the past few years that show Albertans do care about the environment and about parks."

The results are consistent with those from a survey of Lethbridge and Coaldale residents in February by the Citizen Society Research Lab at Lethbridge College. That survey showed more than 85 per cent favor a Wildand Park and are against logging in the area.

An earlier Ipsos-Reid survey commissioned by the province found 81% of Albertans agreed that "Alberta should create more parks to balance residential growth and industrial development in the province."

The Praxis survey released late Friday reports more than 80 per cent of respondents are familiar with the area and almost half visit it at least three times a year.

As well, 82 per cent say that if a choice needs to be made between watershed protection and recreation opportunities in the Castle, watershed protection is more important. And 84 per cent give the nod to wildlife habitat protection ahead of providing recreation inside the Castle.

The Castle encompasses headwater streams for the Waterton, Oldman and Castle rivers. It annually provides an unprecedented one-third of the water for southernmost Alberta. It is also Alberta's most diverse area for plants and animals, including habitat for 223 listed as rare or as Species-At-Risk of extinction within Alberta.

Voting preference makes no difference in majority support for a Wildland Park and opposition to logging, or favoring watershed and wildlife habitat protection over recreation. Numbers range from 67 per cent of Wildrose supporters in favor of a Wildland Park to 89 per cent NDP backers. The anti-logging sentiment ranges from 70 per cent who identify themselves as Progressive Conservative to 90 per cent NDP.

The study statistically surveyed residents of the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, Municipal District (MD) and Town of Pincher Creek, Fort Macleod and the Piikani First Nation's reservation. It included villages and hamlets in the MD, such as Cowley, Beaver Mines and Twin Butte. Across all communities, the majority supports a Wildland Park and opposes the pending logging.

The survey has a margin of error of 3.4 per cent 19 times out of 20, or a confidence reliability rating of 95 per cent. It was commissioned by the Alberta Foothills Network, which includes area businesses and groups such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition.