

IMAGINING A COMMUNITY-ORIENTED “NATIONAL PARK NATURE”: CONFLICT,
MANAGEMENT, AND CONSERVATION IN THE PROPOSED SOUTH OKANAGAN –
LOWER SIMILKAMEEN NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

by

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Abstract

This project is about the process of making a national park reserve in the *South Okanagan - Lower Similkameen* region of British Columbia, as reflected in the perspectives of people who live within the community or who are connected to the Parks Canada decision-making process. For all its local focus, this thesis rests upon extensive background research: research into the process of making national park nature in Canada; research into land and wildlife management practices; and research on indigenous epistemologies about nature, and the progression of white settler culture in the British Columbia. Still, this project makes its primary contribution through its focus on debates about the proposed national park reserve in the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen Valley. The thesis rests on both historical research into the area and interviews with current residents of the valley. Its purpose is to determine how stakeholders feel connected to the land on which they live and how they think that a national park reserve would change their relationship with the land. Ultimately, the project sheds light on and helps to understand the attitudes and opinions towards land management held by stakeholders of those areas being targeted for federal conservation, as well as the conflicts and collusions between residents and Parks Canada policies during such processes.

Preface

Residents of the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen Valleys and Parks Canada employees have been engaged in strident debate about the development of a national park reserve in the area for the past decade. Because the proposal and suggestions of a national park reserve in this area have been contentious, it is important to explore the nature of these disagreements and points of tension—only when the origins of conflicts over land use and management have been uncovered can communities begin to work together towards a group solution. Thus far, inadequate and ineffective compilation of community voices about the project has disabled collective action and agreement on the creation of a national park. This study aims to fill the compilation gap and provide a communal space for analysis of opinion. Twelve recorded interviews were conducted after the approval of my ethics application, H12-01452, by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Review Board.

The purpose is to understand the compromises inherent in the creation of a national park. As background, the project considers how parks were constructed as preserved lands: as working landscapes, as untouched wilderness, or any shade in between those two. The Okanagan Nation Alliance claim the land as their traditional territory, and settler orchardists and farmers value their agricultural traditions there highly, but because this landscape is one of Canada's thirty-nine natural regions, the Canadian government is eager to protect a substantial part of it. Negotiations between preservation and use interests are currently playing out, and this thesis will examine the South Okanagan to address the questions asked in the previous paragraph. The South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen Valleys offer a lens with which to examine conflicts of interest and the construction of landscape narratives.

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A project about communities requires communities to help put the pieces together—so I must thank the many people in the SOLS who let me record their words, who spoke with me, who provided contacts, and who welcomed me into their homes so that I could learn from them. Much appreciation to Michelle Turner and her mother, who hosted me in their lovely house in Summerland during my first research trip. They introduced me to community members and were wonderful hosts for a nervous grad student. So many thanks to Sharon and Albert Boisvert, my hosts during my research trip in May 2013; they proved to be so much more than B&B owners. They let me join in their meals, introduced me to friends for interviews and discussions, and enthusiastically talked with me about the SOLS NPR.

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I must also acknowledge land, having lived and worked for two years on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam Coast Salish people and thank the Musqueam people for their generosity.

Dedication

To Graeme Wynn, for his unending support and guidance.

Chapter One: Introduction

We share this special valley with many other species; it is small, with limited water supplies and a sensitive ecosystem. It would be very easy to do irrevocable damage to its forests, grasslands, and wetlands through short-sighted development. But with proper long-term planning, there is no reason to believe that we cannot continue to enjoy the drives through the natural Okanagan, smelling the scent of the pines on warm summer winds or viewing a valley framed in golden grass.

Richard Cannings¹

Way` the Okanagan and Similkameen have been here since the creation of our peoples, we have utilized the land and its bountiful resources which were given when all the tmix` gave from themselves for our survival. We continue to exercise what was given to us by giving thanks through ceremony and hold the responsibility of ensuring that the tmix` that gives us life is looked after in the reciprocal manner which was taught through oral stories passed down through the generations.

Chief Robert Edward²

I am a newcomer to Canada, and though I have been to nearly every state in the USA east of the Rockies, I had never seen any Pacific waterway before I arrived in Vancouver in August 2011—much less had I heard about British Columbia’s wine country, tucked into two valleys five hours east of the city. A few months after my arrival, I began to consider writing my master’s thesis about the proposed South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen National Park Reserve (referred to henceforward as the SOLS NPR), without having laid eyes on either the Okanagan or the Similkameen valleys. A visit to the area in late August 2012 impressed upon me the complexity and contentiousness of the proposed park reserve and stakeholders’ reactions to it—

¹ Richard Cannings, *Roadside Nature Tours through the Okanagan* (Vancouver: Greystone, 2009), p. 171

² From the introduction, Syilx Working Group, *Building a Syilx Vision for Protection: Final Report, Assessing Feasibility of a Syilx/Parks Canada Protected Area: Findings and Guiding Concepts* (18 Dec. 2012)

and intrigued me as I began to understand the new visions for conservation that places like the South Okanagan-Similkameen inspire.

Many people smile knowingly when they learn the location of my study area: “It must be very difficult,” they say slyly, “to write your thesis about Canada’s wine country, in one of the warmest climates in the country.” They’re certainly not wrong, because I do delight in the setting, and in sampling the wine so often offered in interviews with vineyard owners about the proposed park reserve. Nor is the vision that most have of the Okanagan inaccurate: cold cobalt lakes sinking deep between arid golden hills, a bright green patchwork of orchards and vineyards layered across the narrow valley floor between and among First Nations reserves, condos, subdivisions, older neighborhoods, and rapidly growing towns. By contrast, and with all due respect to this oft-overlooked place, mention of the Similkameen Valley usually generates blank stares.

I did not grow up among either mountains or deserts. I was raised in central South Carolina, near farm fields, flat and green as the Similkameen Valley floor, but without the shoulders of mountains pushing through the earth—just steadily rolling hills towards the northwest beyond the edges of the fields. Red clay earth shines through rows of soybean and cotton, bright lines of dirt roads stripe through private properties off back highways. Sandy soil coats the hills, as the stringy roots of stringy pines push towards the hills’ damp hearts. Wide, slow, muddy rivers flow around their own curves. The land looks lived-in; there is little space for illusions of grandeur, sublimity, and wildness. For my undergraduate thesis, I wrote about Congaree National Park, twenty minutes away from my hometown. Congaree Swamp, actually an old-growth floodplain forest, was a perfect specimen of a certain type of rare ecosystem—and yet it was also a locus of human activity, a well-used landscape, a place with a long and deep

cultural history. Writing about Congaree helped to emphasize those points of contradiction, and to remember and understand why and how human and natural history are bound together.

It may have been easier for a young undergraduate, curious but not yet entirely critical, to uncover those connections, given that the swamp does not resemble traditional, emblematic parks (Yellowstone, Yosemite, Banff, and the Grand Canyon spring to mind as four great examples). The swamp enfolds a visitor into its dense hot, humid air, tall, cathedral-like trees, and an undergrowth of paw-paw trees, vines of poison ivy, and low-lying ground cover—it does not awe with high views that unfold and unfold until they haze into the horizon. The closeness of bird song and mosquito hum, the scent of green growing things, and the smell of the black muck of rotting leaves do not transport you out of your body, in that transcendent glorious light-footed way of cliffs and mountains—they plant you firmly within yourself, making you conscious of each footstep to avoid mud or a snake, of each bead of sweat rolling down your back. You are not reminded of God or a higher power—you are too embedded within your own body, too fixed in place to move beyond. Or at least, that is what Western cultural constructions of experiences of nature had taught me to believe. This personal geographical context makes it easy to exoticize those grand, expansive western parks. I cannot forget my knowledge of place when I hike through Congaree, and I imagine the same could be said for anyone from a place with a landscape resembling any one of those parks. For that reason, heeding labor or environmental histories is all the more important: we need to be reminded of lived experiences of landscapes, and in turn remember that in exoticizing landscapes, we strip them of their human histories.

As currently envisaged, the SOLS NPR would encompass 284 square kilometers tucked into the rugged hills between the Similkameen on the west and the Okanagan on the east, including a “northern component” around Vaseux Lake, a little sliver of blue in the valley floor,

roughly fifteen kilometers northeast of the main park boundary (Figure 1.1).³ In contrast to the semi-urbanized, agriculture-rich floor of the Okanagan (Illustration 1.1), the SOLS area includes high hills covered with bunchgrass, sage flats, and mixed Douglas fir forests (Illustration 1.2). Almost all of the land is under grazing tenure, and all is within the traditional territory of bands of the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA), though the western edge of the proposed park reserve, along the winding Similkameen River, does abut private homes, vineyards, and the Lower Similkameen Indian Reserve No. 2. Currently, ownership of the land is split three ways: 93 km² are within provincial protected areas; 83 km² are multi-use Crown land; and 98 km² are private land.⁴ The SOLS is the southernmost Canadian section of a strip of grasslands stretching as far north as Prince George and representative of the Dry Interior Plateau, Region Three in Parks Canada's thirty-nine natural regions; the agency is committed to creating a national park in each (Figure 1.2). The lands within the proposed park boundaries are under pressure as development creeps up the slopes of the hills on the western side of the Okanagan. A drive along the wide, twisting, nineteen kilometer-long gravel road up Mount Kobau, or Txasqin,⁵ in the heart of the park area provides gorgeous, arresting views: east to the golden, rounded hills of the Okanagan; west across to the more rugged, craggy Similkameen; and, up-close, of cows that roam the mountaintop (Illustration 1.3). Because of such tangible reminders, there is no escaping an awareness of how this land has been and is used, what traditions have taken root within the high hills of the Okanagan-Similkameen, and how the beauty of this place is intrinsically connected to labor and culture.

³ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), p. 7

⁴ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, Jan. 2011, p. 9

⁵ The Sylix word for what English speakers call Mount Kobau. The Sylix people include the Okanagan Nation Alliance.

The SOLS NPR was proposed in 2002, has since faced serious political roadblocks, and been rejected by a variety of stakeholder groups, because of and despite, respectively, major revisions to the plan in 2006 and 2010. This fraught process has revealed much: the extent to which some stakeholder communities hold negative views of national parks; the importance of extensive community consultation; the fallibility of bureaucracies; the dangers of poor communication between and among stakeholder organizations; and the need for new visions of conservation and protected lands that consider traditional land use practices and community co-management. Although the national park reserve is at least years away from realization, an understanding of the ongoing process of its creation could provide a basis for a new set of environmental ethics: a respectful, community-oriented vision of conservation that values both the preservation of landscape integrity (cultural and ecological) and close collaboration between Parks Canada and stakeholders. Writing a thesis about an as-yet unmade national park reserve may seem premature, but I contend that there is much to learn from situating such an analysis among earlier accounts of park creation and a larger understanding of the environmentalism of land management.

My sources for this study were varied and often piecemeal. There is little critical literature on the Okanagan, and published histories of the south Okanagan are scarce, so I necessarily relied on newspaper articles, tourist guides to the region, newsletters, press releases, organizational studies, and government reports to build the picture I now have. I also completed an ethics review board application to conduct recorded, anonymous interviews with twelve stakeholders, and spoke off the record and without taking notes with a larger number of community members. These interviews—whether recorded or not—were key to my understanding of the proposed park reserve, the communities inhabiting the SOLS, and

individuals' views on conservation. They provided insight into how stakeholders have transformed the SOLS into a "place of significance," and how the significance with which the SOLS is infused can "communicate tacit knowledge."⁶ A wide range of sources and methodologies is vital for a project such as this: without many formally published sources, it is necessary to use highly local, community-produced sources to learn about local, community-driven events. Indeed, the Internet was, along with my interviews and my three research trips to the SOLS, my most valuable source of sources: to find email addresses of organizations' leaders, researchers, community groups; to download .pdfs of government and community-written reports about the proposed park; and to keep tabs on developments in the debate from hundreds of kilometers away as I attended school in Vancouver.

This thesis has three substantive chapters.⁷ Chapter Two offers a synopsis of the history of national parks in Canada and the U.S., particularly in context of how earlier park creation processes played out. This discussion focuses on fairly recent literature, as the past ten years have seen important contributions to the history of conservation by environmental historians and historical geographers. There are thus many excellent works on the park systems of Canada and the United States, dealing with such matters as changes in contemporary park management and the histories of dispossession and government control within park areas. Although the two countries have unique histories of bureaucracy and management, the similarities are sufficient to make the history of U.S. parks relevant to contextualizing the SOLS NPR debate.

Chapter Three provides a brief environmental history of the grasslands of central BC and explains Parks Canada's interest in forming a national park in the interior plateau of British

⁶ Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2005), p. 11

⁷ The introduction is technically Chapter One.

Columbia. The SOLS was not the first site identified as representative of the hilly, arid grasslands that spread across central British Columbia; in fact, Parks Canada considered a wide range of potential sites and did not pay serious attention to the SOLS area until the early 2000s. Many of those sites are now protected areas, a designation that provides a modicum of protection from extensive development, but is impermanent and subject to the whims of any given provincial government. Primary among those sites was Churn Creek in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, hundreds of kilometers north of the current Region Three study area: proposed as a national park in the early 1990s, the project failed due to a lack of community support. That simple phrase, “lack of community support,” belies the complex relationships among Parks Canada, ranchers, and First Nations, and the shifting views of what conservation means and what conserved lands can look like that this discussion seeks to elucidate. The trajectory of park creation efforts at Churn Creek was radically different from that in the SOLS area, and this chapter explores these differences and seeks to explain why Churn Creek failed, and what impact this had on the SOLS NPR.

Chapter Four outlines what I perceive to be the unfolding of the SOLS NPR creation process. This is by no means – and cannot be at this stage – a complete history, but it is as thorough an accounting as I can present. Always in mind during this discussion is a question, paraphrased from William Cronon: where did this story come from?⁸ My humility about the story I tell is an attempt to level with the “shifting theoretical ground” inhabited by scholars who bring together a variety of methods and disciplines and bridge “traditional social science and postmodernist critical theory.”⁹ The SOLS NPR presents many different stories for interpretation and understanding, and I am cognizant that my rhetorical razor will cut out some voices and

⁸ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories,” 1991, p. 1349

⁹ Ibid., 1350

excise certain stories. The very notion of the rhetorical razor implies a pre-existing material, whole and unblemished, illustrating a complete tale that is subsequently destroyed when particular voices cut in to tell *their* story, which is invariably cut in a definable and contained piece of the whole.

But this is not quite how things are. I think of the process of writing and telling stories as enabled by a loom. We need to recognize that exclusion and partiality occur in the making of any cloth (or story) by the choice of which strands to include, but the loom also places agency in the hands of the storyteller who weaves together these threads to form a larger piece.¹⁰ The loom as a tool for storytelling does not erase the embedded biases, original positionality, and inherent privileges of the weaver. Consider the identity of the weaver, the warp—the threads that run longitudinally, tied to the loom—and the words that the weaver chooses, the weft—the threads that intertwine with the warp as the weaver begins the design. Ultimately, a writer must use what threads they find and make of those threads what they can. I have woven together a warp and weft of my choosing to present as faithful a story of the SOLS NPR process as I can, but given that the process remains incomplete, this fabric must stay unfinished and on the loom for now.

This story responds to certain questions. Why was the SOLS identified as a site for a national park reserve, given the development pressures and limited available land in the region? Why has the process taken this long without either succeeding or failing? How have stakeholder groups shifted or transformed throughout the decade of these negotiations? How has the park reserve been represented by Parks Canada and by stakeholders, and what can be learned from these representations? This tracing of the narrative threads of the SOLS reveals patterns that

¹⁰ See Julie Cruikshank's description of Yukon storytellers; that for their process of storytelling, they "merge natural histories of landscape with social histories and pursue their analogies in a local human ecology," *Do Glaciers Listen?*, p. 8. "Yet the aftermaths of colonialism are always local," p. 9.

carry this account to a larger scale of inquiry within environmental history: how have public perspectives on conservation changed in the past twenty years? Have people developed a new conception of what kinds of land are worthy of preservation? What approaches to park development have been relatively successful among local communities, and why?

These questions all point to very concrete aspects of this story: the winding path of the park creation process; stakeholders' motivations for or against the park reserve; the current likelihood of a park reserve in the SOLS. However, the story does not end with these material aspects. I posit that the debate around the park reserve signals a major departure from traditional, and oft-studied, discussions about national parks. Most studies on national parks in the last two decades have spoken to and tended to confirm a proposition familiar to environmental historians and historical geographers in the last quarter century: that wilderness is a cultural, aesthetic construct originating from white, sexist, and colonial societies' obsession with an empty, fruitful frontier that underlies the creation of nature preserves and parks and eliminates, first rhetorically and then physically, the presence of Native populations or economically disadvantaged groups from desired territory. This view depends upon the acceptance of a dichotomy between nature and humanity, a divide that privileges colonial interests and erases alternative narratives of land use and culture. It is a theory that holds true for the creation of many parks, and the dichotomy of nature/humanity still bedevils the management of parks that were founded on that divide.¹¹

However, this divide is all but irrelevant for the SOLS and does not explain the conflicts that have arisen. The Okanagan is sufficiently developed that no group or individual is (or was) under the illusion that any part of it is an untainted wilderness. The park reserve area is entirely

¹¹ I employed this line of thinking in my undergraduate thesis (and master's level revisions of it) about the creation of Congaree National Park in the 1970s, and all of the particular national park case studies that I read for this thesis use it too.

under grazing tenures, and a dozen privately-owned ranches checkerboard across its hills; all of the land is within the traditional territory of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band; and private homes line the western edge of the proposed park reserve. The SOLS is a landscape that holds memory and cultural importance: as a traditional homeland to First Nations; as a working place to ranchers; and as a valuable and rare ecosystem to environmentalists and scientists. While many of the “wildernesses” within other Canadian national parks have been created by colonial projects of displacement, the SOLS park creation project did not begin with the construction of a wilderness narrative. While the park reserve study area does represent various types of “nature” to stakeholders, its supporters view the SOLS not as a tract of rare untouched wilderness to preserve, but an endangered ecological and cultural landscape to be conserved.

And yet, divisive conflicts over the proposed national park reserve have percolated for over a decade now. Because no one promotes the SOLS NPR as a wilderness, other factors must be in play to unsettle and upset. I suggest that there are several cultural identity groups in the SOLS area, each of which has developed particular and sometimes clashing perspectives on conservation and land use. These groups are neither immutable nor entirely cohesive, but they are tightly tied to occupation and the material ways in which stakeholders engage with the SOLS: First Nations hold the strongest sense of identity, political as well as cultural, but alongside them in the SOLS are what I describe as recreationists and environmentalists (interchangeable with the term “naturalists” throughout, especially since many recreationists see themselves as conservationists or environmentalists). These diverse identities produce different understandings of conservation efforts. Many recreationists have worked the land, as farmers, orchardists, or ranchers, and engage in sportsmen-like activities, such as hunting; their “recreation” is intrinsically tied to labor, and for them, the SOLS is a space of both work and play. The

environmentalists often come from “professional” occupations and prefer hiking or bird-watching. Recreationists see themselves as traditional and grounded; environmentalists enjoy and value a landscape’s ecology.

Alongside these identities, which fracture any notion of a larger, cohesive “community” of the region, are differences in uses of space and the perceptions of place that accompany them. Historical geographers and environmental historians have often designated spaces of labor and spaces of leisure in distinct ways reinforced by systems of class and race.¹² Richard White’s famous essay, “Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?,” written nearly twenty years ago, broaches a topic with which many environmental historians are still trying to come to grips—and a topic that is central to this thesis. White establishes a blunt dichotomy between modern environmentalists, who “so readily consent to identifying nature with play,” which renders nature “a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay, or live”; and blue collar workers who, while they use their labor to engage with nature to “blur the boundaries between the artificial and the natural,” also find that “the price of their knowledge is the death of a tree.”¹³

This divide is evident in the SOLS, where ranchers, farmers, and orchardists consider themselves more aware of the needs of the landscape than environmentalists, and environmentalists worry that continued ranching in the SOLS would be detrimental to endangered species. However, I would argue that these divides—both within these specific communities of culture and between the “workers” and the “environmentalists”—were more

¹² As encapsulated in Richard White, “Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?,” *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) p. 171

¹³ *Ibid.*, 173. See also Connie Y. Chiang’s excellent book *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast*, (Seattle: University of Washington, 2008), for more on tourism, spaces of work, and spaces of play.

apparent at the beginning of the conflict over a decade ago than they are now. As debate over the SOLS NPR has developed and shifted, so these groups have found their convictions blurred. Many environmentalists have accepted that ranching should continue within the park boundaries and understand that creating a park must take decades to allow the fair purchase of land from private landowners. Many ranchers and orchardists happily identify themselves as environmentalists or conservationists, expressing concern about climate change and the sustainability of water in the SOLS. I would also argue that First Nations in the region maintain a culture that strives to transcend the strict environmentalist/worker dichotomy. Members of local First Nations bands typically make little distinction between environments of work and leisure or between spaces of play and spaces of production.

Debate about the SOLS has created space for a new conception of what places are worthy of conservation and led to the forging of hybrid identities that shift the conflict away from an easy duality of environmentalist/recreationist. Added layers of complexity are not usually seen as helping to resolve issues such as this—and yet, in this situation, the unsettling of cultural identities broadens understanding between groups. That the conflict over the NPR emerged from labor-based divides is unsurprising in the Okanagan, a valley reliant on industries that promote tourism—and home to people who worry about levels of development in the Okanagan even as they hope that money and tourism can save the valley. This duality of fear/hope has encouraged an emphasis on green industries in the valley and an effort by conservation groups and local advocates to advertise the proposed NPR as a major economic boon for both the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. A drive to produce built up the Okanagan and its agricultural industries, a hunger for development pushed the Okanagan's capacities to its limit, and an emerging desire to refocus the economic path of the Okanagan towards sustainability could increase pressure to

maximize the potential financial gains of the park reserve. The potential commodification of the SOLS NPR, and how casting the NPR as a means of producing capital works to the benefit of the NPR, will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

Marketing national parks—not “profiting” from them, because both Parks Canada and the National Park Service in the U.S. are rarely financially secure agencies—is a well-documented phenomenon. The debate over SOLS has been very complex, but it is not oversimplifying to note that support for the park reserve grew once the potential socioeconomic benefits that nearby communities would garner from it were made explicit. Reports and presentations by environmental organizations have repeatedly argued that the cost of cordoning land from further development will be offset by cash flowing from tourists’ wallets. Like any commodity, parks must be marketed to attract a clientele, but the dynamic that this entails should not be above analysis.

Still, I find myself on shifting and unstable ground here. Residents of and community leaders in the small, rural towns of the Okanagan and Similkameen seek to bolster the lives that they have built there—and these material realities and the concerns that come with them have to be kept in mind. A simple conclusion from this portion of the process is that promoting the preservation of land for its own sake is not necessarily enough impetus for struggling communities to relinquish profit that could be gained from its use. And, in fact, linking the economic success of a stakeholder community to the park reserve could only improve the park reserve’s chances of becoming a reality.

In her book, *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper*, J. Keri Cronin employs the concept of “national park nature,” which she defines as a “system of visual organization predicated on dominant cultural values

regarding nature, non-human animals, and ‘the environment.’”¹⁴ Her focus is on photographic imagery of Jasper National Park in Alberta and the norms and values that those images reproduced and reinforced. Here I remold the concept of “national park nature” to interrogate and examine the types of “nature” and the kinds of landscapes created and promoted by the various socio-cultural stakeholder groups in the Okanagan and Similkameen. Indeed, perhaps the most important question I asked every person with whom I spoke was to specify their ideal vision for the SOLS. What kind of park reserve, or what sort of land use more generally, did they imagine, and why? What about that vision was important to them, and what sort of ‘nature’ would be put forth in its realization?

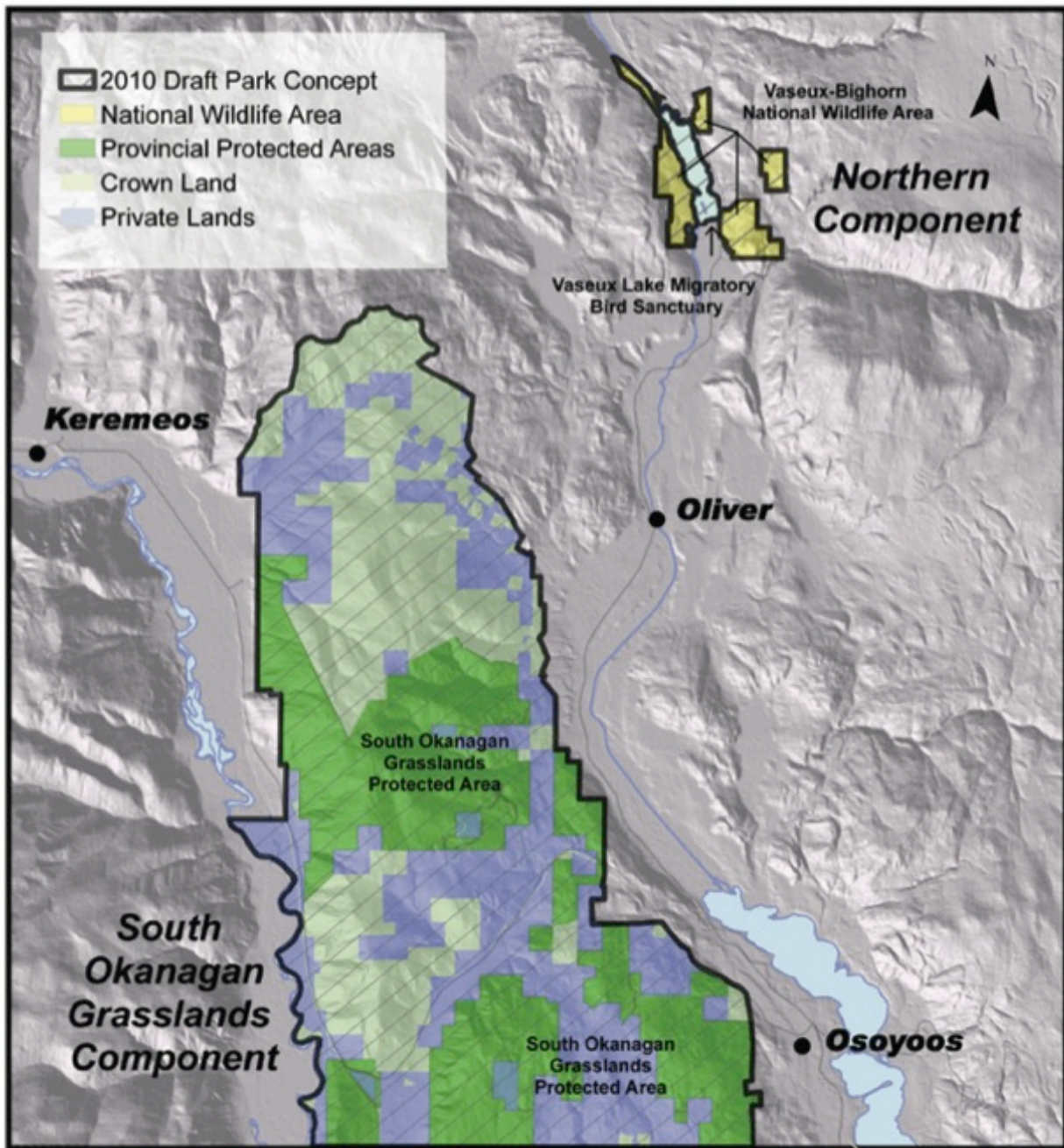
Thus far, each vision—whether articulated at the individual, organizational or identity-group level—of the SOLS NPR ultimately advocates for the integrity of the current landscape and opposes its degradation and development. That said, significant divisions among stakeholders are still apparent, and cannot be ignored, particularly when the history of the park creation process is taken into account. Those differences emerge from divides within the community, contested actions of park creation, and conflict over park management strategies. I argue that a drift towards a common view—one that values the history of land use, the integrity of the “natural” landscape, and deeply committed, community-oriented co-management—has begun. This growing consensus emerges from a few sources: sustained dialogue over ten years; connections forged across communities as ontological doors between them opened slowly; and the close and careful study of the region by several stakeholder groups.

It is too early to say what the “national park nature” of the SOLS will be, especially given that the NPR is by no means a done deal and still faces serious road-blocks. We have yet to see

¹⁴ K. Jeri Cronon, *Manufacturing National Park Nature*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2011), p. 4

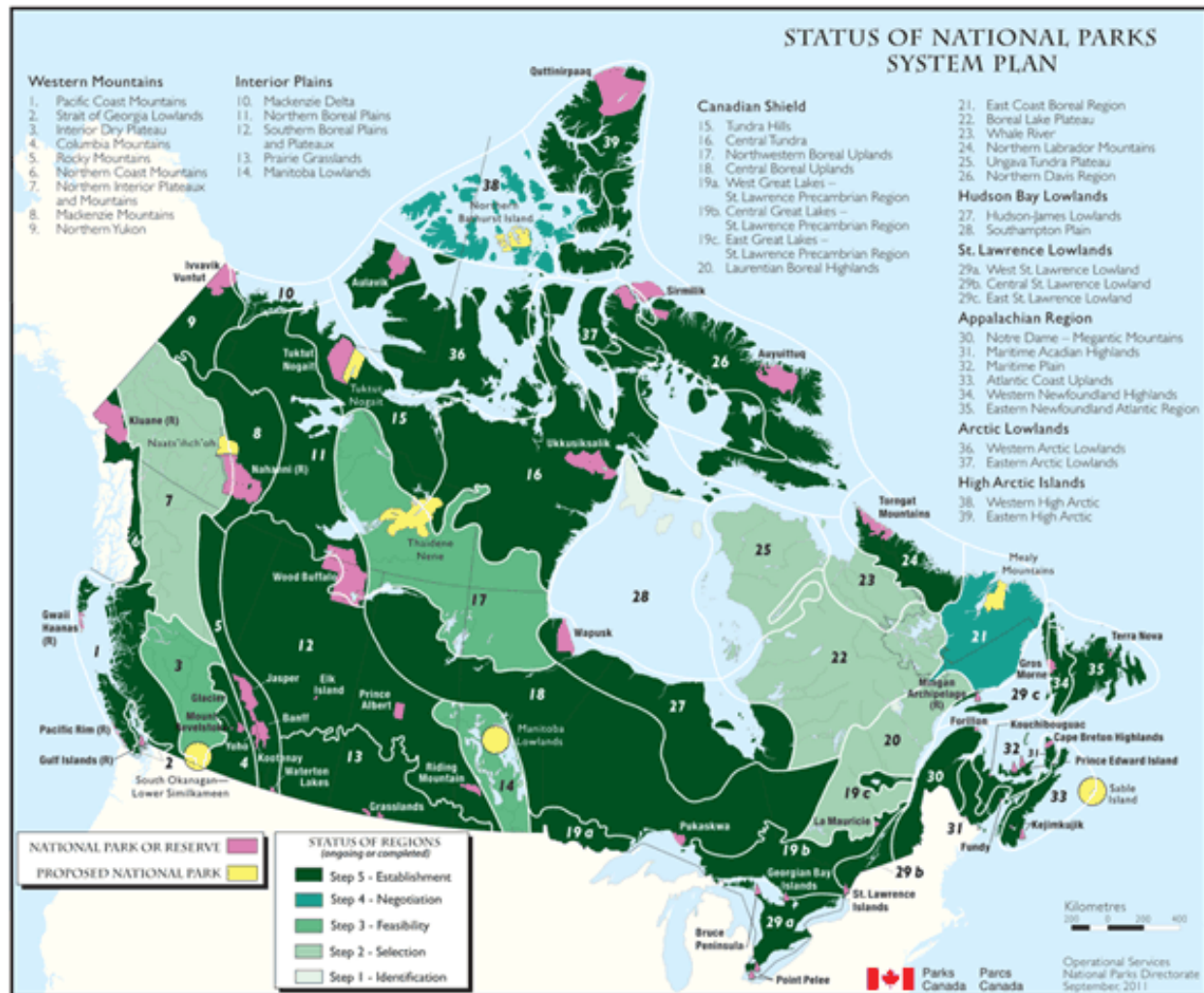
how these visions—while potentially compatible, pending execution—will link together; and we have yet to see if the park reserve will become a reality. I do not mean to sound overly optimistic, and I do not mean to make assumptions either about the views of stakeholder groups or the possibilities for cooperation among them coalescing in a park management structure. Indeed, the decade of debate over park creation has proven how little one can take for granted. Rather than make sweeping claims about the park reserve and stakeholder groups, this thesis seeks to examine the range of perspectives towards the SOLS NPR. It attempts to order and understand the values embodied in these perspectives and to clarify the natures of resistance to and support for a national park reserve in the SOLS. What kind of national park can be created today, and how might this one differ from earlier parks? What values of land use and preservation are continuous, and which are new to this park reserve? What is the significance of this proposed park reserve, when placed into conversation with earlier processes? These questions have guided the very processes of park creation in the SOLS, and they will guide this thesis as well.

Figure 1.1: Current proposed boundaries for the SOLS NPR:¹⁷



¹⁷ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), p. 11. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Figure 1.2: Parks Canada's 39 Natural Regions, by Parks Canada:¹⁸



¹⁸ From “The State of Canada's Natural and Historic Places 2011, Parks Canada, <<http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/pc/rpts/elnhc-scnhp/2011/part-a.aspx>>. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Illustration 1.1: Irrigation and Agriculture in the SOLS, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 1.2: Sage-covered hilltops in the SOLS, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 1.3: From the top of Mount Kobau, facing west, photo by author, August 2012:



Chapter Two: The SOLS NPR in context: labor and environmental histories of Canadian and American national parks

I stepped out of the dust-veiled sedan into a sharp, chill, sage-scented wind and narrowly avoided a large dry cow patty. Up the hill was a tall red and white fire tower. Down the hill, a muddy wallow had been stamped down by hoof-prints, churning together soil and bright green grass. Standing along a path was a black cow, chewing balefully and steadily, its wide sides blocking any passage around it. It knew that it belonged at the top of the mountain, and that I did not.

From the top of Mount Kobau, Txasqin, in the heart of Unit 1 of the proposed South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen National Park Reserve’s Park Concept Area, it is easy to look east from its sage-blanketed crest to the pillowy hills of the Okanagan Valley and west to the sweeping rugged slopes of the Similkameen Valley to admire the vistas. The views are spectacular, especially in the golden, late-afternoon light of a bright August day (Illustration 2.1). The panorama of mountains and hills is rewarding, too, after a nineteen-kilometer drive along a wide gravel road that winds through grasslands and sage-silvered slopes through evergreen forests. Richard Cannings’s description of the drive up the mountain details the biodiversity of the area and the variety of birdlife present along the road, as it climbs through different ecosystems. The “diverse mosaic of grasslands and Douglas-fir forests,” shaped by elevation, topography and aspect, nurtures unusual juxtapositions of “lowland birds such as Brewer’s sparrows...alongside high-mountain specialists such as hermit thrushes.”¹

The peak, at 1863 meters, is high for the region and far enough south of the Okanagan’s characteristic patchwork of green orchards and vineyards on sandy, bleached

¹ Richard Cannings, *Roadside Nature Tours Through the Okanagan*, (Vancouver: Greystone, 2009), p. 36

grasslands that the view from the top reveals mostly hills and mountains, layered and hazily obscured by distance. To notice the habits of work on and use of the mountain, look down, not out. Those mountains fading into each other, and the thick sage that coats their flanks make a lovely sight, yes—but to admire them from the vantage of the mountaintop is also to sidestep the cow patties that dot the peak. A more mundane, less romantic reminder of a very human relationship to the particular glories of Mount Kobau could not be conjured. Other signs are evident: the wood posts of fences, with thick wires strung between them, line the drive up Mount Kobau. A sign that would mark the boundary of a provincial park is lying on the ground with three gaping bullet holes through the metal, and its post has been shattered into two (Illustration 2.2). Perhaps the sign was merely a convenient target for a practicing sharpshooter; maybe it was shot in anger, reflecting disapproval of government-designated conservation areas. I have heard both views, as I’ve mentioned the destroyed sign to a number of people in the area. In either case, that sign and those fences and, yes, the dried-up cow patties are indelible reminders that this mountain has been trodden over by feet, tires, and hooves long before I pulled up to that gravel parking lot in a borrowed sedan to revel in the sage, sunlight, and the feeling of being on one peak among many.

The Okanagan Valley’s deeply gouged floor, punctured and hollowed out by glaciers, is filled with the cold waters of glacial lakes, though its hilly grasslands, low scrub, and forested mountains, which represent the driest land of the Okanagan, are under scrutiny for conservation.⁵ The Similkameen Valley, which runs parallel on the western side of the Okanagan, sharing the mountain wall between them, has high sweeping mountains to the

⁵ See Ed Murray, A. Roed, and Robert J. Fulton, *Okanagan Geology South: Geologic Highlights of the South Okanagan British Columbia* (Kelowna: Okanagan Geology Committee, 2011)

west—but its valley floor is flat and green and pastoral, gently worn down by a silvery meandering river (Illustration 2.3). The story of the Okanagan Valley’s development is undoubtedly that of the intermingling of water in winding rivers and deep lakes with those dry fertile soils in massive irrigation systems—but the story of the park reserve’s conservation is spread out in a mosaic of bunchgrass and sage grasslands, interspersed with Douglas firs, stretched over the rugged topography of mountainous rangelands.⁶

So what is the view from Mount Kobau? It isn’t of rivers, flowing through silty soils, bearing barges and other emblems of a thriving built nation; of reviled floodplain forests, cypresses rising from the mud; or of the majestic giants of Canadian and American national parks.⁷ Instead, we see high rolling hills and mountains in use by hunters and ranchers; sage flats inhabited by cows and visited by birders; Douglas fir forests cut through with ATV tracks. It is neither a paved-over nor a grand, sweeping landscape: it is somewhere in between. Cows tread the hills and feed on the grasses—but it is an ideal spot for restoring the burrowing owl population.⁸ Ranchers haul cattle up and down the slopes in the spring and fall—but endangered species still keep hold among the bunchgrass and sagebrush. Indeed, the balance of these seemingly at-odds activities within such an in-between place as the SOLS weaves together the apparent opposition of grand vista and tended pasture.

Straddling the mountains between the Similkameen and the Okanagan, two very different

⁶ See Johannus A. Janmaat’s “Parrying water conflicts in the Okanagan: The Potential of a Water Market,” *BC Studies* 168 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Winter 2010/2011), pp. 21-44; and W K Wilson’s *Irrigating the Okanagan, 1860-1920*, (Canada: The University of British Columbia, 1989), UMI Dissertations Publishing

⁷ See Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, (USA: Oxford University, 1992); Grego 2011 undergraduate thesis, Middlebury College

⁸ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), p. 13

valleys in both physical appearance and economic character, and balanced between potential conserved space and working landscape, the SOLS is a liminal space. First Nations advocate conscientious, careful use, tied to their culture and history. Environmentalists covet its endangered species count and rare ecosystem type. Ranchers and nearby orchardists fiercely defend their stewardship. It is a space for burrowing owl, cow, and people alike, and it is very difficult to extricate any from those hills.

The material experiences of the SOLS vary accordingly, and the SOLS's image is therefore remade each time a different person interacts with those mountains—it was certainly remade in a different image each time I interviewed a community stakeholder. But before scrutinizing those particular images, it is important to ask: how did the process of national park creation in Canada arrive at these round, dry mountaintops? How different is the proposed SOLS NPR from earlier parks? What intentions guided the creation of earlier parks, and how do they resemble contemporary purposes? The “view” from Mount Kobau, then, also brings one to focus on the development of the park system in the U.S. and Canada, in terms of the evolution of its intentions, bureaucracy and management, and the types of parks themselves.

National parks in both Canada and the U.S. predate the creation of specific government agencies for their management: Banff and Yellowstone, the first national parks in these countries were established around three decades before the founding of either Parks Canada or the National Park Service.⁹ The earliest parks were formed from a bureaucratic and business-oriented perspective to display “mountain wilderness” and to draw tourists to

⁹ Claire Campbell, “Governing a Kingdom: Parks Canada, 1911-2011,” *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2011), p. 5. For a classic on national parks in the U.S., see Alfred Runte's *National Parks: The American Experience*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1979)

these spectacular sites with amenities that included luxury hotels.¹⁰ However, the influence of wilderness activists and the preponderance of a romantic vision of nature must also be paid due attention, and the preservationist impulse that emerged from the influences of men like John Muir certainly drove an upwelling of activism promoting national park formation.¹¹ Canadian historian John Sandlos points out that the passage of the *Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act* in 1911 transformed park governance from a “grab-bag of policies” under the *Rocky Mountain Parks Act* from 1887 to a “well-defined policy regime.”¹² Under this new rule, the Parks Branch created its own amalgam for conservation: it “adopt[ed] preservationist *and* pro-development policies,” the latter in response to “local initiatives” put forward by “chambers of commerce, local governments, tourism promoters, and recreational groups” to the Parks Branch.¹³ These efforts to draw in and provide for tourists while still conserving land are a continuous line throughout the lifetime of the Canadian national parks agencies. In the case of the SOLS NPR, one environmental organization in particular, CPAWS, is strongly pushing the idea that community development and park creation can and should co-exist.

However, there is a flipside to parks creation, in which parks were not necessarily welcomed by or created for stakeholder communities—and given the fraught nature of the process in the SOLS, examining the contentious history of parks creation can help provide context for this conflict. In the case of the SOLS NPR, a substantial number of stakeholders resist the proposed NPR, reject the park as unnecessary for environmental conservation in the

¹⁰ John Sandlos, “Nature’s Playgrounds: The Parks Branch and Tourism Promotion in the National Parks, 1911-1929,” *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2011), p 55

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55

¹² *Ibid.*, 56

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59

area, and decry the NPR as potentially detrimental to their ways of life. This is, of course, not without precedent; indeed, many books have been written about the collision of human histories with national park nature. They are central to the crafting of a new ethic of conservation—an understanding that incorporates human history, acknowledges the fault in separating the human from the natural, and delves into the complex histories of give-and-take in the annals of western conservation. They deftly illustrate the mechanisms of control that the American and Canadian governments forged over groups of residents through the imposition of land use restrictions, whether on movement through the space, extraction of firewood, or trapping of animals for individual use. From the early to mid 20th century, the two governments did a poor job managing residents’ objections and balancing them against both an ostentatious mandate to conserve lands of high “natural” value and a more implicit desire to control fractious groups. In the proposed SOLS NPR, shades of these earlier conflicts remain in responses of some stakeholders to the NPR, and indeed, sometimes in Parks Canada’s management of the park creation process.

Hunters at the Margin by John Sandlos uses three case studies in the Northwest Territories to illustrate the fraught relationship between First Nations peoples and the Canadian government through the lens of three nationally managed wildlife species, wood buffalo, muskox, and caribou—and the legacy of those earlier struggles can be seen in the later establishment of national park reserves, which respect Native title to land. First Nations’ history of resistance against the Canadian government takes on new meanings as Sandlos exposes the ways in which governmental land and wildlife management was often designed to impede, colonize, and destroy Native cultures throughout the first half of the 20th century. “For many Native northerners,” he writes, “the federal government’s efforts to restrict access

to important game species represented a direct threat to their cultural life as hunters and fur harvesters”: connections between land and culture are inextricably bound together through work and they cannot be separated without unraveling the community’s fabric.¹⁴ And such a dissolution constituted a dispossession from a homeland, from ritualized work habits, and from a culture. Through his examination of Native appeals for hunting and trapping permits, trials administered against Native peoples caught disobeying the rules, and personal accounts of these exchanges, Sandlos concludes that the government’s “control measures seem to have remained in place for the sake of control itself,” perpetuating “ecological imperialism” against northern First Nations living on the margins of parks that were once their land.¹⁵

Although Karl Jacoby in *Crimes Against Nature* does not use language as stark as that employed by Sandlos, his message of dispossession is just as clear: by 1885, when the New York legislature “reorganized its holdings” in the Adirondacks into a forest reserve run by a forest commission, 16,000 people were living within the borders of this massive, oval park.¹⁶ It would not be entirely fair to claim that the government simply did not consider the opinions of the residents now within the three-million-acre forest reserve: because the region was undergoing a “de-frontier process,” and coping with depopulation and a sluggish economy, officials “assumed” that area residents “would readily embrace conservation” and the benefits that state control would bring.¹⁷ And indeed, residents of the park approved of the “larger project of protecting the Adirondacks’ forests,” as their livelihood and community identities were wrapped up in the forest—its trees, its animals, its streams.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2007), p. 15

¹⁵ Ibid., 105

¹⁶ Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), p. 17

¹⁷ Ibid., 18

¹⁸ Ibid., 18

This baseline of agreement, however, was not long-lived, as residents began to realize and chafed under the restrictions on their hunting, fishing, timbering, and land use as enforced by the forestry commission. A complex give-and-take developed between residents, locally hired foresters, and government officials. Residents sought to foil bureaucrats and manipulate foresters; officials worked to prevent violations against forestry law and took punitive measures; foresters patrolled, noted offenses, and did their best to balance their connection to the community and their obligations and duties to the forestry commission. Locals saw the officials as meddling and detrimental to their lifestyle; officials' views reflected a larger middle-class perspective on the forest communities, deeming them as possessors of a ““peculiar moral attitude”” that promoted “unpredictable, lawless behavior.”¹⁹ The forest residents did not act as proper citizens within the framework of the conservation system, and neither they nor officials were, because of accumulated hurts, willing to find much common ground. This early attempt to balance conservation with land use was perhaps doomed from the start by the lack of communication between the government and stakeholders—a pattern unfortunately continued throughout the SOLS NPR creation process. Parallels between the formation of the Adirondack park and the SOLS NPR run the gamut from a breakdown of communication, a wariness between competing groups, and unlawful behavior.

Joseph Kosek in *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* grapples with contentious forestry and conservation projects in northern New Mexico and presents a grim portrait of community, environmentalist, and government relations gone awry. Forestry and ranching dominate the economy of northern New Mexico, and attempts

¹⁹ Ibid., 48

to establish government management of the forests often pushed out family operations in favor of corporations that could win government contracts.²⁰ This process was racialized, too: as early as the 1880s, Anglo settlers who began to move in gained water, grazing, and timbering rights more easily than, and often to the detriment of, both Latino New Mexicans and local American Indians. Kosek's account, written after years of fieldwork and dozens of interviews, mixes the studies of resource politics, racial tensions, and Marxist interpretations of labor and history to interpret the tenuous history and tense present of the region. Indeed, the process of forestry management in northern New Mexico is practically a guide for what government bureaucrats should avoid when launching a conservationist program.

Kosek describes the depth of the “relationships [forestry] forged between people and the landscape,” and finds that denigrating those relationships is the cause of much strife.²¹ For example, he posits that the environmentalists' failure to “consider...the effects of [Marx's] theory that brings together labor and land,” “remaking them both in the ‘intricate metabolism’ of social history and material landscape,” has “bitterly divided” them from people—often Latino or American Indian—who “refuse to ignore the racial and class history of New Mexican landscapes.”²² Environmentalists' legal efforts, through “forest injunction and subsequent litigation” to protect the forests from logging at any cost, are in “direct conflict with community efforts to reclaim their land” from the Forest Service and logging companies. Among environmentalists, the Forest Service, Anglo settlers, the nearby Los Alamos National Laboratory, corporate logging interests, American Indians, and Latino foresters and ranchers, there is no central or cohesive vision for land use. Kosek does not

²⁰ Joseph Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*, (Durham: Duke, 2006), p. 18

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18

²² *Ibid.*, 19

pretend to have the answers; instead, he strives to forge a “place-based history of the articulations and politics of nature and difference.”²³ Like other scholars who focused on sites of conservation, Kosek examines the forests of New Mexico and their use and conservation because “nature has been the primary target through which bodies and populations...have been governed.”²⁴

While the conflict over the SOLS NPR has not quite resulted in the full-scale populist revolts and armed action that the national forests of New Mexico did, Kosek’s book speaks to the similarly grass-roots conflict over the SOLS NPR because of its more contemporary time frame, the variety of stakeholders, and in the types of land preservation and use within national forests. The national forest is a liminal space in conservation: national forests are not preserved sanctuaries, but working landscapes. They serve as arenas for resource extraction and forestry management and are rarely famed for their beauty as are national parks. Forests are more practical, more work-oriented, and more grounded in familiar practices of labor and resource use than traditional national park landscapes. The proposed SOLS NPR, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, would potentially push the boundary between “sacred conserved space” and working landscape in its own ways, because of the proposed management structures—and so would inhabit its own liminal space within the forms usually instituted by that government conservation initiatives, not unlike that of national forests in the United States.

Despite the contentious and conflicted processes of land conservation, the making of national parks in Canada and the United States proceeded “with remarkable speed” throughout the 20th century. In Canada, however, the “romantic impulse and ministerial

²³ Ibid., 29

²⁴ Ibid., 25

hubris” behind the rapid-fire government conservation efforts came to a halt in 1970 when the Canadian government adopted the National Parks System Plan, establishing a structure and a protocol for the creation of future parks: thirty-nine “natural regions” were designated, with the intention that at least one park be established to represent each.²⁵ Claire Campbell argues in *A Century of Parks Canada* that this new conservation framework “meant not only more parks” but parks that would represent “ecological diversity,” rather than the all-encompassing focus on “scenery and political advantage” that had prevailed earlier.²⁶ Four years later, the Canadian government also agreed to designate “national park reserves.” This was a recognition of First Nations’ claims to land within a park area; by establishing a NPR, Parks Canada sets aside land for a future park once land titles have been settled between the government and the First Nations residents.²⁷ While still an ongoing and imperfect process, the creation of national park reserves heralded a sea change in the government’s perspective on the purpose of parks; no longer were they for the protection and enjoyment of wilderness, they could also incorporate cultural landscapes and the people whose communities laid some claim to those spaces.²⁸

One of the most comprehensive management plans representing this new paradigm of conservation is the 2010 plan for the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, on the western coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. The park, the first on the west coast, was initially

²⁵ Claire Campbell, “Governing a Kingdom,” *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell, (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2011), 8

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10

²⁸ Canada is neither the only country nor the best at enfolding conservation and culture together—I. S. MacLaren points out the policies of other countries whose governments have long worked to incorporate the human into sites of “natural” beauty. See I. S. MacLaren, *Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park: Studies in Two Centuries of Human History in the Upper Athabasca River Watershed*, (Calgary: University of Alberta, 2007)

established in 1970, and in 1987, it was “officially scheduled” as a national park reserve, in consultation with and under advisement from First Nations on the island.²⁹ Previously, the park was guided by the implementation interim management plans, first written in 1994 and later updated in 2003. The 2010 management plan is the culmination of years of work between Parks Canada and area communities, more permanent than the previous interim plans; in it, Parks Canada explicitly lays out its vision for the park, the park’s purpose, and the park’s operations. The plan emphasizes cultural heritage and deliberately puts it on par with ecological systems as worth taking up across park units nationwide:

Parks Canada is responsible for both protecting the ecosystems and cultural resources of these magnificent areas and managing them for visitors to understand, appreciate, and enjoy in a way that leaves them unimpaired for present and future generations.³⁰

In fact, Parks Canada’s chosen theme for Pacific Rim, “People, Stories, and Legacy,” which “will guide the park’s decision-making and future management direction” could not more explicitly feature Parks Canada’s commitment to a new conservation ethic, especially within Pacific Rim—an ethic that will “enrich...personal experiences,” “promote active stewardship and foster the sense of belonging,” within a park that is “home to both humans and wildlife.”³¹ The implementation of these carefully worded, deeply considerate goals is laid out in detailed actionable plans later in the report, and hopefully these intended plans are being acted on in good faith.

Each of these discussions unsettles traditional ideas of wilderness that drove the glorification and reification of empty space, even if each also emphasizes the extent to which place can be a vessel into which new interpretations are poured. Each is infused with the

²⁹ Parks Canada, *Pacific Rim National Park Reserve Management Plan*, 2010, p. 2

³⁰ Ibid., vii

³¹ Ibid., 35

awareness now widespread among environmental historians that wilderness was a cultural construction, a means of separating the human from nature in an effort to colonize and to escape. William Cronon's 1995 "The Trouble with Wilderness" helped spur this mode of thinking: "...wilderness is not quite what it seems."³⁴ The proposed SOLS NPR is a place that exemplifies this rejection of wilderness and affirmation of conservation. There is no wilderness within the proposed boundaries, and if there is no wilderness, what exactly would Parks Canada be protecting? Quite a few environmental historians have tangled with such questions. Once we understand that the wilderness is gone, how do we decide what to protect? If not wilderness, then what? While the message heard most often from that essay is that of the cultural construction of the wilderness ideal, its more valuable and practicable lesson is that protecting wilderness—if it ever really exists—is not of as much value as understanding and preserving lands that we find beautiful and important to our sense of place and our sense of self. Cronon asserts that "we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others."³⁵

It is a strange, reverse hubris to laud our supposed non-use of a place, and for that reason to suggest its conservation: human impacts on the planet are now intrinsic and pervasive.³⁶ There are no wild spaces left, untouched lands that somehow crave our noble protection in the face of our potential to harm. We have spread out and perfected our ability

³⁴ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), p. 69

³⁵ Ibid., 85

³⁶ See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, (USA: Random House, 1989)

to manipulate our surroundings—and this manipulation does not simply refer to our physical use of land, but to the stories we construct around places. The proposed SOLS NPR is, of course, no exception. In fact, its liminality—between ranchland and rare ecosystem, recreation and a working landscape—only emphasizes the different narratives with which stakeholders imbue the land. None of these narratives are wrong—but to forge a successful national park reserve, space must be found to incorporate and respect each of them.

Illustration 2.1: Mount Kobau, Txusqin, in the late afternoon, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 2.2: The broken, shot-up signpost, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 2.3: The Similkameen Valley bottom, photo by author, August 2012:



Chapter Three: A Brief History of the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen and Burgeoning Conservation in the SOLS

It's gorgeous. It's got everything you want in a national park—except local support.

Former Parks Canada employee, on Churn Creek¹

Since the colonization of British Columbia, the landscape of the Okanagan-Similkameen has changed profoundly. In an interview, a First Nations chief in the SOLS mentioned the outlawing in the late 1800s of First Nations' use of fire to manage the grasslands and the decrease of huckleberries and bitterroot, both important traditional food for area First Nations. The settlement of British Columbia is recent enough that its trajectory is not buried deep in the memories of its residents—many of the people interviewed had direct and distinct anecdotes about the large-scale changes in the region. These memories were not relayed in a particularly sentimental fashion, though they were always couched in the context of the environmental fragility of the region. That so many British Columbians can discuss change fluently should be no surprise: most of those I interviewed are at least fifty years old and born in BC, which means they would have witnessed over a third of the period of large-scale European settlement of the province. For First Nations, that would mean that many living would remember the stories of elders who likely had been born before the creation of reserves, which began in the 1870s in the SOLS. The stories of change in the SOLS are extant in many residents' minds, and the consequences of development are ongoing and understood within that recent historical context.

¹ Interview A, May 2013. Interviews, because the names must remain anonymous, will be lettered sequentially as each new interviewer is quoted.

The region in which the proposed park reserve is situated has undergone profound changes in appearance and development due to human influence: from habitation by the Sylix people; to European incursion through fur trapping and trading; to a focus on ranching to feed gold miners to the north; to a booming fruit and wine production center; and for now, to a region where the combination of tourism and agriculture strain both the natural resources available and the delicate arid land. The proposed national park is often seen by environmentalists as one solution to the rampant development in the Okanagan, as the valley floor is almost entirely dominated by residences, retirement and vacation homes, orchards, and vineyards. Those high hills within the proposed NPR are some of the least altered spaces within the region, and as development spreads, there is fear that it will creep into the arid hills. The region's beauty and moderate climate draw in farmers and tourists alike; but all conservationists in the area, whether or not they support the park, understand and promote the importance of balancing the craving for sun and heat with the tenuous ecosystem. Almost all land use negotiations and development in the SOLS turns on two major issues: First Nations title assertions and land use; and the distribution and scarcity of water.

First Nations protests during the reserve creation process in BC during the late 1800s foreshadowed the current refusal of many BC bands to form official treaties with the province: at the time, some bands “insist[ed] that there was no need to reserve what was already theirs.”² The modern treaty process is viewed by many bands in BC with suspicion because of experience and a reluctance to “adopt an essentially European conception of title.”³ That the Okanagan Nation Alliance retains title over their traditional territories is

² Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, resistance, and reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC, 2002), p. 204

³ *Ibid.*, 321

very significant for the SOLS: first, because this assertion of title over the SOLS necessitates that Parks Canada propose a national park reserve rather than a national park; and second, because it enables Parks Canada, a federal agency, to hold meetings with the Okanagan Nation Alliance apart from the provincial government and for those two to forge agreements and understandings of their own. The Okanagan Nation Alliance was formed in 1981 to “work collectively to advance and assert” the Syilx Aboriginal title and rights of the Okanagan Indian Band, Upper Nicola Band, Westbank First Nation, Penticton Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Lower and Upper Similkameen Indian Bands, and (in the USA) the Colville Confederated Tribes.⁴ The profound differences between how First Nations and settlers view land use are still entrenched and contribute too to the conflict over the SOLS NPR, as described here by a First Nations chief:

When I was about ten, eleven, I started to see the difference between how I was taught, and title and rights, and how I look at the land as compared to western civilization. They look at it from a different point of view, and even actual how they limit our management of our land for everything. You know, when they look at it, they have silos, and one manages it for range, rangeland for cattle and horses and that, another one manages it for economic purpose of forestry, or parks, they all are different, they’re not all cohesive in a sense. You know, one looks at well we need these trees to grow and we need this space for them to grow in. And range people, they look at it and say well, you know there’s this much grass, and there’s this many cows, and we got to have this and this and this. And then...the wildlife and the parks people, and they say there’s all these rare species...But they’re not looking at it from our perspective of everything on the land has a purpose for our living.⁵

Second, given the huge lakes in the Okanagan (Illustration 3.2), the public perception of the region is not that it is lacking in water; however, runoff from snow and rainfall

⁴ Okanagan Nation Alliance official website, “Who we are: Organization Information,” (2010), < <http://www.syilx.org/who-we-are/organization-information/>>. See more in the “2011-2012 Okanagan Nation Alliance Annual Report” at the bottom of the page.

⁵ Interview B, May 2013

evaporates quickly, and the lakes themselves replenish at a slow rate. The SOLS is dry with Penticton, the most populous town in the region, only receiving 28 cm of rain a year; and the huge glacial lakes in the Okanagan do not guarantee water stability for the region because of the expense of irrigation.⁶ Orchardists, ranchers, and vineyard owners rely on irrigation, and the water supply is by no means a surety. Indeed, the 2008 “Living Water Smart” strategy of the provincial government was designed to address issues of water throughout the province, and identified important aspects of the strain on water resources in the Okanagan.⁷

The redistribution of water for irrigation transformed the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys from overgrazed rangeland to flourishing centers of agriculture: peaches, cherries, apricots, and apples all thrived in the hot sunny summers of the region—the “natural”—and the human-sculpted irrigation channels—the “altered.” Now, the Okanagan is known as Canada’s wine country—and while people still look forward to the fruit harvest each summer, wine, tourism, and “recreational property...supplanted fruit farming as the economic foundation” of the valley in less than twenty years.⁸ 80,000 people now live in the SOLS.⁹ The Okanagan had only thirteen wineries in 1984, and now has 134; the Similkameen had only three in 1999, and today there are eleven.¹⁰ The lakes, vineyards, and temperate climate draw tourists to the Okanagan, as does clever rebranding of the region as Canada’s wine country; the rampant development of the Okanagan since the boom in wine consumption and production has proved to be an economic boon for the valley as well as a

⁶ “Canadian Climate Normals 1971-2000 Station Data: Penticton,” Government of Canada Climate, <<http://climate.weather.gc.ca/>>.

⁷ Johannus A. Janmaat, “Parrying Water Conflicts in the Okanagan: The potential of a water market,” *BC Studies* 168 (Winter 2010/2011), p. 21

⁸ Casey 2008, p. 46

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55; Interview C, October 2012; Also see “Quick Facts,” Wines of British Columbia, BC Wine Institute, <http://www.winebc.org/press_room/statistics/>.

cause for environmental concern. Development is not always inherently destructive, but the sprawls of subdivisions for summer and year-round homes and water-intensive agriculture do put pressure on the narrow, arid southern Okanagan.¹¹

The Okanagan and Similkameen are very different places: the Similkameen is much less developed and populous; it does not have the lakes for recreation; and while the Similkameen is not exactly depressed, its economic fortunes turned down as ranching declined. Attitudes towards the SOLS NPR are more hostile there than in the Okanagan. But the two valleys share similar concerns about water use, development, and the threat of destruction of the very ecosystems that drew settlers to the valleys. One interview, with a former civic leader of Keremeos, illustrates the difference between a Similkameen Valley with a healthy cattle industry, and one without:

I'll have been here 50 years ago next year. I was probably in the village—not sure—but outside of teachers, I was probably the only person here that had a degree, 50 years ago. There were sawmills; bush crews for the wood industry; farmers; a little bit of mining; packing houses was one industry, of course. You go back to the 60s and the early 70s, it was a thriving community.¹²

Similkameen residents tend to see themselves as more akin to common perceptions of the “Wild West” than do those of the Okanagan: more rugged, more reliant on ranching and forestry, and possessing a view of themselves as workers and stewards of the land. While a dozen vineyards are scattered along the valley floor, and while some residents of the valley bemoan the increasing trickle of migration to the valley, the Similkameen is nowhere near as built up as the Okanagan. Keremeos, the principal town of the southern Similkameen, and its

¹¹ See Melody Hessing, “After the Harvest: Towards a Sustainable Okanagan?,” *BC Studies* 168, (Winter 2010/2011), pp. 81-94

¹² Interview D, May 2013

environs had a population of 3390 in 2006.¹³ And yet, like the Okanagan, the Similkameen's population has increased largely through migration: in 2006, 85% of residents of Keremeos and the surrounding area were born elsewhere. That the vast majority of residents moved from elsewhere does unsettle the rhetoric of Similkameen inhabitants who fear a glut of tourists and retirees should the NPR become a reality, given that many of them are also transplants. Forestry and agriculture are the first and third most lucrative industries in the Similkameen, so extraction and irrigation-dependent land use are similarly important to the Similkameen as the Okanagan.¹⁴ And the evidence of this extraction is highly visible: driving around Princeton and down to Keremeos, it is easy to see clear-cut or selectively cut bald spots in the Douglas fir forests in the mountains.

The SOLS NPR would straddle the mountains that separate the two valleys and would have different consequences for each valley, but the trail to the creation of the SOLS NPR begins further north, closer to the epicenter of the Cariboo Gold Rush. Conservation initiatives in Parks Canada's Region 3 can be traced back to the early days of grasslands and range preservation and forward to community-crafted land management plans. Organizations dedicated to the preservation of grasslands emerged in BC with the advent of range studies in the 1940s and were revitalized with the rise of a scientific ecology in the 1970s. Grasslands account for less than 1% of BC's land area, but they sustain over 30% of the province's endangered and threatened species.¹⁵ The efforts of grasslands ecologists to raise awareness about grasslands biodiversity date to 1918, when the Commission of Conservation Canada produced a report that included a description of BC grasslands—though it was not until 1947

¹³ Canadian Census, *Keremeos Community Profile*, Canadian government, 2006

¹⁴ *Keremeos Community Profile*, p. 6. Retail/trade are second on the list.

¹⁵ *BC Grasslands Mapping Project: A Conservation Risk Assessment*, (Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia: 2004), p. 1

that actual field data and observations of BC grasslands were brought together in Dr. Ed Tisdale's paper, "The Grasslands of the Southern Interior of British Columbia," published in the journal *Ecology*.¹⁶ This document's careful cataloguing of BC grasslands emphasized the uniqueness and fragility of the region and helped raise recognition for this particular ecosystem. With the passage of the Range Act in 1978, a wide spectrum of use of grasslands was instituted, from ranching to wildlife conservation.¹⁷ During the 1980s and the 1990s, much has been published about BC grasslands, enabled by the Range Act and the burgeoning activism for grasslands conservation by groups such as the Canadian Parks and Wildlife Society.¹⁸

However, that research was often not easily accessed or organized for public use—until the BC Grasslands Conservation Council, during their founding meeting at Big Bar Ranch in 1996, launched initiatives to collect and compile descriptions, assessments, and data about BC grasslands. Two major reports have emerged from this meeting, both of which are founts of information about the characteristics of and variations among BC grasslands: an intensive mapping project of the grasslands, released in 2004; and a more descriptive text by Brian and Sandra Wikeem, also published in 2004. Organizations with initiative such as the GCC are important because they promote multi-use, community-consensus visions of grasslands conservation—and within such visions is an appreciation for landscapes traditionally not seen as eligible to become a national park. Because of their physical liminality, the SOLS and the rest of Region 3 necessitate a flexible, creative outlook—such

¹⁶ Ed Tisdale, "The Grasslands of the Southern Interior of British Columbia," *Ecology* 31.3 (1947), pp. 346-382

¹⁷ Joanna Reid, "The Grasslands Debates: Conservationists, Ranchers, First Nations, and the Landscape of the Middle Fraser," *BC Studies* 160 (Winter 2008), p. 4

¹⁸ See the *BC Grasslands Mapping Project* in particular.

landscapes expand perceptions of what a “beautiful” place can look like. National parks and other conserved lands were so often predicated on their aesthetic appeal, which had to fall within a rigid, narrow definition. Grasslands were not in that original category—but a combination of local stewardship and focused ecological knowledge are forcing that definition to open.

In the search to establish parks representative of each of Canada’s thirty-nine ecozones, Parks Canada had cast a wide net for a Region 3 candidate. As one interviewee, a biologist originally from the Okanagan who consulted for Parks Canada recalled, that in 1980, Parks Canada:

...asked me to identify some large, more wilderness areas that would be more representative of the region, as well as smaller sites that would represent some of the more unique features of the region. So in the end I identified four large wilderness areas, which were naturally not in the Okanagan because we don’t have that kind of landscape here, very much, and those features were up in the Bonaparte Plateau, north of Kamloops: the Churn Creek area; the Chilcotin Junction; and also...the West River Road between Quesnel and the Coast Mountains...I identified two kinds of national monument areas: one, the Vaseux Lake area; and the other, the Osoyoos area, as being representative of the unique features that the Dry Interior had...And as a result of that, they decided to look into the Churn Creek area as their kind of favored bigger park proposal, and nothing really came of that. There was a lot of local opposition, as I understood, to the idea up there. And so that—the whole idea of establishing a park in this region kind of went to the back burner.¹⁹

Today, each of the areas described in this interview as having national park potential are at least partly conserved in a provincial park or a protected area, the result of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan from 1995 (Figure 3.1). All of these are also hundreds of kilometers north of the current proposed national park reserve. That these areas were favored over the SOLS for the early push for park creation in Region 3 and that Parks Canada’s early

¹⁹ Interview E, October 2012

efforts to establish a park so far from the SOLS failed underlines a larger argument of this thesis: that a marked shift has occurred in the environmentalist and popular perspectives of what types of place deserve conservation and restoration.

Churn Creek evokes a sense of western frontier in its rolling, rugged hills, the deeply incised valley of the creek as it flows into the Fraser River, and stubbly, sage-covered grasslands. The area epitomizes the frontier spirit of the Cariboo-Chilcotin, which emerged when gold was found on the Fraser River in 1859, followed by the rise of a ranching industry to sustain the hungry miners. A former Parks Canada project manager for Churn Creek suggests that these deeply embedded cultural and economic identities remain, both for residents and for the resource industries still there:

...there's still a very strong frontier mentality in not only the region but especially in the Chilcotin. They don't like government to begin with—they're free spirits who want to be left alone...That's been the Cariboo-Chilcotin spirit forever. And you translate that into the resource industries that are there today—whether they're loggers, miners, ranchers, hunters both commercial and sport, they want to be left alone as well. Anything that government could propose that would change that is resisted big time...But you've got 100 years of tradition, and a national park would say, that all stops. And in a Wild West frontier kind of place, that doesn't go over well.²⁰

According to the project manager of the proposed Churn Creek park, “the federal government [was] looking for natural lands that represent[ed] the best of BC Interior Plateau—arid grasslands, dramatic river canyons and dry forests.” They were looking for somewhere that conveyed “the image of the Old West, where you have these vast expanses of rolling grasslands, a lot of wildflowers and beautiful benchlands.”²¹ Parks Canada envisaged an extensive park, which covered the current protected area and much of the Fraser

²⁰ Interview A, May 2013

²¹ Glenn Bohn, “Reviving our Dwindling Grasslands,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 July 1994

River Canyon through the Cariboo-Chilcotin. The provincial government allowed a Parks Canada representative to attend the Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan creation process, which began in the early 1990s, and through his inclusion, Parks Canada pitched the idea of a national park at Churn Creek to the stakeholders and policy makers involved in the early 1990s. However, despite this approach, intended to integrate Parks Canada policies with local decision-making, the proposal was not well received.

Nonetheless, the planning group conceded to consider a smaller national park at Churn Creek (the CCNP). In 1994, a recommendation from the NDP-formed, provincial Commission for Resources and the Environment was made to the provincial Cabinet; the 75,000 hectares (as opposed to 200,000 hectares under the federal recommendations from 1980) included primarily provincial Crown Land, with much of it under grazing tenures.²² However, even after this revised plan was presented by Parks Canada and the provincial CORE to the BC government, it was abruptly shut down in the mid-1990s because of a lack of community support. Most sources attribute the termination of the national park plan to the heavy opposition of area ranchers. The truculence against federal interference in a local planning process in the Cariboo-Chilcotin can be partially found in the labor-oriented roots of the region. In *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*, Elizabeth Furniss described the region's economy as reliant upon "the forest industry,...ranching, mining, tourism, and government employment."²³ Because of the heavy emphasis on primary industries, the comparatively sparse population, and the history of ranching in the region, the Cariboo-Chilcotin maintains a "frontier spirit." According to

²² Glenn Bohn, "Reviving our Dwindling Grasslands," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 July 1994

²³ Elizabeth Furniss, *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community* (Vancouver: UBC, 1999), p. 6

Furniss, settler culture in the region remained strong and dominant because of its “ubiquity and flexibility: its ability to be continually modified in order to deflect or incorporate challenges to its legitimacy.”²⁴

William Turkel’s book *Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* employs geology to intervene in the kind of uni-dimensional and dominant historical understandings that Furniss decries. Turkel points to “the sheer profusion of physical evidence from the past to be found in any place,” which “makes it impossible for an individual or group to limit the stories that landscape can tell,”—though he is extremely aware and delves into just how colonial efforts have molded histories to establish dominance.²⁵ Turkel’s work also seeks to unsettle a view of science as reductive, inaccessible, and disconnected from local practices and traditional understandings. His discussion of geology is intended to foster “recognition that the environmental sciences may provide a wealth of historical information, but they do not provide a unitary or authoritative account against which all other accounts must be judged.”²⁶ This recasting of scientific knowledges to make them more easily put into conversation with local or traditional knowledges holds an obvious appeal both for the scholar attempting to reconcile and make room for a network, rather than a monolith, of knowledge paradigms while resolving community disputes over land use. This complex understanding of the interaction of science, management, and community could help forge connections between disparate understandings of conservation and preservation in the SOLS.

²⁴ Ibid, 15

²⁵ William J. Turkel, *Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau*, (Vancouver: UBC, 2007), p. xxii

²⁶ Ibid, xxii

Turkel also presents a grim picture of the dominant historical understanding within the “historiography of British Columbia” of the Cariboo-Chilcotin, traditionally thought of as “a landscape of darkness, resistance, and violence,” with a particularly virulent settler view of the Tsilhq’at’in, the local indigenous people, as “essentially truculent.”²⁷ Joanna Reid’s thesis, *Grassland Debates: Conservation and Social Change in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, British Columbia*, has descriptive elements in common with both Turkel’s and Furniss’s accounts, as she opens her introduction with anecdotes about the remoteness of the Cariboo-Chilcotin and the treachery of the roads in the region.²⁸ The contemporary danger of traversing the Cariboo-Chilcotin mirrors historical tales of the region as “an unruly place,” rife with vigilante violence and “frontiersmen.”²⁹ And this history informs the current atmosphere, as “[t]he middle Fraser landscape often appears as a last vestige of the Wild West, where rough, hardworking men eke out a marginal living on dry, unforgiving land.” To be sure, none of these scholars leave these depictions without thorough critical interpretations—but that each of them begins with this apparently pervasive portrayal of the Cariboo-Chilcotin as a new Wild West suggests that that mentality is sticky and perpetuated by the isolation of the region from cities, larger populations, and stronger government presence.

So, the Cariboo-Chilcotin has a culture inflected with a frontier sensibility, an economy dependent on natural resources, and a society whose complex dynamics require a redrawing of theoretical frameworks. The actors within this culture, economy, and society

²⁷ Ibid, xxii

²⁸ Joanna Reid, *Grassland Debates: Conservation and Social Change in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, British Columbia*, October 2010, Ph.D. Thesis for the UBC Department of Geography

²⁹ Ibid., 2

rejected a national park in their midst, 75,000 hectares of grasslands and ranchland, despite an ecological-minded bureaucracy's advocacy for the value of the proposed park. The tale of the Cariboo-Chilcotin as an intractable landscape inhabited by people with matching temperaments offers a possible explanation for why the park proposal failed, but that narrative branches into a more complex series of relationships between Parks Canada, ranchers, and the land itself. I will argue that the proposed Churn Creek park failed for two major reasons: because of ranchers' distrust of government conservation and insecurity about the future of their livelihoods; and because of Parks Canada's difficulty in bridging the divide between the principles behind grasslands ecology and the values of a ranching landscape. I contrast this pair of contributing factors with a newly emerging, increasingly prevalent mindset that reconceptualizes the types of land deserving conservation and the kinds of relationships that need to be built to achieve that conservation.

Reid argues that the CCNP proposal failed because the "active, long-term, and intensive local experience of Churn as a ranching landscape was left out of these ecological representations."³⁰ She admits the highly contested nature of the debate, relaying that at the beginning of her research, community members were very reluctant to tell a full story about the proposed park, and indicating that she had to learn about the park proposal "eventually, piece by piece" as she gained the trust of the people with whom she interacted.³¹ She points out that ranchers mistrusted park creation as a form of "government land reallocation" rather than conservation and noted a pervasive sense of "marginalization and alienation" among ranchers because they felt that the government ecologists sent to Churn Creek were unwilling to engage with them on a meaningful level. One of her sentences points to a direct contrast

³⁰ Reid 2009, 151

³¹ Ibid., 151

between the process of park creation in Churn Creek and the process currently taking place in the SOLS, in which she asserts that “Churn Creek exists in its current mixed-use protection area form in part because of [ranchers’] opposition.”³² The proposed SOLS NPR would be intentionally mixed-use because the relationship between government bureaucrats working in conservation and stakeholders who live within or near park areas is necessarily shifting, such that a more inclusive definition of “conservation” can be crafted.

An interview with a former Parks Canada employee more or less corroborates Reid’s account of residents resistant to park creation because it would curtail cultural and economic activities and a certain inflexibility on the part of Parks Canada. However, the former employee also emphasized the influence and role of powerful provincial organizations and of resource industries in further blocking the process of park creation. While it is important to maintain the agency of the individual ranchers and the power of their working relationship with the Churn Creek landscape, the influence of interest groups can impact policy on local landscapes, apart from the decision-making capacities of stakeholders. There is no documented evidence to pin even partial failure of the CCNP on such companies. What can be said, however, is that corporations have indeed altered conservation efforts in Churn Creek. Black Dome Gold Mine relies upon transportation corridors through the Churn Creek Protected Area, and as a result, Churn Creek was not designated a provincial park but was instead afforded “protected area” status, which allows for more use.³³ Corporate interests in Churn Creek such as the gold mine have the advantage of providing jobs, making their importance to the community and the local economy more immediately obvious than a distant government, the benefits from which are either so integrated into daily life as to seem

³² Ibid., 152

³³ Interview A, May 2013

automatic or so far away from the day-to-day activities of life in the Cariboo-Chilcotin as to seem inconsequential.

In any case, Churn Creek ranchers felt marginalized by Parks Canada when the park was proposed. They felt as though this conservation effort stifled rancher participation, and were dubious of government intervention on land over which they felt themselves stewards. Ranchers who had internalized the frontier myths attributed to the Cariboo-Chilcotin, might very likely have seen that territory as separate from a centralized government, as a place organized by and therefore belonging to the tough folk who choose to live there. More crucially, ranchers saw themselves as pragmatic stewards of a well-known landscape, defending their carefully considered use against the impingement of government ecologists. Ranchers were deeply scornful of Parks Canada's failure to consult fully and openly in the park development process and their apparent unwillingness to accommodate an alternate set of land ethics within their established parameters of what conservation could include.

Set alongside the ranchers' distrust of and essential exclusion from the process of park creation was the struggle of ecologists for recognition of grasslands as valid sites for conservation efforts. While Parks Canada did not sufficiently engage with the community local to Churn Creek, as evidenced by the dearth of conversations and interactions to build consensus, its employees were nonetheless acting to protect a type of landscape historically ignored. Grasslands are not visually dramatic, and a damaged grassland rife with invasive species does not necessarily appear different, to an untrained eye, from a healthy grassland. Flat expanses or rolling hills of bunchgrass do not hold the same appeal to the public imagination as towering, craggy mountains—and so grasslands ecologists have been struggling for years to shore up appreciation and motivation for their calls for conservation.

Overall, logistics and profound disagreements outweighed and defeated the proposal for a park at Churn Creek. The park proposal, despite the good intentions behind its zeal, failed because of its execution, and plans for a park at Churn Creek were abandoned. However, The Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan's survey provides a pithy yet illustrative description of the consolation prize, the Churn Creek Protected Area, and also shows how this landscape diverges from traditional landscapes of conservation in parks:

The bunchgrass grasslands occurring at Churn Creek exist at the most northern extent of this large arid and semiarid area... The Protected Area encompasses a great diversity of near natural grasslands, and contains large areas of low, mid and high elevation grasslands with a variety of aspects as well as wetlands and forests. This is combined with an exemplary variety of landforms created by glacial and fluvial processes, erosion and mass movement. The resulting open landscape of terraces, kettle lakes, hoodoos and gullies, together with the massive Fraser River Canyon is among the most scenic in the Province. This diversity is distinctive in the Province's protected area system, making Churn Creek the most significant grassland protected area west of the Rockies.³⁴

This description emphasizes the biodiversity and unique "natural" landscapes contained within the protected area; the geological history literally visible in the physical geography; and the spectacular vistas that would greet the eye of visitors to the area (Illustration 3.3). The Churn Creek Protected Area was established in 1995 as a part of the larger Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan, which also created sixteen other provincial parks and protected areas.³⁵ The protected area today sweeps along 36,747 hectares of a glaciated, u-shaped river valley and its terraces and benchlands, representing a variety of the arid grasslands rare in BC.³⁶

³⁴ *Management Plan for Churn Creek Protected Area*, BC Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, BC Parks Division (Mar. 2000), p. 14

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14

The land use plan that established the protected area is a substantial document, conforming to bureaucratic standards of species documentation, enumerating types of permitted land use, and endorsing the uniqueness and beauty of these grasslands. It also leans heavily on an affirmation of the symbiosis between ranching and the maintenance of the grasslands and of continuing support for the ranching community in the Cariboo-Chilcotin. For example, under the second section entitled “Protected Area Visions and Roles,” a series of paragraphs in italics begins with, “*the prime role of the Churn Creek Protected Area is to conserve and restore nationally significant grasslands and wildlife populations while maintaining a viable, year-round working ranch.*”³⁷ The document then stresses the continuity of traditional use not only by the ranchers but by First Nations (“Protected Area management also reflects the historic importance of Churn Creek for First Nations, ranchers, hunters, miners, and recreational users”), private landowners, placer miners, and others using the Churn Creek area for industrial purposes (“Private land holders and placer miners are continuing to use their property as they desire and have rights to access and develop these lands subject to any relevant regulations. An Industrial Corridor passes through the middle of the Protected Area and provides access for mining, logging and other industrial users”).

Land conservation, in the context of the provincially managed Churn Creek Protected Area, no longer means a cessation of human use, but rather a more pragmatic relationship that sustains the traditional working landscape—which includes a mining thruway—and the bunchgrass grasslands. The careful rhetoric of symbiotic relationships between ranching and ecology in the plan originates from the massive collaborative effort behind the plan—dozens

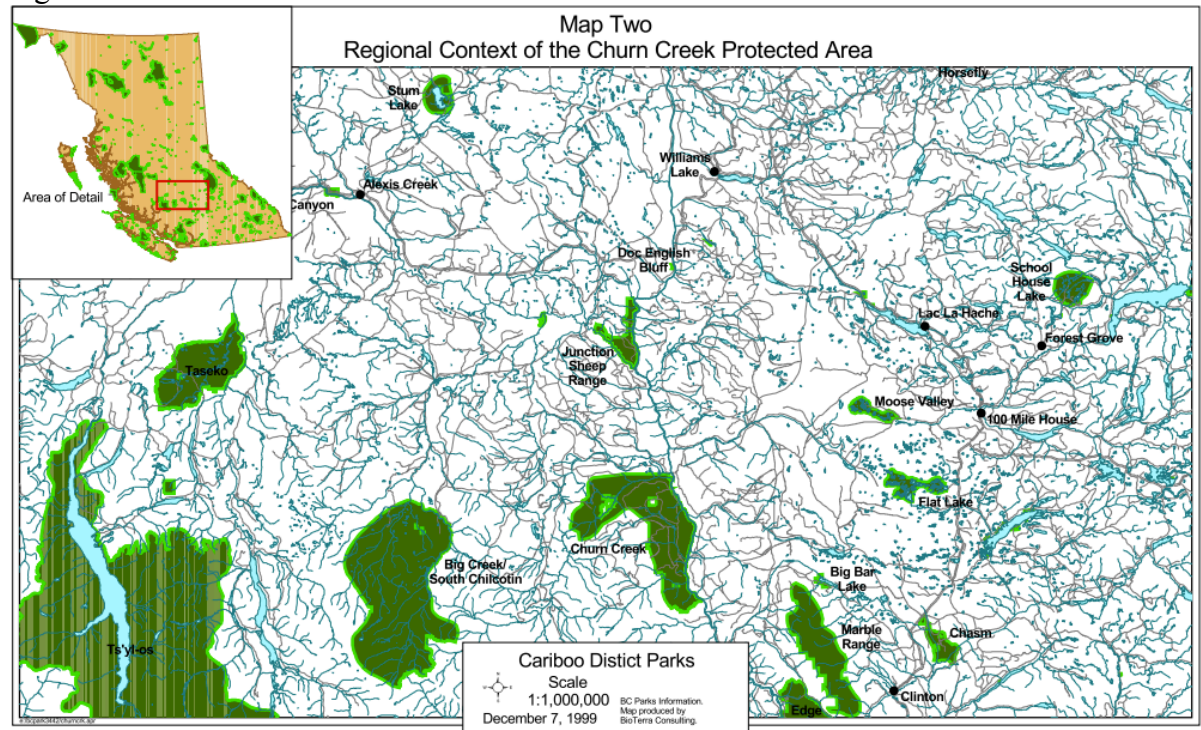
³⁷ Ibid., 16

of landowners, ranchers, government officials, foresters, ecologists, and other stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds contributed to its development. Every aspect of this plan was decided through consensus—that is, everyone in the decision-making process had to agree on each point. Both the logistics and intricacy of such a plan are remarkable, and a testament to the power of community-oriented conservation, which inspired some local ranchers to further conserve area grasslands.

Since 1998, the Empire Valley Ranch has been a part of the Churn Creek Protected Area. This ranch was originally established in the 1860s as a part of the ranching boom in the wake of the Fraser gold rush, and its owners agreed to incorporation into the protected area. They chose to join the protected area out of a desire to enhance their stewardship through “rotational grazing practices and natural grazing patterns of our cattle...to restore natural grassland species and enhance native grass production.”³⁸ This creation of connection between a working ranch and a conserved space forges hope for the relationship between government agencies that work in conservation and local stakeholders—hope that is inching forward in the SOLS.

³⁸ Empire Valley Ranch, “About us,” <<http://empirevalleybeef.com/aboutus2.html>>.

Figure 3.1: Churn Creek Protected Area and environs:³⁹



³⁹ *Management Plan for Churn Creek Protected Area*, BC Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, BC Parks Division (Mar. 2000), Appendix M. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Illustration 3.1: Bitterroot harvest sculptures at the Nk'mip Cultural Center at the Osoyoos Indian Band Reserve, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 3.2: Osoyoos Lake, looking south, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 3.3: Photograph of Churn Creek:⁴⁰



⁴⁰ *Management Plan for Churn Creek Protected Area*, BC Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, BC Parks Division (Mar. 2000), p. 57. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Chapter Four: A National Park Reserve in the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen?

The difficulty is of course that it's creating a national park in a very built-up area. There's a lot of private land around, you're putting it between several communities. Most national parks are fairly easy to create—you just plunk it down and nobody's living there, or very few people. Whereas this is a little more difficult. They've done this before, and had some problems in the past because they've been very heavy-handed about it, and expropriated a lot of land, said this is gonna be a park, boom. Well, they're not going to be doing that this time. So it's just those provincial lands plus whoever would be willing to sell.

Interview E, October 2012

In the SO, the OS LRMP was finished by the time PC comes along and says, hey, we got an idea for you! And they said oh no, we're done. We've bled, sweat, and tears to get what we have in the LRMP, and **now** you're coming along after the fact, and trying to propose a national park? Get out of here. We got off on the wrong foot right from the beginning because we weren't in that LRMP process. It was just timing, because we'd just finished in the Cariboo, got kicked out, and then wanted to introduce ourselves in the Okanagan, and they were already finished. There was not a lot we could have done about it.

Interview A, May 2013

That's been why it's such a controversial issue, because it was introduced after we did a management plan for the area. It would have been good when they came up with the idea if they had gone back to that group, which was made up of everybody and said, here's what we want to do. Can we make this work, or how can we make this work? But that wasn't the process. ...when we went through the LRMP we had ranchers and birdwatchers and recreational vehicle guys and conservation groups, and everybody was represented at the table. We had a lot of discussion and we had to come to a consensus—it wasn't a voting process, everybody had to agree!... It was give and take: okay, we'll go with this protected area here, but then you've got to give us a little more latitude over here. It was a negotiation and a discussion.

Interview F, May 2013

Efforts to conserve the high, desert-like grasslands between the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys began years before the SOLS NPR was proposed in 2002. Indeed, First Nations in the region have been crafting respectful relationships to resource use in these

valleys for thousands of years. The earliest settlement within the South Okanagan-Similkameen was by Interior Salish people speakers of the Sylix dialect, who now comprise the handful of bands within the Okanagan Nation Alliance; their land use strategies incorporate family-based stewardship. An interview with the chief of a local band clearly demonstrates both the long history of carefully considered use and the initiative that area First Nations take to protect their ancestral lands for the future:

...we want our ceremonial places protected. We want our title and rights. We want to manage the land the way it was managed, so that it's not just a warehouse or someone's lobbying for logs or areas to log...we're not just environmentalists because Green Peace started, we're environmentalists when the beginning of time came. If you read our stories and look at them, you start to see the relevance of why, why you look at the land the way it is.¹

One of the earliest efforts to preserve land in the Okanagan-Similkameen was the formation of the Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society in 1966. This organization, comprised of concerned environmentalists and ecologists in the region, helped coordinate the creation of Cathedral Provincial Park in 1968; Conkle Lake Park in 1973; Okanagan Mountain Park in 1973; and Cascade Recreation Area in 1987; they also acquired habitat at Vaseux Lake for preservation. Cathedral Park now encompasses 81,542 acres (from an original 18,217) of rugged mountain terrain in the mountains on the western wall of the Similkameen; Conkle Lake Park, east of the town of Osoyoos, covers 1450 acres of lake and shoreline habitat; Okanagan Mountain Park is 24,710 acres on the eastern shore of Okanagan Lake, opposite Peachland; and Cascade Recreation Area includes nearly 29,000 acres of

¹ Interview B, May 2013

mountains adjacent to Manning Provincial Park, a couple hundred kilometers west of the Similkameen Valley.²

These earlier efforts focused on attractive mountainous land or lakeshores, areas easily marketed to hikers looking for a view and winter recreation buffs searching for snow—the type of landscape lauded and admired by both 19th century naturalists and the government bureaucrats who pioneered the first national parks in Canada and the U.S. But as stakeholders turned their gaze away from the more distant mountains and towards the contested valley floors and nearby hills, they began to shift from a purist understanding of preserved lands as previously unused by settlers towards a widening view of conservation, inclusive of land once thought not worth the effort. Reconceptualizing nature and our interaction with it is at the heart of the larger project of progressive environmental history, and the story of the proposed SOLS NPR fits within that framework, as those communities reevaluate, compromise, and forge those connections between ideology and practice.

Today, half of the existing parkland in the South Okanagan-Similkameen is intended for recreation, and only 1% of the landbase within the regional district is parkland—as opposed to the 10 to 15% typical of BC regional districts.³ Conservation organizations, such as the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP), founded in 2000, present this discrepancy as a failure of the government to conserve land within the region and promote increased land preservation as a solution not only to that lack, but also as a cure for the degradation of land within the South Okanagan-Similkameen.⁴ These calls for

² Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society, “Projects,” (2013), <<http://okanagansimilkameenparkssociety.ca/projects.htm>>.

³ South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program, *Keeping Nature in our Future: A biodiversity conservation strategy for the South Okanagan-Similkameen*, (2012), p. 39

⁴ Ibid., 39

conservation are often situated within an expressed admiration for the region's livability and a desire to cultivate both the industries that draw in tourists and residents and the ecosystems that made these industries possible in the first place.⁵ Residents of the SOLS are all too aware of the need for balance and moderation, values reflected in the liminal "nature" of the proposed NPR itself: SOSCP, for example, describes its mission to "conserve biodiversity" as dependent upon strategies of "cooperation, stewardship, and outreach," with an understanding that species and landscape recovery projects go hand in hand with community organizing.⁶ The combination of the arid ecosystem and the built environment necessitate an expansion of the conservation agenda—and so the SOLS, prime example of community-based conservation that it is, has become a landscape of negotiation. Numerous conservation efforts and community debates underline the simultaneous difficulty of conserving land that is either prime real estate or a working landscape and planning in an inclusive, stakeholder-oriented fashion.

In 1995, representatives from both public groups and government agencies began to develop the Okanagan-Shuswap Land Resource Management Plan, which was intended to guide protection and use of Crown land within the Similkameen, Okanagan, and Columbia-Shuswap valleys of British Columbia. Much like the land management plan in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, the planning process brought together stakeholders from a wide variety of groups and occupations and was consensus-based. The published plan, approved in 2001, is 826

⁵ Ibid., i; Hobson & Associates for the Environmental Advisory Committee, "Environmental Issues and Options for the South Okanagan Regional Growth Strategy," June 2006

⁶ Andy Bezener, Michael Dunn, Howie Richardson, Orville Dyer, Rob Hawes, and Trish Hayes, "South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Program: A Multipartnered, Multi-species, Multi-scale Approach to Conservation of Species at Risk," Proceedings of the Species at Risk 2004 Pathways to Recovery Conference, March 2–6, 2004, Victoria, B.C., p. 3

pages long, provides management strategies for 2.5 million hectares of forest and grasslands, and created forty-nine new protected areas of 123,000 hectares total (each of which has its own report, usually upwards of thirty pages). Such a gargantuan document reflects the enormous effort it took to coordinate these groups and facilitate resolution of their various viewpoints.

The stakeholders involved also created the protected area that now makes up roughly a third— exactly 93 km²—of the proposed SOLS NPR.⁷ The South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area is in fact a tattered patchwork of multi-use protected land made up of four different units: Mount Kobau, Chopaka East, Chopaka West, and Kilpoola (Figure 4.1). These areas appear as a scatter of polygons across the hills between the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys and have fairly limited public access. The road to the top of Mount Kobau and the Kruger Mountain Road are the only automobile routes into these protected areas; no designated hiking trails exist, though old roadbeds can provide walkways for hikers familiar with the area. And while “there couldn’t be any forestry or mining,” in these areas, as a contributing member of the OS LRMP recounted, visitors and residents “could still continue to hunt and fish and graze cattle”—an important point for stakeholders and a major reason as to why there is opposition to the national park reserve, which would discontinue hunting and fishing.⁸

Opinions about the levels of protection afforded these highland areas are contingent upon the ways in which different groups use and interact with the landscape. For many area hunters and ranchers, current arrangements are perfectly appropriate: they want access to the hunting grounds on Mount Kobau, and they want to have land to graze their cattle. For most

⁷ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, Jan. 2011, p. 9

⁸ Interview F, May 2013

environmentalists, these arrangements are inadequate: some who support the park accept ranching, but many fear that cattle threaten endangered species, and they worry about the lack of permanence in protected area status.⁹ Nonetheless, the OS LRMP is considered a hard-won victory for community conservation efforts because of its comprehensiveness and the diversity of voices that contributed. Signed in 2001, it had barely taken effect when the wheels were set in motion for the SOLS NPR proposal in 2002 by a small number of well-connected residents of the SOLS.

There have been three stages to the debate over a park in the SOLS: first, a period of curiosity and uncertainty between 2002, when the park was first proposed, and 2006, when altered boundaries were proposed; second, a period of disillusionment and near-failure between 2006 and the release of the feasibility study in early 2012; and third, a period of resurgent community interest and bureaucratic stalling continuing to the present. Each stage shift was marked by a bureaucratic announcement—but it was the change in various stakeholders' reactions to each of these announcements that made them worth note. Although community groups and organizations drove initial conservation efforts in the SOLS, the immediate impetus for creation of a NPR was came from a well-known local environmentalist couple. They enrolled the political support of Senator Ross Fitzpatrick of Kelowna and formed a small committee to visit Ottawa in 2003 to pitch a national park for the SOLS to then-Prime Minister Jean Chretien. According to an interview with a local environmentalist:

[Chretien's people] were very impressed with the idea, they were impressed that First Nations seemed to be in favor of it...—and things happened very quickly. And by...the fall of 2003 there was a

⁹ All information collected from interviews, October 2012 and May 2013

memorandum of understanding signed in Vancouver between Gordon Campbell and Jean Chretien.¹⁰

That memorandum led to a park feasibility study, begun in 2004 by a joint Canada-British Columbia steering committee and finished in November 2010 (released to the public in May 2012). Early supporters of the park initiative included local environmentalists and First Nations. Many of these environmentalists had been deeply involved in earlier campaigns to raise awareness about endangered species in the SOLS—such as the Meadowlark Festival, inaugurated in 1997 and continuing each May as a multi-day “outdoor nature celebration” of naturalist-guided hikes, kayak and canoe trips, to give a structured space for visitors and residents to “appreciate the environment, the specialness of it.”¹¹ The Okanagan Nation Alliance also supported the project from its inception.¹² First Nations’ interest in the project can be attributed to a desire for increased preservation of land; and also to the business-minded efforts of Osoyoos Indian Band chief Clarence Louie, who sought improve the economic life of the band through the creation of Canada’s first indigenous winery, a resort, and a large cultural center that doubles as the entrance to a substantial protected piece of arid valley-bottom grasslands (Illustration 4.1).¹³ These supporters saw the park as a welcome route to conserving important parts of the vulnerable SOLS environment.

¹⁰ Interview E, October 2013. This particular account is repeated in several other interviews, and can be found in the Casey *Canadian Geographic* piece and the *Okanagan Recreation* magazine article as well.

¹¹ DO Interview, May 2013. And for a look at the extensive programming and events available at the Meadowlark Festival, check out their website at <<http://www.meadowlarkfestival.bc.ca/>>

¹² Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, Jan. 2011, p. 3

¹³ See the OIB’s website: <<http://oibdc.ca/>>.

However, the timing of the proposal, not a year after the finalization of the hard-won LRMP, and the insulated way in which it was proposed, upset many in the community. In the words of one orchardist:

But I said it immediately when I heard this parks proposal, why are they doing this to us? Nobody appreciated the miracle of the LRMP. It was phenomenal.¹⁴

Or as a conservation professional reflected:

...they'd had this six to ten year conversation [for the LRMP] about what should happen to Crown lands, and a national park was not a part of that discussion. I think people felt cheated... on the heels of the LRMP, the ink was just still wet when they went to Ottawa with this [park] concept.¹⁵

And as a former rural director for Keremeos and Hedley recalled:

That's been why it's such a controversial issue, because it was introduced after we did a management plan for the area. It would have been good when they came up with the idea if they had gone back to that group, which was made up of everybody and said, here's what we want to do. Can we make this work, or how can we make this work? But that wasn't the process. The process was, we're here to introduce a national park!¹⁶

Early negative reactions to the park proposal stemmed from three major points: the timing, immediately after the release of the LRMP, seemed disrespectful to the accomplishment of that plan; the usurpation of community discussion, because the federal government both withdrew from and did not mention a national park during the LRMP process; and the fact that it was the brainchild of a small, elite group. Parks Canada did not pitch the national park during the (otherwise ideal venue for discussion) LRMP process because of mechanistic, ill-timed reasons. They had spent much of the 1990s focused on Churn Creek and had done there exactly what residents of the SOLS wished they had on their

¹⁴ Interview G, May 2013

¹⁵ Interview H, May 2013

¹⁶ Interview F, May 2013

home ground: Parks Canada suggested a national park in Churn Creek during the Cariboo-Chilcotin land use planning process, and the proposal was rejected despite the community-oriented venue. By the time Parks Canada was forced to abandon the Churn Creek proposal, the OS-LRMP process was already ongoing. It is fatalistic to suggest that creating a national park in Region Three was doomed before it began—but given how the proposals were received in both Churn Creek and the SOLS, it is not exaggerating to describe Region Three as a tough sell.

The initial proposal outlined the current boundaries of the proposed SOLS NPR, encompassing 284 square kilometers of hilly grasslands from the mountains just north of Keremeos all the way down to the U.S.-Canada border, and a little patch around Vaseux Lake. Parks Canada included both the larger grasslands area and Vaseux Lake to encompass a greater variety of ecosystems: Vaseux Lake would give the NPR ten square kilometers of aquatic habitats, the valley floor's endangered "pocket desert" antelope brush, shrub-steppe ecosystem, and an impressive view of McIntyre Bluff (Illustration 4.2); and the uplands would include five different ecosystems and a variety of habitats such as bunchgrass grasslands, ponderosa pine parklands, and interior Douglas fir forests while providing space for a trail system and night-sky viewing.¹⁷ With these components, the NPR would encompass habitat for fifty-six federally listed species at risk.¹⁸ The SOLS is "one of Canada's richest areas of natural biodiversity," as would be the NPR.¹⁹

Without a published feasibility study, it was difficult for stakeholders to understand the goals of a national park reserve in the SOLS, why that particular piece of land was

¹⁷ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, Jan. 2011, p. 9

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9. However, as the report notes, the proposed NPR would still be larger than thirteen of Canada's forty-two national parks.

chosen, and how Parks Canada would—or would not—work with residents to manage a park. The fear behind these questions heated to a boil in 2006, when Parks Canada released a new version of the park boundaries (Figure 4.2). The 2006 park concept doubled the size of the proposed NPR by adding Snowy Mountain Protected Area, a set of peaks that forms the western edge of the Similkameen Valley protected by the OS LRMP. Parks Canada added Snowy Mountain because it provided a spectacular mountain vista, increased wildlife viewing opportunities of the rare California bighorn sheep, and widened the number of ecosystems represented in the NPR. It would have included within the SOLS NPR a type of landscape more familiar to national park visitors because of the grandiosity of Snowy Mountain in comparison to the arid rolling hills and hold more potential attraction for tourists searching to scramble up a new peak.

That Parks Canada felt compelled to add a sublime view, a tall mountain, and rare large fauna to SOLS NPR without consulting the community indicates the difficulty of shedding traditional constructions of nature, both conceptually and practically. Grand national parks are also the most popular and most lucrative because their nature is recognizable as such—old rangelands less so, especially within the typical 19th and 20th century paradigms of wilderness. This new park concept triggered the heated controversy over the NPR that has characterized its trajectory in the minds of stakeholders and onlookers alike—its release was, for many, the ultimate sign of a bureaucratic refusal to engage with stakeholders in a substantive fashion or to include stakeholder perspectives in the planning process. Stakeholders lost trust, and after the release of the 2006 park concept, Parks Canada has had to struggle uphill to regain legitimacy.

No community group takes credit for providing the expertise or advice that contributed to the 2006 expansion—and indeed, it seems as though no community group was involved in the government discussion over the 2006 boundaries, as a local environmentalist and supporter of the park affirmed:

...from a local naturalist and biologist and ecologist perspective, everyone agreed that the two really important areas are the Vaseux-White Lake area in the north and the Osoyoos-Richter Pass area in the south. And Parks Canada went off and did their own thing—we don't know what they did, they never told us—but came back and said, 'We're going to do this in two areas: we're going to do this in Richter Pass area and the Snowy Mountain area,' which is an area that we never thought to add to the park. It's a large provincial protected area, which is mountains and snow and ice, which we have plenty of in national parks. It was representative of the snow and ice of the Dry Interior Plateau, but it was hugely problematic...²⁰

A former Parks Canada representative corroborates this account: “It was added a. for representation, and b. for size. There was a lot of good grasslands down at the bottom of Snowy. It's all part of Region Three, so it filled out the representation package.”²¹ The 2006 boundary expansions were opposed for two major reasons: Snowy Mountain is a much richer hunting ground than Mount Kobau; and it is a site sacred to the Lower Similkameen Indian Band. Thus, the expansion turned First Nations in the area against the NPR, galvanized opposition and made it visible, in the form of the numerous “No National Park” signs that line Highway 3 from Keremeos into the Okanagan and Highway 97 south of Penticton in the Okanagan (Illustration 4.3). The Lower Similkameen Indian Band could not support the addition of sacred sites to the national park without consultation and without promise of co-management, and so they rejected the new boundaries as “disrespectful”; and in an official statement in May 2008, the entire Okanagan Nation Alliance withdrew from the

²⁰ Interview E, October 2012

²¹ Interview A, May 2012

project because of this lack of engagement from Parks Canada.²² Area hunters and recreationists could not support the loss of access to Snowy Mountain game. The latter in particular expressed themselves quickly and vehemently:

We put up all those no national park signs. We're Canadian; we know we're shoving our finger in the face of some of our neighbors. That's not something that I wake up in the morning and want to do. It just isn't in my DNA. However, I won't back down from a fight.²³

Opposition to the park by stakeholders sometimes manifested itself in dubious ways. Most notably, a flyer published by the Grasslands Park Review Coalition and widely circulated in the early years of the park proposal claimed that Parks Canada would charge an admissions fee; that all commercial activities, including ranching, would be forbidden; that the park would be a “net loss project” to the area’s economy, which is impossible to assert without an economic assessment study; that the park would lead to “increased risk for catastrophic wildfire,” despite Parks Canada’s expertise in the area of fire management.²⁴ Misinformation had a negative impact on the proposed SOLS NPR—though it is important to understand the perspective from which these objections emerged, why local stakeholders so feared the “loss” of this land to a national park reserve, and what kernels of truth can be discerned in an otherwise erroneous flyer.

In effect, the 2006 park concept, because of its material form and the short-sightedness of its authors, destroyed the nascent prospect of understanding between the self-billed naturalists and recreationists, and pushed away a crucial ally, the Lower Similkameen

²² Interview B, May 2013; “Conservationists present urgent call for establishment of a national park,” *Osoyoos Times* (8 June 2010); “National Park plan hits major roadblock,” *Osoyoos Times* (31 October 2007)

²³ Interview G, May 2013

²⁴ Grasslands Park Review Coalition, “Do we need a national park? What will we lose?” (2006)

Indian Band. Anti-national park signs sprouted alongside roadways, and Parks Canada lost the trust of many residents—even some who supported the park, lamenting that “there seemed to be a lot going on behind the scenes, that was done in secret, and was never really explained to people.”²⁵ The swift rejection by stakeholders of the 2006 park concept sent the steering committee responsible for the feasibility study back to the drawing board to reevaluate their approach, galvanized opposition to the park, and forced local environmentalists who continued to support the park to search for new strategies to win over the larger community. All that said, local environmentalists responded quite quickly to the outrage over the 2006 park concept, and in 2007, gathered and submitted a petition with 20,000 signatures that was presented to the province and accepted by Minister Penner.²⁶ This immediate action, however, did little to shake the opposition of groups who felt ignored by Parks Canada following the expansion.

To the public, the national park reserve idea seemed “dead in the water” for five years after 2006, with “virtually nonexistent” movement forward either with discussions with stakeholders or with management planning, despite the replacement of the former project manager with a new manager, a man experienced in grasslands conservation efforts, in 2011.²⁷ In 2010 a major public opinion poll conducted by a research firm based in Vancouver interviewed 405 random residents of the SOLS region in late May and found that 95% of the respondents agreed that “[i]t is important to protect the natural ecosystem, plant and wildlife species in the South Okanagan in order to maintain our quality of life here.” But strong support for conservation efforts is not the same as support for a national park. Only

²⁵ Interview E, October 2012

²⁶ CPAWS, “SOLS: What you need to know,” (20 February 2012)

²⁷ “SOS for National Park,” *Osyooos Times* (25 November 2011)

63% of those asked “Given what you presently know, please tell me if you would FAVOUR or OPPOSE protecting a portion of the South Okanagan-Similkameen in a National Park?” were in favor.²⁸ Fully a quarter opposed the park.

However, because Parks Canada was still working on the feasibility study and public discussions had slowed down, the provincial government seized upon the perception that the park was stalled. In December 2011, the Liberal BC Minister of the Environment Terry Lake released a statement in which the province tersely, suddenly announced that it was withdrawing from the park process: “The province is not convinced there is enough local support to move forward with this proposal at this time.”²⁹ Initially, Parks Canada’s new project manager declared the federal government’s intention to continue working with ranchers and First Nations to build a more community-oriented plan despite the province’s withdrawal—but a month after Lake’s announcement, on January 20th, 2012, Parks Canada rescinded.³⁰ On their website, they cited “respect [for] the position of the Government of British Columbia” and recognition “that it cannot proceed without the support of the Government of British Columbia,” with intention to re-engage publicly with stakeholders only if the province does so first.³¹

²⁸ *Local Support for a National Park in the Southern Okanagan – Similkameen, Public Opinion Study*, McAllister Opinion Research Firm for Western Canada Wilderness Committee (2 Jun. 2010)

²⁹ Judie Steeves, “Province drops support for national park,” *Penticton Western News* (27 December 2011)

³⁰ Ibid; Mark Brett, “Parks Canada steps back from public process,” *Penticton Western News* (31 January 2012)

³¹ Ibid 2011. The statement in full can be seen at <<http://www.pc.gc.ca/progs/np-pn/cnpn-cnnp/so-os/index.aspx>>: “Parks Canada respects the position of the Government of British Columbia regarding the creation of a national park reserve in the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen Valley and recognizes that it cannot proceed without the support of the Government of British Columbia. If the province changes its position and indicates it is prepared to proceed, Parks Canada would resume its work in this area. In order to respect the

The province ignored two key requests to reopen debate in the months that followed their announcement: from the Okanagan Nation Alliance and the board of the Regional District of the Okanagan-Similkameen. In February 2012, roughly a month after, the Okanagan Nation Alliance's chair, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, released a statement:

At this point in time, the Okanagan Nation Alliance strongly urges both the governments of Canada and British Columbia to revisit their premature and hasty decision to abandon the South Okanagan park proposal until full consultations have taken place with the First Nations of the South Okanagan and Similkameen valleys.³²

The ONA had been in discussions with Parks Canada since November 2010, with the goals of both finding a new path after the ONA's rejection of the park concept in 2008 and to find a park plan that accommodated and respected First Nations' concepts for the park—but their appeal was rebuffed by Minister Lake, who reaffirmed the province's refusal to pursue a national park reserve in the SOLS.³³ In April, the board of the Regional District of the Okanagan-Similkameen voted to ask the province to re-engage with discussions about the park with the federal government, with the stipulations that the province be kept in the loop about the talks and that the feasibility study be released to the public.³⁴ But the weight of the ONA and the regional district board were disregarded by the province, and the province is still aloof from the park creation process.

The withdrawal of the provincial government—and then Parks Canada—from the project was a serious blow. While a project manager and a First Nations liaison continued to work in Parks Canada offices in Penticton, the ability of Parks Canada to engage with the

province's perspective, Parks Canada will not publicly engage stakeholders on the proposal at this time."

³² Mark Brett, "Park plea falls on deaf ears," *Penticton Western News* (7 February 2012)

³³ Ibid., 2012

³⁴ Joe Fries, "National park plan gets a boost," *Penticton Western News* (19 April 2012)

community, to make any formal agreements with ranchers, or to release official information to the public was crippled. Reaction to the announcement was wide-ranging. One conservation professional found that “...it was disappointing, to say the least, that the minister would walk away from a process that cost millions and millions of dollars, without any future concept around dialogue.”³⁵ A former rural director and farmer speculated that the province was acting for the benefit of the stakeholders because they hadn’t seen Parks Canada make “an effort to change what their agenda was.”³⁶ A former mayor of a local town ascribed it to “Politics. Politics,” partially because of the provincial election held in May 2013 and because of the vocal nature of the opposition to the park.³⁷

However, the province’s abrupt refusal to participate because of a supposed lack of widespread public support was in direct contravention to both the aforementioned 2010 public opinion poll, which showed that 63% of SOLS residents support a park and the Parks Canada feasibility study. Completed in November 2010 and submitted to the BC provincial government in January 2011, the feasibility study was not released to the general public until May 2012 when two separate Freedom of Information requests were filed with the provincial government—a year and five months after the province first received the feasibility study, and five months after the province disengaged with the park creation process.³⁸ One request was submitted by *Penticton Western News*, a local newspaper, the other by politicians on the board of the Regional District of the Okanagan-Similkameen. The province sat on the feasibility study for months, and it withdrew from the process despite the feasibility study’s

³⁵ Interview H, May 2013

³⁶ Interview F, May 2013

³⁷ Interview D, May 2013

³⁸ Joe Fries, “Study rekindles debate over national park,” *Penticton Western News* (17 May 2012)

support for the SOLS NPR—a study that the province deliberately withheld from the public because it contradicted their political agenda.

Once the Freedom of Information requests pried the study from the provincial government's hands, it was revealed to be a more open, community-oriented document than expected, more reflective of the consensus-based agreements that marked the success of the OS LRMP, and more closely hewn to the type of conservation promoted by residents who opposed the park, but consider themselves conservationists nonetheless. Rather than simply a conservation analysis of the endangered ecosystem or a promotional release to attract tourists, it is a holistic plan that seeks to build a national park reserve with and for stakeholders. The executive summary contains a concise description of the study's aims, indicating that, in addition to cutting the NPR back to its original boundaries:

...the proposed national park reserve presents a unique opportunity to work with First Nations and local residents to achieve conservation objectives, to restore threatened habitats and species at risk including the burrowing owl, and to collaborate with the broader ranching community to achieve stewardship of this valued landscape.³⁹

The study reads as a simple mandate with an eye on both stakeholders' interests within and the ecological integrity of a landscape that incorporates both. That executive summary also levels with two key stakeholders: first, it emphasizes that the park creation process “will not compromise future settlements of Aboriginal Title and Rights” and that the park reserve will be created and co-managed in ways involving and agreeable to area First Nations; and second, Parks Canada says that it is “committed to an adaptive management framework,” ensuring that ranchers will not be dispossessed of their property.⁴⁰ The study also includes a public opinion poll of its own, conducted in 2007, when opposition was

³⁹ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, Jan. 2011, p. 3

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3

perhaps as strong as it ever was, with 777 responses. Even then, 38.7% of respondents supported the NPR, and 19.4% opposed—and 27% felt they needed more information, to which the study was a response (Table 4.1).⁴¹

Of course, a stated course of action is not the same as movement forward. However, the feasibility study indicates that Parks Canada made good on renewed efforts to engage with the community: ranchers were given input into the adaptive management framework⁴²; First Nations' voices were heard and responded to;⁴³ and an eight-member Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Committee, comprised of local elected officials representing all nearby towns, was given briefings throughout the feasibility study.⁴⁴ By consulting stakeholders, and by advertising those findings in the study, at least some measure of commitment to community-driven conservation can be seen. The study also addresses a wide range of socioeconomic, ecological, and cultural concerns with the NPR. With sections on “Relationship and Collaboration with First Nations,” “Communications with Local Officials,” “Socio-Economic Assessment,” “Public Consultation and Outreach,” and “Long Term Transition to a National Park,” (five out of the eleven headers in the table of contents) Parks Canada appeared eager, in the study, to level with stakeholders' needs and concerns. The feasibility study also seems to create a new type of park. Beyond the fact that there are only eight NPRs to thirty-six national parks in Canada, Parks Canada's model for the SOLS would allow for ranching, unique among Canadian parks, and envisages an NPR created by and for the community as much as for potential visitors. Not only does the study promote

⁴¹ Ibid., 19

⁴² Ibid., 11

⁴³ Ibid., 12

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14

community-led conservation, but the effects of those efforts would continue to be for the community's benefit.

The feasibility study does make concrete promises to a variety of stakeholders. To the twelve ranchers living with the park boundaries, it promises a flexible, cooperative willing-buyer, willing-seller arrangement, such that no rancher will have their land bought out from underneath them; and that as long as they do not sell their ranch, they may continue grazing cattle.⁴⁵ To First Nations, it says that “legislative measures will not compromise future settlements of title and rights claims, that traditional activities will continue, and that traditional knowledge will be used in park planning and management.”⁴⁶ To the wider community, it offers the assurance that “while the income and employment effects are not large, they are long term and continuous,” and that should hires be made from a local work pool, they are “likely to have a significant positive impact on the economy,” despite the loss of hunting, mining, and wood gathering permits.⁴⁷ To those concerned about endangered species and habitat restoration, the study asserts that the NPR adequately includes “key biogeoclimatic zones, as well as priority habitats and special features.”⁴⁸ To the two helicopter companies that use the hills for training grounds, Parks Canada agreed to grant permits, “subject to environmental impact assessment.”⁴⁹ The study does not shy away from listing the concerns over losses—indeed, multiple tables list and level with them—but mitigates them with benefits and “opportunities” of the NPR.⁵⁰ Finally, the study builds a

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20

series of strategies to start the actual park creation process, which would require five major steps:

1. To “develop and implement a land assembly strategy that includes strategic acquisition of private lands within the boundary”;
2. To build an “interim local advisory committee to support park management, planning and implementation”;
3. To create “interim park management guidelines with the participation of affected stakeholders, governments, land management experts and staff”;
4. To “collaborate with ranchers, range professionals, and scientists to develop an adaptive management framework and a vegetation management plan” to facilitate both continued grazing and ungrazed areas;
5. To put together “a team of provincial, federal and First Nations staff to implement an effective national park reserve establishment process in collaboration with stakeholders and local communities.”⁵¹

Despite this study, the provincial government has still refused to re-engage with the process. However, environmental groups, First Nations, and park opposition have continued to work: the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society has developed a new approach to garnering support for the NPR; First Nations conducted and released their own study; and opposition continues apace, both humming along in the Similkameen Valley and under the erstwhile action of the Grassland Park Review Coalition.

The Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) has changed their mind about the SOLS NPR—from initial support, to rejection in 2006, to reacceptance in 2008—because of shifts

⁵¹ Ibid., 21

in government plans for the park. Today, the ONA supports the NPR; and their support is detailed in a feasibility study developed by the Syilx Working Group (SWG), which formed in November 2010, on behalf of the ONA Chiefs Executive Council. The SWG included members from the Penticton, Upper Similkameen, Lower Similkameen, and Osoyoos Indian Band, with consultation with ONA elders.⁵² The study, completed in November 2012, has six major recommendations for the management of T'xasqin:

1. That the ONA move forward to the negotiations phase with Parks Canada, because both parties find an NPR feasible;
2. That the ONA work towards “Syilx inclusion in a cooperative consensus-based decision-making framework, integrating and showcasing TEK to guide park planning and management in the NPR, and ensuring Syilx access to the land and resources for traditional and cultural purpose;
3. That a media committee be established to communicate accurately and openly the process to the public;
4. That the ONA send a detailed letter to the province explaining their perspective and summarizing their feasibility study;
5. That the ONA establish new lines of communication with the Canadian Wildlife Service in conjunction with Parks Canada to resolve outstanding SARA (Species at Risk Act) initiatives.⁵³

The study was conducted to ensure that the NPR would protect and preserve the ONA’s title and rights; to determine strategies for including First Nations ecological and cultural

⁵² Syilx Working Group, *Building a Syilx Vision for Protection: Final Report, Assessing Feasibility of a Syilx/Parks Canada Protected Area: Findings and Guiding Concepts* (18 Dec. 2012), p. 26

⁵³ Ibid, p. 14-15

knowledge into the NPR's planning and management; and to develop a plan to put the NPR in action. The Sylix Working Group's plan, like the Parks Canada's feasibility study, promotes community conservation efforts that preserve both the ecological landscape and living cultural traditions. The provincial government has yet to respond to the ONA's study substantively, despite the positive public reaction to the study's release and the hopes that it would revive discussions between stakeholder groups and the different levels of government.⁵⁴ Interviewed stakeholders responded to the ONA study in an overwhelmingly positive way, even those who oppose the NPR: they cite that the study "garnered a lot of participation and thinking from the ONA," as an example to Parks Canada for future community consultations.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, members of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society have developed strikingly new perspectives on environmentalism and on the need for a national park. According to a CPAWS insider, there was a great deal of frustration about the stalled conversation, hung up by incessant wrestling between ecological importance and the loss of recreational activities. Prompted by the withdrawal of the province from the project, CPAWS decided that it was time to reframe the discussion. Rather than focusing on endangered flora and fauna, "what we needed to do was to engage the business people and the local politicians in a conversation about what the value is to the communities" from an "economic and job [and] community development perspective."⁵⁶ To push that economic-minded front, CPAWS, for the first time during the fight for the SOLS NPR, held a series of

⁵⁴ See a rash of newspaper articles: "Okanagan Nation Alliance throws strong support behind national park," *Osoyoos Times* (28 February 2013); Mark Hume, "Aboriginal support revives Okanagan park proposal," *The Globe and Mail* (26 February 2013); Joe Fries, "Park Plan resurfaces," *Penticton Western News* (26 February 2013)

⁵⁵ Interview H, May 2013

⁵⁶ Interview I, October 2012

twelve presentations in nine communities in the SOLS intended to win over the support of area businesspeople and local politicians.

To environmental activists eager to see the NPR become a reality, recasting the NPR as an economic boon to communities helps stakeholders understand that parks are not simply “green blobs on a map” representing “economic sinkholes.”⁵⁷ Rather than losing that land to conservation, communities would be gaining economic benefits from the tourists who flock to it. This perspective was, indeed, apparently lost on local stakeholders, many of whom pointed to a dichotomy between “economic, industrial opportunities, and...nature conservation,” with no idea that “nature conservation had any economic benefits whatsoever.”⁵⁸ CPAWS cites revenue and tax figures based on studies of the economic benefits of national parks in BC to the tune of GDP of \$37.1 million/year; labor revenue of \$25.62 million/year; and tax revenue of \$3.4 million/year; the NPR as providing twenty to twenty-five new, permanent full-time jobs; and as many as 571 new, permanent full-time jobs associated with the service industry in the area.⁵⁹ They also drew upon a 2005 Economic Benefits Study of the SOLS NPR by a Vancouver consulting group, prepared for the SOLS NPR steering committee, which calculates similar economic benefits for the area.⁶⁰ CPAWS even made a pitch for towns on the edge of the SOLS, such as Princeton, which is on Highway 3 in the mountains, along the way to the Similkameen: Princeton, for example,

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ “Comparison between the potential SOLS NPR and the existing Southern Okanagan Grasslands Protected Areas,” CPAWS (20 February 2012), citing Economic Impacts of National Parks. The Outspan Group, April 2011. Table 17, page 23: amounts generated by BC’s existing 7 national parks: Glacier, Gulf Islands, Gwaii Haanas, Kootenay, Mt. Revelstoke, Yoho, Pacific Rim.

⁶⁰ *Economic Benefits Study, South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Reserve, British Columbia*, South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Steering Committee (Sept. 2005)

could become a “gateway community to the park,” where tourists along their way to the NPR “could gather information about the national park, could walk on...trails, could stop and have coffee.”⁶¹

The interviewee admitted that convincing the environmental community to get on board with this economic revision of ecological preservation goals is difficult: “[a]nd we’ve been reluctant—the environmental community has been reluctant to say that this is a business opportunity. Or a green industry.”⁶² Indeed, such a reconceptualization does not square with a traditional tenet of environmentalism: that preservation is a good for its own sake, independent of outside justification. However, this pragmatic, capitalist mindset is closely tied to the model of some of the earliest national parks in Canada that promoted and relied upon tourism and insisted that visitors to the parks would be “consumers of experience.”⁶³ Much like Yellowstone National Park in the U.S. fifteen years earlier, Banff National Park was built around hot springs famously discovered by Canadian Pacific Railway in 1883. Yellowstone, Banff, and four other Canadian national parks established soon thereafter all existed less to “preserv[e] nature from people,” than to “reserv[e] nature for the people’s use,” within sites that are “visually sublime” and “geographically convenient,” connected by railroads, whose corporations were eager to profit from the parks.⁶⁴ The relationship between corporate tourism and national parks certainly did buoy the numbers of visitors and success of the parks in their early days—but it is in contravention to more idealistic views of

⁶¹ Interview I, October 2012

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ John Sandlos, “Nature’s Playgrounds: The Parks Branch and Tourism Promotion in the National Parks, 1911-1925,” *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2011), p. 53

⁶⁴ Claire Campbell, “Governing a Kingdom: Parks Canada, 1911-2011,” *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2011), pp. 3-4

preservation that are less Rockefeller and more John Muir. But to sell a national park reserve to businesses and politicians hesitant to throw their weight behind it requires numbers and revenue—especially in the Okanagan, where tourism is big business. The SOLS NPR, should it come to fruition, would not be a Banff or a Yellowstone; for one, it is much smaller (23 SOLS NPRs could fit inside Banff’s boundaries). But the recognition that parks have to be sold rather than simply admired lends a twist to any idealistic vision of (Western) environmentalism for its intrinsic value. Both models, taken at their most literal, are faulty: that nature must be marketed and consumed if it is to be protected at all; or that nature is inherently recognizable and sublime.

Between those two is the moderated perspective that many stakeholders bring to the SOLS: a recognition of culture, work, and tradition tied to the land, and a need to balance lifestyles and local economies with ecological conservation. Given the near unanimous consensus in the SOLS for such an understanding of the proposed NPR, then, the opposition between the recreationists and the naturalists bears explanation. The material experiences of recreationists can be understood through the cross-lens of labor and environmental histories. Richard White, whose book *The Organic Machine* examines how the Columbia River shaped and was shaped by work, laments the diminished reliance on labor: “once,” he writes, “the energy of the Columbia River was felt in human bones and sinews; human beings knew the river through the work the river demanded of them.”⁶⁵ We understand nature better, White argues, when we work with and alongside it. Studying those relationships, White has come to realize, is the most important components of making history. According to White, “modern” environmentalists too easily forget earlier relationships to the land: they “stress

⁶⁵ Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. 4

the eye over the hand, the contemplative over the active, the supposedly undisturbed over the connected...they call for human connections with nature while disparaging all those who claim to have known and appreciated nature through work and labor.”⁶⁶ The vitality of the working class relationship to land, and the value systems that lay within that ethic, are too easily forgotten.

The proposed SOLS NPR is a working landscape, and those who have worked that land do express discontent and disenfranchisement of their experiences by those whom White might term “modern environmentalists”—so far, all in line with White’s description. However, a twist within the particular context of the SOLS NPR is that the men and women with working relationships with that land have termed themselves environmentalists and conservationists. Either they define themselves as such because they seek to expand the definition of an environmentalist, or because they feel the term can now encompass their relationship with the land. Mindful of White’s strictures and of stakeholders’ self-identification, we will consider the material details of the relationships to the land of ranchers, environmentalists, and other stakeholders.

Interviews with stakeholders revealed some key points of opposition by area recreationists to logistical, grounded details of the NPR, in any incarnation, but amplified by the 2006 park concept: the proposed park is too small; the hills up there require ranching and hunting as a form of land management to both keep the grasslands healthy and to reduce mule deer populations; a national park would prevent residents from recreating on the land as they are accustomed. Embedded in these protests is an expression of local expertise and even fundamental identity: these stakeholders have grown up hunting, ranching, and riding ATVs

⁶⁶ Ibid., x

on that land.⁶⁷ Because of those forms of use, they express a deeply felt connection to and understanding of the environment in the SOLS and foster their own types of stewardship and conservation: “It’s the hunters that report things...It’s the cattlemen who go after it too. Because we’re there! We’re invested. The recreationists don’t necessarily make their living there, but it’s part of their psyche to be able to get on there.”⁶⁸

This identity, “recreationist,” is viewed as distinct from a naturalist’s experience with place, which is granted greater legitimacy and permission within national parks. And because naturalist activities are approved in national parks, and thereby condoned by a government entity, recreationists also often see themselves as separate from and not needful of government intervention. Recreationists experience the land through a fusion of work and play expressed in grounded activities—and significantly, more often than not, the stakeholders who identify as recreationists also work the land, as orchardists, ranchers, or farmers. This identity is set up in contravention to that of naturalists, but with a retention of a strong sense of stewardship: “None of them are land people, you know, they’re not land-based people. They’re from the city. This thing represents a lot of BC’s issues—it’s rural-urban. And preservation v. conservation—I’m a conservationist all the way.”⁶⁹ Their engagement with the land, rooted in labor, extends even to their forms of play. For example: hunting is not regarded as a form of resource extraction; it is a part of the lifestyle of recreationists, entirely compatible with their labor, as people capable of “living off the land,” as a way of materially engaging with the landscape, and as a means of species monitoring.

⁶⁷ Though to be fair, not all recreationists practice all of these activities.

⁶⁸ Interview G, May 2013

⁶⁹ Ibid

Environmentalists' (or naturalists') traditional ways of engaging with place—birdwatching, hiking, botany, and so forth—is seen as distinct from the recreationists. Many of the stakeholders who support the park come from more white-collar oriented jobs, even if they have relatives a generation or two back who were orchardists or ranchers themselves.⁷⁰ After all, the SOLS's European settlement is recent, and residents have had only a few generations to specialize into different occupations. Immediately after heralding the recreationists' connection to the land, an interviewee continued to discuss the naturalist experience of the SOLS: "there's people bird-watching and hiking. You respect them. They've got every right to be out there as you do."⁷¹ Rather than being connected to labor by either naturalists themselves or the recreationists, this viewpoint is tied to scientific expertise and the ability to identify "areas that were really very special, and unique, with rare species." The categorization of landscape's characteristics into ecological disciplines is demonstrated by naturalists' activities and is deemed legitimate within conserved lands because of its scientific origins. This dichotomy of recreation versus environmentalism emerges from material origins of physical movement through and use of land. And while often the backgrounds of the naturalists and the recreationists are indeed different, the emergence of this duality suggests more a distinction of form than ideology—as mentioned earlier, stakeholders in the SOLS express extremely similar hopes for the conservation of the land, regardless of their support or opposition to the NPR.

Though the majority of the debate over the NPR has taken place as described above, some of it has been notably contentious. Two key examples stand out: local meetings about

⁷⁰ There are some blurred lines—one of the main ranchers in the Similkameen, who does not support the park, is a biologist.

⁷¹ Interview G, May 2013

the park; and the Yes or No parks signs. During a string of twelve meetings in nine days organized CPAWS in the SOLS in 2012, a type of protest against the park forged a memorable set of images. As one CPAWS representative recalled, after the meetings, attended by politicians, businesspeople, and other stakeholders, began:

...then all of these people in their flak jackets and army fatigue would ride up on their ATVs, and they would stand at the back of the room, and they would yell at me: ...That's a pure lie. And they'd be yelling at me from the back of the room like that.⁷²

Events like that have promoted a vision of the opposition to the park as a small but vocal group, difficult to speak over—or with. A main opponent of the park laments this turn, shaking his head that such expressions of opposition belie that their “coalition has tried to be credible.”⁷³ Opposition to the NPR was often accurately characterized as “a small group of directly affected stakeholders,” but the general impression that they are “fairly loud” probably gives too much emphasis to the performative actions of a minority.⁷⁴ Most of the opposition, strident or not, remains rooted among recreationalists, tied so closely to a labor-oriented understanding of land.

The “No” national park signs appeared along roadsides after the 2006 park concept was proposed, and subsequently, angrily rejected by stakeholders who felt slighted by Parks Canada. The No signs do create a strong impression of local public opinion about the NPR. A CPAWS insider griped that since “those No National Park signs went up,” “people think that there’s massive, massive opposition to the park,” despite the public opinion polls that say

⁷² Interview I, October 2012. Corroborated independently with a local stakeholder who attended those meetings.

⁷³ Interview G, May 2013

⁷⁴ Interview H, May 2013

otherwise.⁷⁵ And indeed, one or two prominent “No National Park” signs are on the land of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band—who now support the park, so there is a possibility that some of the signs may be outdated. Putting up a sign for or against a NPR may not appear to be a brave or notable political act; however, the act of declaring support or opposition to the park on one’s property, in small communities where everyone knows everyone, is a bold stance. One winery owner and former Regional District Director in the Similkameen, who has a “Yes” sign at the entrance to his property, recounts his experience:

...since I was in a position to make a decision as I was no longer a politician, I put up a yes sign. My first sign said yes, small national park. And it was up for ten days, and it was rudely vandalized. So I took it down, but I’m not a person to roll over. So we repainted it and I just put a big YES. And it stayed. And now I’m starting to see there’s yes signs popping up all over the place, and there’s a maybe sign just down the road...quite frankly, it was intimidating for anyone to say yes, and any yes signs that used to be there were ripped down—except for one that stands really high on a pole...So, I wanted to send a message to the province and the federal government that...there are people here who want the national park...people would be intimidated by putting up yes signs, and by saying yes.⁷⁶

Signs are vandalized often, and because a sign makes explicit a person’s stance on the park, erecting one is no small step. A prominent “Yes national park” sign in the Similkameen that I photographed in October was damaged when I returned in May. Regardless, the conversation played out with both “yes” and “no” signs visible along Highways 3 and 97 through both valleys (Illustration 4.4). I later spoke with a man who had his own “maybe” national park sign who said, to his surprise, that it stayed up for about two months (Illustration 4.5). I asked him what his logic was behind the “maybe” national park concept:

⁷⁵ Interview I, October 2012

⁷⁶ Interview C, October 2012

My idea for “maybe” a national park was: hey, let’s all sit down and talk this over. Let’s talk this over. And let’s put all the pros on here, and all the cons on there, and all the probabilities on there, and let’s work on them. And there are certain things you’re not going to give up; and there are certain things you probably could give up. And you give and take and see what you come up with.⁷⁷

This response ties in closely to one question that I asked every interviewee. What, I wanted to know, would be their ideal vision for Mount Kobau’s future, if they could wave a wand and have their ideas become real? The responses often had much more in common than the heated controversy would suggest, and most found that conservation efforts fall under the “pros” column the “maybe national park” stakeholder describes:

First thing I’d want to see would be everybody working together. I’d like to see the common goal identified collectively. Then I’d like to see producers who are willing to set land aside—most of the real critical stuff is private....Collectively, we could look after all the evils...Habitat enhancement, bring back what’s been lost....I’d like to go shoulder to shoulder with some of these parks people, get together and have a nice big lunch, work side by side with them and get that good will back. Have them recognize my contribution and my feelings of environmentalism is.⁷⁸

Because it’s a complex land base, it would be a complex approach. Like we’re doing already, local governments would be making informed decisions on the land base...Same with provincial crown governments would have the capacity to manage what was happening on the land base. We wouldn’t have crown land sales. Resource based industries, like what’s happening with pine beetle right now, we would have science behind that and we would be doing a better job not just at finding fiber for a company but really doing a biodiversity approach to resource management. We would be balancing the need to protect agricultural land with ecosystem management.⁷⁹

And that’s the main thing I see—a light-touch use, but a wide-open use. I don’t want people excluded from places. There’s so many beautiful places in the proposed park area as it is that people would love to hike through, so that’s what I see. And I wouldn’t mind if there was cows there or not!⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Interview D, May 2013

⁷⁸ Interview I, May 2013

⁷⁹ Interview H, May 2013

⁸⁰ Interview E, October 2012

A well-run, efficient, small national park. Going back to the original boundaries that were announced in 2003 when Chretien and Campbell announced it in Vancouver, instead of going to this grandiose scheme that Ottawa came back with.⁸¹

To go from a bottom-up standpoint, saying, get all of the resource users together. I know it takes time and talk and discussion—I know through that LRMP process, there was a we and they type thing when we started out, but at the end, it was a “we” process...I like to think more long-term, and I think there are some important things up there that need protection, and making sure we don’t abuse the landscape we have, and making sure that people who do use it, respect it, and don’t degrade it. I’d like to see the province getting all those folks back together...and say, okay, it’s been ten years since we’ve done the LRMP process. What’s changed? What do we need to do to change our management practices here? How can we do that? I think that would be more productive than doing this top down approach...More local discussion and agreement. And once they get that, then they can move it to a national park stage...Generally I’ve found most people, if they’re given all the correct information, usually come up with the same decision.⁸²

I’d put in some walking trails, some horseback riding trails...Definitely interpretation. First Nations history, I’d like to know more about that. I’d like to see an interpretation center...I would like to see the area return to its natural healthy state with flourishing grasslands the return of Burrowing Owls, sage thrashers and even Sage Grouse. I’d also like to see the community get together too, and see that it’s really something good.⁸³

With the exception of some explicitly mentioning a “national park,” the responses are functionally similar: to strive for a sense of community; for balanced conservation; for open, respectful discussion. No one denies that those bunchgrass grasslands need some sort of protection; no one wants to see stakeholders ignored or alienated; no one wants a solution without open and fair give-and-take. And beyond the absence of such sentiments, indeed, stakeholders express positive wishes for the opposite. Residents of the SOLS seem to have similar long-term goals for regional conservation, and all profess to want the communication

⁸¹ Interview D, May 2013

⁸² Interview F, May 2013

⁸³ Interview J, May 2013

and discussion that would enable it—despite animosity over the past decade, despite entrenched, potentially oppositional identities; despite what many think of as detrimental bureaucratic fumbles. Having discussed those conflicts, identities, and series of events, having detailed what those conservation goals are, and how SOLS communities have interacted thus far, the failure to produce a park must be examined. Given that the goals are functionally the same, and that some stakeholders have shown themselves able to work away from conflict, one wonders what it will take to lay this controversy to rest, or what lengths must be traversed until these stakeholders reach the top of their mountain, their Kobau, their Txasqin.

The voices of stakeholders have been heard extensively throughout this last chapter, and I want to hear from two more of them. Stakeholders may be too close to the issue for so-called scholarly distance, but they know it best:

But I think overall the big mistake that Parks Canada has made is just, and perhaps everybody, not just Parks Canada, but Parks Canada, the ranching community, the provincial government, the yes side, the no side, there's just been a tremendous lack of communication. What communication there has been, has been involving very disparate messages, some of which have to be wrong, because they're opposite. So though the yes side would certainly accuse the no side of spreading rumors about the park that were certainly not true, in order to try to gain support for the no side, Parks Canada did nothing to dispel these, or very little to try to sort that out. They were trying to be neutral about it, whereas neutral to me means making sure everybody's got the right information—not that you have to say what the end result will be.⁸⁴

By listening to the community input. That's what it's got to be. It's a national park, so it belongs to the country, but it's basically the responsibility of the people in the area.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Interview E, October 2012

⁸⁵ Interview F, May 2013

Right now, the fate of the proposed SOLS NPR is unclear. The BC provincial election in May 2013 kept the Liberal government in office. The election results were a surprise to many: the last interviews I did were a few days before the election, and nearly everyone with whom I spoke assumed that the New Democratic Party would take the lead and that their tenure over the provincial government would cause a major change in the slow-moving pace of the SOLS NPR proposal. However, the results, as they stand, leave the proposal in limbo. The Okanagan Nation Alliance's feasibility study should be a call to action to the provincial government to re-engage, and perhaps once the dust from the spring elections has settled, they will take that responsibility more seriously. Indeed, the ONA's feasibility study is the last best hope to reopen negotiations on the SOLS NPR and to begin that conversation that so many stakeholders want.

One of the most recent conservation efforts in the SOLS illustrates the eagerness of stakeholders to engage with land protection and restoration: the Nature Conservancy of Canada's acquisition of the Sage and Sparrow Conservation Area in 2012, and the Elkink South Block in 2013, which all told make up 3000 acres along the U.S.-Canada border.⁸⁶ The Nature Conservancy of Canada, along with a private landowner who ranches the properties, compiled these parcels of land to create a larger habitat corridor between the protected areas in the SOLS and to promote the conservation of the rare grasslands of the region. The blocks of land are sandwiched among the current South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area and the Kilpoola Lake Nature Reserve, all within the SOLS NPR study area; they provide the land base for "native bluebunch wheatgrass and sagebrush grasslands, trembling aspen gullies, rugged terrain, wetlands, [and] coniferous forest," representative of

⁸⁶ See the Nature Conservancy of Canada, "Elkink South Block, Sage and Sparrow Conservation Area," (May 2013)

one of the four most endangered ecosystems in Canada.⁸⁷ These conservation areas were forged by the cooperation of an area rancher with an environmentalist organization—which signifies that conservation of these fragile grasslands can be perpetuated through private dealings, despite bureaucratic stalling and stakeholder divisions. Private consciences and independent enterprises, though, should not be made to bear the weight of an entire region’s ecological future.

⁸⁷ “Elkink South Block,” Nature Conservancy Canada (March 2013)
<<http://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/where-we-work/british-columbia/featured-projects/elkink-south-block.html#.Ud7ACT7EqCI>>.

Table 4.1: Opinion poll from the Parks Canada SOLS NPR feasibility study⁸⁸:

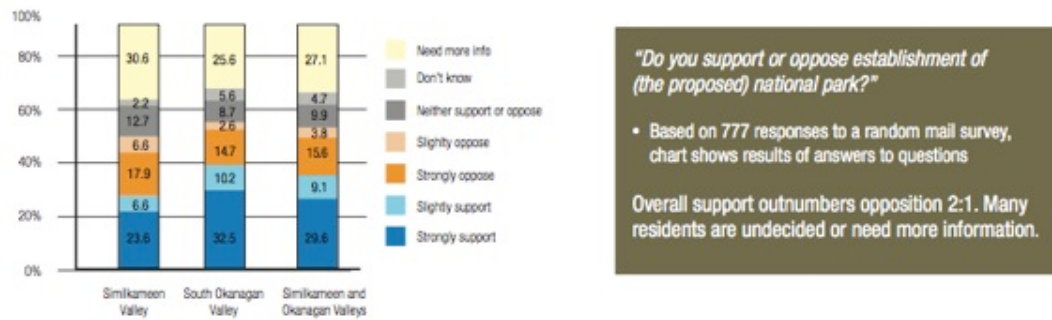
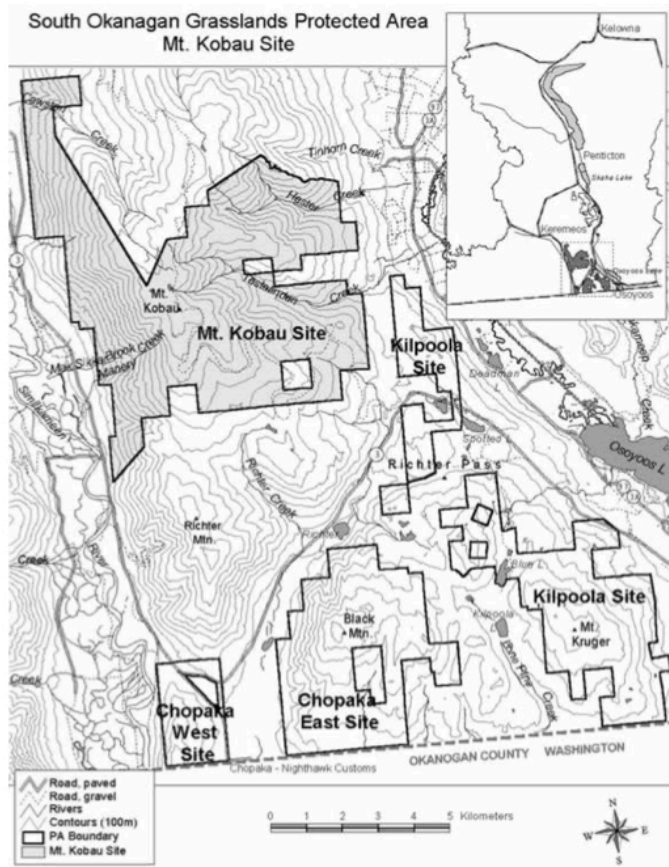


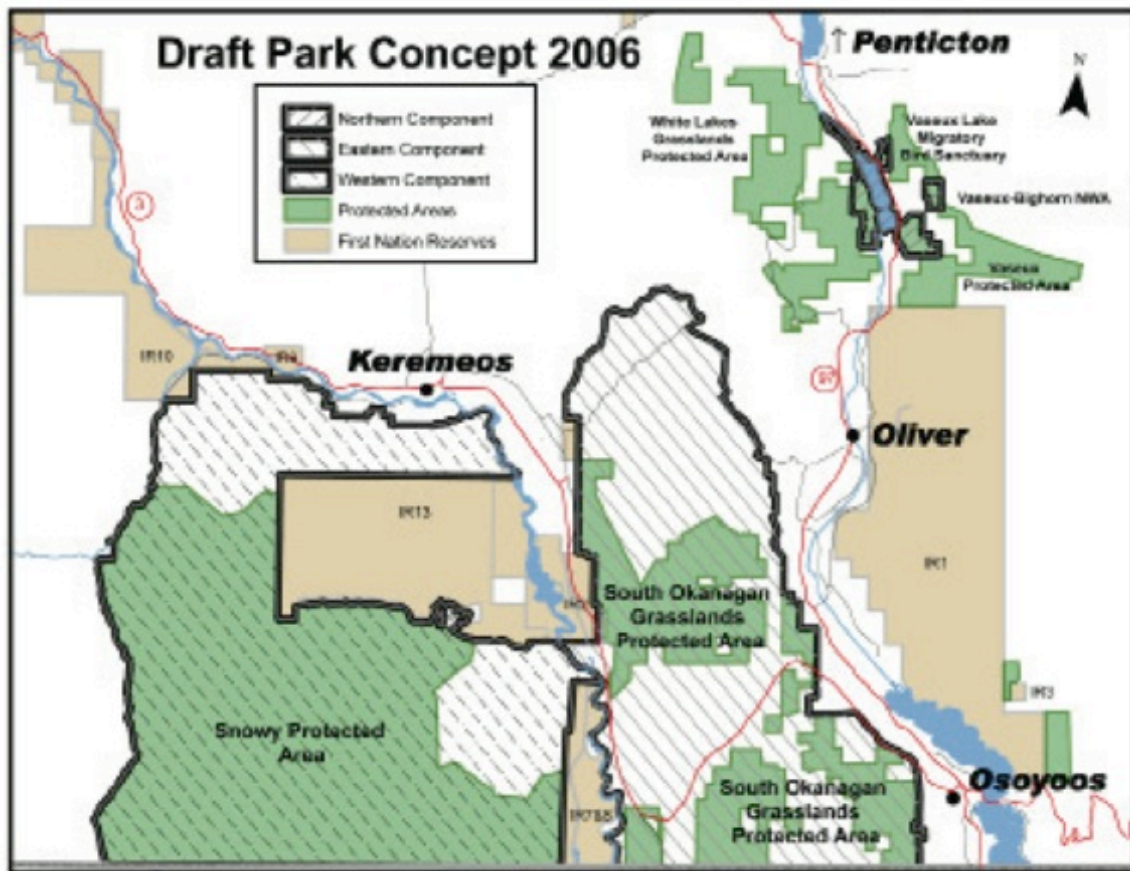
Figure 4.1: Protected areas in the SOLS⁸⁹:



⁸⁸ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), p. 19. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection Environmental Stewardship Division, "Okanagan Region Management Direction Statement for Mount Kobau Site, South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area," OS-LRMP (March 2003). The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Figure 4.2: 2006 Park concept area⁹⁰:



⁹⁰ Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan – Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), p. 23. The use of this government-produced image in this thesis does not represent the views of the government of Canada.

Illustration 4.1: The Osoyoos Indian Band Reserve, view of the cultural center and other buildings, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 4.2: Vaseux Lake with McIntyre Bluff in the distance, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 4.3: “NO NATIONAL PARK,” along Highway 97 in the Okanagan, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 4.4: “YES! NATIONAL PARK,” along Highway 3 in the Similkameen, photo by author, August 2012:



Illustration 4.5: “MAYBE NATIONAL PARK,” along Highway 3 in the Similkameen, photo by author, August 2012:



Chapter Five: Conclusions: Nature, Community, and Conservation

The first time I saw a “Maybe National Park” sign, I whipped the car to the side of the road and jumped out to photograph it. I had been driving down Highway 3 in the Similkameen in August 2012, during my first research trip. It was evening, soft and saturated with color and light, and the highway was empty. I snapped the picture, just of the sign, with a high blue sky wisped with clouds behind it. The sign was held aloft with sturdy wooden stakes; “MAYBE” was painted in blue, “NATIONAL PARK” was in green. I looked southeast into the valley towards Tlxasqin, Mount Kobau, its slope lit by the setting sun. I could see vineyards striping the valley floor; flourishing fruit orchards; the silvery, twisting Similkameen River. I knew that cows were roaming the muscled side of Mount Kobau, perhaps facing down a roaring ATV or an unsuspecting birder. It was a beautiful evening—though not a quiet evening, with “NO” and “YES” and “MAYBE” signs shouting from the roadside. It isn’t a conversation that I want to ignore.

I don’t know if the SOLS NPR will become reality. I think that if the process stumbles to a halt now, a valuable opportunity to foster the open discussions that stakeholders want will be lost. Whether residents are birders or hunters, or both, all value the bunchgrassed mountains and hot, antelope-brushed valley lowlands of the South Okanagan and Lower Similkameen. Whether residents moved here five years ago or have been roaming the region since they were kids, all understand the limitations on development and growth in the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen. Whether residents do or do not want a park, all want community-driven conservation efforts.

A delicate, pressured landscape like the arid South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen represents an opportunity for an approaching era of conservation. It is a working landscape

in a populated region that nonetheless is marked as ecologically important. Rather than rocky and iced over, or a place to visit but not stay, the peak of Mount Kobau is green and habitable. From the mountaintop, I can look out and see contemporary use, from a hazy distance to practically beneath my feet. First Nations balanced use of the land to preserve its integrity. Ranchers' cows grazed the hills. Orchardists and vineyard owners planted up the valley bottoms. The SOLS has a rich human history and a rare set of ecosystems. Today, some of its residents press for a national park reserve. Some do not. Regardless, something special is happening in the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen: a burgeoning understanding that a working landscape deserves conservation, in tandem with respect for human practices. There, a community can work for conservation; stakeholders can regulate their use; and a conserved space is not simply a green blob on the map, lost to use and meaning. Abstracted beauty and material use can coexist. Labor and protection are not mutually exclusive. Community and nature are not separate.

We need this understanding of conservation now more than ever. Today, nearly all landscapes are working landscapes—and all of those landscapes deserve thoughtful use. For some, community conservation may not be possible, and government intervention may be necessary when corporate power strong-arms community processes. However, in the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen, residents have identified what they value and what they want. They may not all view themselves as part of a whole and unbroken “community,” but differences in identity should not to be erased to hold a discussion about conservation. Land connects them just enough.

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