



ALL-TIME HIGH

An unprecedented number of visitors are heading to Banff National Park, with a million more tourists passing through the gates in just the last five years. Has the beloved park reached its limits?

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LIKE PEOPLE IN MANY TOURIST DESTINATIONS, MOST OF THOSE WHO NOW CALL THE TOWN OF BANFF HOME DIDN'T GROW UP THERE. HEATHER WILLIAMS¹ IS ONE OF THE LUCKY EXCEPTIONS: HER PARENTS MOVED TO BANFF WHEN SHE WAS A KID AND SHE'S LIVED THERE MOST OF HER LIFE.

She remembers Banff always being busy. And it was: in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, about three million people visited Banff National Park every year. Some explored the vast wilderness through skiing, hiking and mountain climbing. But almost everyone stopped in the town, which possesses a footprint of less than five square kilometres.

Williams remembers the town had issues even when she was a teenager: RV traffic backing up Banff Avenue, busloads of tourists clogging sidewalks, lineups at the post office, human-wildlife conflicts, and no parking. But Banff was her home. It was easy to overlook a few little pains to have such an amazing backyard. After high

school she left for university but returned every summer and then moved back to start a business of her own.

"Banff is a refuge. A place where I come back to who I am," Williams says. "I chose to live in Banff, because I want the life I had growing up for my family."

Then things got a whole lot busier. The number of annual visitors, which had only changed slightly since she was a kid, grew from about 3.3 million in 2014 to 4.2 million in 2019.

On the busiest weekends in the summer of 2019, there wasn't a vacant parking spot at Moraine Lake at 6 a.m. At 8 a.m., the 500 spots at the upper Lake Louise parking lot were all taken. By lunchtime, Parks Canada staff were turning people away from overflow lots – massive parking areas near the highway where shuttle buses move people around. When they did find a parking spot, tourists found the trails just as busy. They lined up at waterfalls and iconic vistas to snap selfies.

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But the crowds were worst inside the town of Banff's boundaries. The Town estimates its car capacity at 24,000 vehicles per day. Anything more and the downtown streets clog. In the summer of 2019, that threshold was surpassed on more than 50 days. Parking spots anywhere near the main drag were impossible to find just about any time of day. By mid-afternoon, vehicles lined up two kilometres to cross the bridge over the Bow River in Banff, the town's worst traffic chokepoint. At the two grocery stores, checkout lines snaked down the aisles all day long. Shelves of staple foods were empty.

Most visitors didn't mind; visitor satisfaction remains high, according to Parks Canada. But for those who live there, life was suddenly hard.

All those people increase the chances of negative impacts on wild animals, like vehicle collisions and harassment. Park wardens put down several wolves and bears in recent years after they became habituated to human food. Ecologically, having more boots on the trails increases erosion, tramples vegetation and risks introducing invasive species. For the humans, it becomes hard just to buy groceries, get their kids to lessons on time, and find parking anywhere near their homes.

"The last five years have been exponentially different," Williams says. "The problems are no different, just majorly amplified."

But speaking out about them is not easy in a place where more than 90 per cent of residents link their livelihood to tourism. Being an entrepreneur and knowing every other business owner in Banff is more complicated than being a teen and knowing every other kid in town. Williams doesn't feel like she

can speak openly without repercussions, so we've changed her name.

She feels that many local businesses, the Town, and Parks Canada have tunnel vision. It seems to her that they just want more and more tourists without considering the environment, the residents, or the wildlife.

"It's hard to hate on tourism because it's everyone's bread and butter," she says. "But I don't know that we should be looking for more. It feels as though what we see is enough."

THE TRICKY THING WITH BANFF is there is no single entity responsible for deciding what is enough. The Canada National Parks Act governs all lands inside the park boundaries, including the town of Banff, with rules that try to balance ecological integrity with public enjoyment.

Within the town, the mayor, council and administration manage the infrastructure: roads, water, transportation and waste. But, according to the town's Incorporation Agreement, Banff's primary function is to serve visitors. Its secondary function is to provide a comfortable community for residents "who need to reside in the townsite in order to achieve its primary function."

And finally, there's Banff & Lake Louise Tourism (BLLT). Funded by all businesses based in the park, its job is to get more visitors to come.

All three organizations – Parks Canada, the Town of Banff, and BLLT – say they work well together, but it's easy to see why residents wonder who's looking out for them. "We flush 25,000 toilets with a tax base of 7,847 residents," is a popular quote.

"We take a very integrated approach to managing the park," says Greg Danchuk, the visitor experience manager for Parks Canada in Banff National Park. "We consider all the factors that will impact the future of the park and its residents. We feel we have a good handle on the growth in visitor numbers."

At the core of Parks Canada's strategy, he says, is a system adopted in the late 1990s that splits the park up into five zones, each one allowing different levels of use and infrastructure development. Only two per cent of the park falls within zones that permit recreation and development. In addition, he says, there's been no increase in the number of campsites and hotel rooms inside the park.

Instead, Danchuk believes the increase in visitors is mostly due to population growth in Calgary, 1.5 hours to the east. Between 2014 and 2019, the city added just under 100,000 people. If each one visited the park a couple times a year, it could add significant numbers to the daily entries. But there is also the variable of new accommodation just outside the park. In that same five-year span, several new hotels opened in Canmore, a town less than 10 minutes from the eastern park gate. And passenger traffic at the Calgary International Airport, the closest gateway to the park, increased by more than two million passengers per year.

Regardless of where the visitors are coming from, Danchuk says, "there is no direct link between number of people in the park and impact on wildlife." That doesn't mean park officials don't manage where the people go to avoid conflicts and give sensitive wildlife the space it needs. They

94.3% OF RESIDENTS SURVEYED* AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT THEY ARE HAPPY LIVING IN BANFF NATIONAL PARK, IN GENERAL. WITH REGARDS TO PEAK SEASON (JUNE TO SEPTEMBER), THIS PERCENTAGE DROPPED TO 62.7%.

70.9% OF RESIDENTS SURVEYED* AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT TOURISM ENRICHES THEIR EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN BANFF NATIONAL PARK.



nudge visitors with requirements like hiking in large groups. They close trails where grizzly bears are hanging out, and have implemented seasonal trail and highway closures in important wildlife corridors.

But the one thing they aren't doing is planning for more tourists. "It's impossible for us to predict visitor growth," Danchuk says. So they don't. As tourist numbers grew in the last five years, Parks Canada staff identified trouble spots and worked on them, improving traffic flow in parking lots, adding parking stalls, and rehabilitating overused trails and day-use areas. But they aren't planning their infrastructure needs in line with tourism growth projections. It leaves residents like Williams frustrated.

"Parks Canada's decisions have felt reactive instead of proactive," she says.

THE TOWN OF BANFF takes a different approach. Karen Sorenson, Banff's mayor since 2010, says it's all about data. "So much data," she says. "It informs every decision we make." Vehicles entering and exiting the town, pedestrians on sidewalks, riders on ROAM public transit, litres of water flushed down toilets: the Town knows the daily numbers and capacity for it all.

To Sorenson, one of the most interesting statistics is that 70 per cent of tourists to Banff visit for less than four hours before hitting the road again. These short-term visitors add to the volume of parking and traffic, which are the biggest concerns of residents, according to polling conducted every four years by the Town.

"We have to figure out how to move the increased number of visitors out of their vehicles," she says.

To that end, Sorenson is most proud of ROAM, Canada's first municipal all-hybrid electric transit fleet. Since its launch in 2008, ROAM has ramped up its number of buses, its frequency of services and its number of routes. Between these improvements and the fact that parking is harder than ever to find, ridership has doubled since 2015 to 1.3 million passengers in 2019. The Town also helped launch On-It, a seasonal bus service that runs between Calgary and the national park.

But what has made the biggest difference in reducing traffic was the opening of an intercept parking lot in late August 2019. Liricon Capital, a local company, donated a chunk of land on the edge of town for a 500-stall parking lot, where visitors could park their cars, then walk or catch a shuttle into town and to nearby attractions. Some residents expressed concern over the

*From a survey conducted by Crowfoot Media in November 2019 (291 respondents).

**87.2% OF RESIDENTS AND 89.2% OF VISITORS SURVEYED*
REPORTED THAT THE INCREASE IN TOURISTS TO BANFF
NATIONAL PARK CONCERNS THEM.**

**THESE CONCERNS INCLUDED ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS,
HARASSMENT OF WILDLIFE, TRAFFIC AND PARKING ISSUES,
LITTERING, CAMPSITE AVAILABILITY, OVERCROWDING, AND THE
COMMERCIALIZATION OF A NATURAL PLACE.**



parking lot (in particular, Liricon's future development plans and the lot's placement adjacent to residential areas, the elementary school and a day-care). However, the parking lot offered an immediate decrease in congestion downtown. When cars start backing up at the bridge over the Bow River, Town workers manually override the traffic lights to flush out bottlenecks. On a busy Sunday they might do it 15 to 20 times. On Labour Day weekend 2019, the first long weekend after the parking lot opened, they only needed to do it twice.

Sorenson says it's a sign that they're catching up to the traffic and parking problem. But it will be difficult to get ahead of it without help. "We have a funding challenge," she explains. The townsite's boundaries will never increase. Parks Canada limits development and restricts who can live in town. With the town already near build-out, there is little room for the tax base to

grow, yet the number of visitors using its infrastructure continues to soar.

"We're a significant engine for the economy of Alberta and Canada," says Sorenson. In 2016, Banff, along with Jasper and Canmore (two other tourism-dependent Alberta towns) commissioned a report to determine their contribution to the provincial economy. The annual economic impact of visitor spending in these three communities added up to \$2.46 billion, one third of the provincial total, creating a tax revenue of \$756 million. Ninety-seven per cent of those taxes went to the provincial and federal governments.

For 15 years, the three towns have lobbied unsuccessfully for something similar to B.C.'s Resort Municipality Initiative, a program that increases tourism-heavy municipalities' share of tax revenue to help fund visitor services. The justification for a bigger piece of the pie becomes more

compelling when the numbers for the mountain towns are compared to the provincial total. In 2017, Travel Alberta says, visitors spent a record \$8.9 billion. The organization's goal is to increase tourism revenue in Alberta to \$20 billion by 2030.

Tourism creates jobs, which in 2017 amounted to 127,000 in Alberta. Banff's unemployment rate sat at around 4 per cent while the provincial average was 6.6 per cent in fall 2019. But many Banff businesses struggle to find enough employees, and not just in peak season like they used to. Banff's hotel room occupancy is near 100 per cent from June until September – and it is building throughout the rest of the year. Average occupancy hit a record 71.7 per cent in 2018, a gain of 100,000 room nights from 2015, and exceeded 50 per cent in November 2018 for the first time ever. Lineups stretch out restaurant doors. Prices, and margins, are also increasing.

However, tourism businesses recognize there's something amiss with the status quo, says Leslie Bruce, president and CEO of Banff & Lake Louise Tourism. In 2016, BLLT's board decided to stop marketing the summer season, as part of a shift towards stewardship.

"Yes, we have a responsibility to promote the town and park, but we also recognize we will never be successful if we put the environment or community at risk," she says.

BLLT continues to try to grow the number of visitors in the shoulder seasons and winter. But in the summer the group's focus is on visitor experience and education, for example, telling tourists where to park and how to avoid the crowds by visiting popular spots at quieter times or going to less busy places. They also try to teach people how to be good guests with an education campaign focused on ways to reduce persistent and common faux pas. Visitors now learn how to pack out garbage and photograph wildlife safely.

"Those are not usual [destination management organization] activities," Bruce says. "But resentment toward tourists is not about the number of people visiting a place. It's about the feeling the residents have about the visitors. The way the visitors behave plays a big part in those feelings."

For environmental and user-focused groups, the shift is welcome, but not enough. Locals are still avoiding going into town and hiking on some trails. More humans mean more detrimental impacts on wildlife and ecosystems. And spreading out visitation into former "quiet times" means the wildlife and residents never get a break.

"We're compromising the experience and the very values of why Banff was protected in the first place," says Anne-Marie Syslak, the executive director of the southern Alberta chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), an environmental and advocacy group.

She'd like to see Parks Canada implement quotas on the number of people allowed on certain trails and conduct more research into the carrying capacity of humans in the park, in general.

"Right now we have no idea of the ecological and social thresholds," she says. "At what point will too many people start to negatively impact grizzly bears or the people that live here? No one knows."

But we do have an idea. Research on grizzlies in the park found that as trail use increases, bears move around more, which means they're expending more energy and eating less. At a certain point, about 17 groups² per day, bears are less likely to use those same trails. They are particularly sensitive to human use in the spring, a concern as visitation during the "off season" continues to grow. One positive finding is that the bears can adjust their behaviour; they tend to use busy trails more at night, for instance. Other research found similar behavioural shifts for other types of wildlife.

Put it all together and "Parks Canada needs to adopt a more precautionary approach," Syslak concludes.

At this point Parks Canada is not considering any quotas, says Greg Danchuk. One of the agency's goals is to increase visitor numbers in Banff, according to the Parks Canada Depart-

ment Plan for 2018-2019 and Banff's own management plan.

That's disappointing for Williams. At first it was people she knew of who were getting so frustrated with the challenges of living in Banff that they were moving away. Now her own friends and family are questioning their choice of home.

The problem is the way governments are making decisions, she says. Parks Canada, the Town, and the tourism organization use [only] measurable things to guide them: tax dollars, revenue, visitor numbers, hotel rooms, traffic stats, and wait times. "Great leaders think of governance from all angles: the measurables and the not," Williams says. "Right now they're ignoring the intangibles to the detriment of the residents."

It's especially disappointing because Banff was Canada's original tourist destination. It should be a leader. "We are a mountain town that Whistler and Tremblant have tried to emulate," she notes. "We have the ability to pave the way on an environmental level. But we're not."

She thinks there's still time to turn things around. Like everyone else quoted in this article, Williams remains hopeful about Banff's future. After all, there's nowhere else like it: a town inside a national park with set boundaries and maxed-out development where the people who live there have to work there, too. With those kinds of parameters in play, she thinks it's impossible not to realize that everyone and everything is connected.

"I'm pretty confident that Banff will be just as special a place for my kids," Williams says, "as it was for me." ▲

1 This name has been changed. **2** In her research, Canmore-based wildlife biologist Sarah Elmeligi discovered a correlation between the number of human groups that used a trail and grizzly bear trail use. Most bears used trails before any people used the trail (i.e. at night or dawn/dusk) or before eight groups (of any size) of hikers had used a trail. After 17 groups within a 24-hour period, most bears were less likely to use the trail.