

**MARMOT BASIN SKI HILL: a slippery slope for wildlife**  
Updated May 20, 2009

Under the Auditor General Act the JEA together with the Bow Valley Naturalists and UTSB Research in Banff National Park have petitioned the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development for answers from the federal Minister of Environment on the recent approval by Parks Canada of Site Guidelines for Marmot Basin downhill ski area in Jasper National Park.

The groups feel that a decision to allow potential development in a part of Marmot's leasehold in an adjacent wilderness area in exchange for a narrow strip of that area cannot be regarded as a 'substantial environmental gain'. We are also concerned that this kind of exchange could be repeated in Banff National Park and must not go unchallenged. We have asked that the decision be re-examined and if necessary brought before an independent panel for review.

**Background**

There are three ski hills in Banff National Park and one in Jasper National Park. Established more than 50 years ago they have morphed into large commercial operations with inevitable adverse effects on vulnerable alpine wildlife and habitat.

In 2000 the government-sponsored Panel on Ecological Integrity recommended the national park ski hills be managed as non-conforming uses, curtailing any aspects of facility operation that clearly and directly affect ecological integrity and be allowed no further expansion.

However, in 2006 the federal Conservative government introduced relaxed guidelines allowing expansion by a ski hill if it could show a 'substantial environmental gain' by, for example, 'a leasehold reduction or reconfiguration that results in better protection of sensitive areas in exchange for development in less sensitive areas.' A not unreasonable exchange if followed in good faith.

Marmot Basin is the first of the national park ski hills to take steps to negotiate a long-overdue long-range plan (LRP). It offered to 'surrender' a narrow, heavily forested 118 ha strip (about 2500 m long by 250-600 m wide) on the northern border of its lease in the adjacent Whistlers Creek Valley in exchange for:

- more development in its present footprint
- 60-hectare licence-of-occupation for Nordic and beginners' area outside its south boundary
- ski lift to the basin summit necessitating another licence-of-occupation for the lift terminus
- possible future construction of two ski lifts on Outer Limits and Tres Hombres slopes in Whistlers Creek Valley directly next to the 'surrendered' area.

If these proposed projects go ahead they would increase the ski hill's developed area by 224 hectares.

### **Whistlers Creek Valley**

The pristine wilderness of the adjacent Whistlers Creek Valley serves as a wildlife corridor between the Athabasca and Tonquin valleys and is home to three species at risk – woodland caribou, listed as ‘threatened’ under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) and wolverine and grizzlies listed as species of ‘special concern’ under the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Other species in the valley include mountain goats, lynx, moose, black bears, wolves and white-tailed ptarmigan.

In 1981 Parks Canada refused any development in the valley because of its importance to wildlife, its fragile plant communities, unstable soils and its location as part of a spectacular wilderness view from the summit above the Jasper Tramway.

Parks also refused a ski lift to the basin summit because it would facilitate access to the valley. The valley, including the narrow strip that Marmot has proposed to surrender, has remained protected ever since.

### **Environmental gain or commercial gain?**

How can the surrender of already protected important wildlife habitat in exchange for major development right next to it possibly constitute a ‘substantial environmental gain’? Nevertheless Parks Canada, frustrated with the four ski hills' constant demands for more development, agreed to the exchange saying that it wanted ‘future land-use certainty’.

Realising how controversial this would be Parks said development in the valley would depend on the results of a three-year ‘caribou risk assessment’ – an unreasonably short time for assessing such a far-ranging unpredictable species as woodland caribou – and what of other sensitive species present in the area?

Through the Access to Information Act the JEA has obtained papers indicating that Parks Canada ignored the advice of its own biologists and other specialists who felt that only by removing the entire Whistlers Creek drainage from Marmot's lease would there be a substantial environmental gain, stating: "Removing only a portion of Whistlers Creek would not be a significant gain given the proposed increase in development”

This is not an environmental gain – it is a commercial gain. See 'Language Matters: The Gain Game

### **Lack of research and monitoring**

Parks Canada has done practically no monitoring or research in the area since 1981 when the original decision was made and now admits to an estimated 40 knowledge deficiencies on wildlife populations, vegetation, soil stability and water resources. How can it make credible decisions with no data?

Parks Canada must honour its 1981 decision, made after completion of a full environmental assessment. Even without up-to-date studies and monitoring we know that the plant communities are still fragile; the soils and vegetation mats are still unstable; mountain goats and caribou still frequent the area and Whistlers Peak across the valley is now accessed by more than 30,000 Jasper Tramway visitors each summer to photograph the magnificent wilderness landscapes.

### **Summer use**

Marmot Basin also wants summer use on the ski hill in this high-quality grizzly habitat and Parks Canada is considering allowing it even though the Jasper National Park Management Plan clearly states ‘the most important factor in grizzly bear survival is minimizing contact with people.’ In 1999, for this same reason, Parks Canada assured the public ‘a summer use program is neither proposed nor contemplated.” Under ‘New Directions’ for the revised Jasper National Park Management Plan concerning grizzlies Parks proposes to ‘Identify strategies to improve habitat security in areas that are now below the 68% target’: the Portal-Astoria Land Management Unit which includes the Marmot Basin downhill ski area is presently at only 64%. How can this be improved if summer use of grizzly habitat is permitted?

### **Skier Capacity increased by 60%**

The JEA recognizes that some development in the present footprint would be reasonable and legitimate but before this process was even released to the public Parks Canada and Marmot Basin had negotiated growth limits, based on industrial not ecological standards, which would allow 6,500 skiers a day on the hill – an increase of more than 60% on the present average peak day of 4,045. New ski lifts, ski runs, ‘glading’ (cutting trees), terrain parks, extra parking and expansion of snowmaking will be allowed as well as an increase of 43% in commercial space including possible relocation, replacement and increase in size of lodges and facilities and the installation of warming huts ‘in areas remote from lodges.’

What will be the cumulative effects of these changes e.g. the increase in power consumption, sewage, water use, staff numbers, highway traffic etc.? These concerns are dismissed by Parks with: ‘The cumulative effects associated with ski area development are not expected to compromise ecological integrity in the region.’

No mention is made of the effects of increased traffic on the 10-km Marmot access road through a wilderness area frequented by most species of the park’s wildlife, including three species at risk. Parks Canada simply states: ‘The existing access road appears to have the capability to adequately accommodate increased traffic if the ski area were to reach its design capacity at build out’.

### **How ‘certain’ is ‘certainty’?**

Parks Canada argues that by accepting Marmot’s lease reduction in exchange for development it will achieve ‘land use certainty’ by removing the option for a future government to allow development in the surrendered strip of forest.

The two licences-of-occupation adjoining the lease that would be needed to accommodate the Nordic/beginners' area and the summit ski lift terminus will require an amendment to the Canada National Parks Act. If Parks can obtain these licences-of-occupation through an amendment to the Act how can it be sure of 'future land-use certainty' when any future government can also amend the Act to suit demands by ski area owners?

The only 'certainty' seems to be that the crucial wildlife habitat of Whistlers Creek valley is in danger of being opened up to development.