



Global Forest Watch Canada

Human Footprint in Alberta's Newest Proposed Parks Already an Issue

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Last September, the Government of Alberta proposed the 1,038 km² Castle Special Place be protected as a combination Provincial and Wildland Provincial Park. An updated analysis shows there are more linear disturbances (e.g., roads, seismic lines, trails) in the Castle than previously estimated, putting sensitive grizzly bear, bull trout, and westslope cutthroat trout at risk.

The analysis, conducted by Global Forest Watch Canada (GFWC), examined the length of linear disturbances and their density in the newly proposed parks. There was a total of 1,823 km of linear features (e.g. roads, trails, and transmission lines). The density of linear disturbances in the Provincial Park was 3.5 km/km², while in the Wildland Provincial Park it was just over 1 km/km². Thresholds described in the scientific literature to maintain core habitat for grizzly bears are 0.6 km/km². Road densities as low as 0.69 km/km² have been found to impact fish in Alberta.

“Our analysis shows the extent of linear disturbances in the Castle is already too high to maintain or enhance ecological integrity, particularly in the proposed provincial park,” said Wynet Smith, Executive Director of GFWC. “Much of the linear disturbances need to be removed and rehabilitated if the Castle is to meet its ecological objectives of water security and habitat for species at risk.”

The grizzly bear population residing in the Castle is part of an international population crossing into Montana and British Columbia. How the new Castle protected areas are managed has international implications for this species. The extent of secure habitat, habitat with little human disturbance, and high quality vegetation, is not enough to sustain a viable grizzly population. While the Wildland Provincial Park contained 254 km² of secure productive habitat, the provincial park only contained 1.5 km².

“For grizzly bears, there is an opportunity to protect some large patches of secure habitat in the southern reaches of the wildland provincial park,” said Smith, “But the provincial park will require some focused restoration to secure habitat for bears whose home ranges cover that area.”

The situation for westslope cutthroat and bull trout, two of Alberta's native at-risk fish species, is more severe. All cutthroat and bull trout critical habitats were located in areas with linear disturbances beyond recommended thresholds for population viability. Much of the critical habitat for westslope cutthroat trout in the provincial park was in areas where linear disturbance was as high as 5.0 km/km².

“Both cutthroat and bull trout are extremely sensitive to habitat alterations, most of which are caused by linear disturbances. Our analysis concretely shows that trout habitat is in serious trouble,” said Smith. “If Alberta is to meaningfully recover these species, there needs to be fewer roads and trails in the proposed Castle parks.”

The analysis conducted is available in a series of three bulletins about the Castle area, which are available on the GFWC website at: www.globalforestwatch.ca.

“The Government of Alberta has taken an important step towards protection and there is great potential to make a difference to the future of this incredibly important area. We're very hopeful that this detailed, high resolution analysis will help Government staff and others working diligently in this area to identify areas that are in need of protection and restoration,” said Smith.

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