



Icefields Parkway

Backgrounder: Banff & Jasper National Parks

A Need for Change

In recent years, it has become clear that recapitalising assets and improving the experience for visitors along the Icefields Parkway are necessary to maintain its reputation as one of the world's most scenic drives.

Background

- The Icefields Parkway is one of the premier tourist attractions in Canada. A spectacular 230-km drive along the backbone of the continent between Lake Louise and the Town of Jasper, the parkway showcases the reasons the area was included in the Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site.
- Two national historic sites, Howse Pass and Athabasca Pass, are located along the parkway.
- Parks Canada, with the support of an advisory group, has drafted a strategy for the renewal of the Icefields Parkway.

Key elements of the Icefields Parkway Strategy include:

- Using “The Icefields Parkway at its Best” as the theme for developing strategies for resource protection, opportunities for visitors, and public education.
- Understanding the motivation of visitors and responding to visitor needs -- from pre-trip planning to sharing memories.
- Helping Canadians understand the significance of the parkway.
- Ensuring the protection of resources – either in the strategy or in the management plan.
- Involving Aboriginal people in presenting their stories.
- Coordinating the efforts of Parks Canada and its many partners.
- Demonstrating sound environmental stewardship.

An Icefields Parkway action plan will help Parks Canada and its partners to:

- Improve infrastructure, such as the road, day-use areas, campgrounds and signs.
- Improve visitor services, such as the campground reservation system and Parks Canada's website.
- Enhance access to real-time information about things to do and see, road conditions, wildlife, campgrounds, etc.
- Work more closely with partners, including Aboriginal groups, tourism operators, and independent guides.
- Improve the availability and quality of interpretation.
- Maintain the parkway as a scenic drive and an important link between Banff and Jasper.

Existing Management Plan Direction

- Emphasize opportunities to learn along the parkway.

- Improve assets along the parkway.
- Keep the parkway open year-round.

Considerations

- The planning program adopted an integrated approach to ecological integrity, cultural resources, education, and visitor experiences along the parkway.
- Planning was limited to the roadway and adjacent opportunities, facilities, and services.
- Because ecological concerns in the study area are relatively modest, the strategic concept focuses on enhancing the experience of visitors.
- Implementing the concept will support broader ecological initiatives and reduce the impact of specific sites.
- Many improvements, such as major highway infrastructure, are long-term projects.
- The five-year management plan reviews will include reviews of the Icefields Parkway strategy.

New Directions

Parks Canada welcomes public comments on the following questions about the strategy for the Icefields Parkway.

- Is the vision appropriate?
- Is anything missing from the vision?
- Do you agree with the key directions?
- Are the three “visitor relationships” useful and appropriate?
- Are there issues the draft strategy does not address?
- Does the strategy reflect the challenges of managing the parkway as both a scenic drive and as a highway for through traffic?
- Are the roles of stakeholders and partners clear?
- What are the main priorities?
- What would encourage you to visit the parkway?
- What would discourage you from visiting the parkway?

Icefields Parkway Strategic Concept Draft

The Icefields Parkway is a spectacular 230-km drive along the backbone of the continent between the hamlet of Lake Louise in Banff National Park and the Town of Jasper in Jasper National Park. It is an icon, recognized by its status as part of the Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site. As a place for Canadians and people from around the world to experience and sustain mountain life and wilderness with friends and family, it provides a focus for renewing our integrated mandate of education, protection and visitor experience. A public participation process that involved Parks Canada, a dedicated group of stakeholders and First Nation representation helped prepare this strategic approach. A commitment by stakeholders, commercial operators and partners to work closely with each other and Parks Canada with respect to visitors and stewardship will help carry the Parkway to its future best.

The Icefields Parkway at its future best...

Canadians and visitors from around the world who come to the Icefields Parkway in Banff and Jasper national parks find themselves immersed in a dramatic landscape of ice-draped ridges, jagged peaks, turbulent headwater streams, sweeping vistas of forest-carpeted valleys, and alpine meadows bright with wildflowers. Great rivers arise here at the very backbone of the North American continent, born of melting snow and ancient glaciers, flowing to three oceans. Timeless pathways along the Bow, Mistaya, Sunwapta, Athabasca, and Saskatchewan Rivers guide travellers on a breathtaking journey from valley bottom to two of the highest passes that can be reached by paved road in Canada. In this place, people find some of the wildest and most beautiful landscapes in the world, protected for all time. The Icefields Parkway, part of the Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, is an icon of Canada's national park system.

Long before there was a Canada, this place was known to Aboriginal people on both sides of the continental divide. Aboriginal guides shared their routes and knowledge with early European explorers, traders, railroaders, and the first tourist-mountaineers. Their stories and our shared experiences of wonder and awe connect past, present and future; all of us are travellers, yearning to linger and discover.

From the road's edge and beyond, visitors personally witness dynamic natural forces at work – slow-scouring ice, sudden-release avalanches, rushing waters, renewing fires, and variable mountain weather. Wildlife follow their ancient patterns, and our stewardship as we share space with caribou, mountain goats, grizzly bears, and wolves will help us ensure that this is, and will remain, a wild place for all time.

Few return from their journey through the Icefields Parkway unchanged. Adventure-seekers, family groups, and armchair explorers alike are rewarded. Visitors take home a better understanding gained through personal discovery, and assimilation of well-presented stories. Visitor facilities, integrated with their wild surroundings, are designed,

used, and maintained in ways respectful of the land and water. Exemplary and sustainable environmental and tourism practices and ecological restoration actions assure visitors that this place is very well cared for. Parks Canada, Aboriginal people, and tourism partners play coordinated roles in managing visitor opportunities, storytelling, and fostering the comfort, safety and convenience of travelers.

The ongoing protection of the landscapes, habitats and cultural heritage along the Icefields Parkway sets the foundation for meaningful experiences and making personal connections with wild places and with fellow travelers; these experiences provide a window that inspires people to care about the natural world and their connection to it.

Introduction

The opportunities the Icefields Parkway provides in Jasper and Banff national parks resonate with Canadians and international travelers. Visitors connect with dramatic mountain landscapes and glaciers, rivers, spectacular scenery, history and mountain culture, and the prospect of encountering wildlife, including several species at risk in Canada. The charms of this high-elevation mountain road include a wide range of opportunities that change with the seasons.

The challenge for all who value this unique and special place is to continue to enjoy and manage the Parkway in a way that perpetuates the richness of the experience, the ecosystem, and the cultural resources. Parks Canada, together with a host of other organizations, will focus on excellence in visitor opportunities, protection, and education. We will reach out to Canadians to increase awareness and appreciation whether or not they visit. The quality and unique character of the Parkway, in all its aspects, will be the primary consideration.

Key Directions

1. The Icefields Parkway¹ will have a single, distinctive identity as a scenic heritage destination that gives all visitors, no matter how they travel, “access to the spectacular.”
2. The Parkway will reflect the three fundamental aspects of Parks Canada’s mandate -- education, experience and protection. Maintaining the ecological integrity², cultural resources, and visual integrity of the setting are fundamental for memorable visitor experiences and opportunities to learn and to appreciate the natural surroundings.

¹ The Icefields Parkway includes the road along with the adjacent services, facilities and opportunities. This area has traditionally been known as “front country.”

² When considering ecological integrity in the Icefields Parkway Initiative, scale is important. Many core ecological maintenance and restoration initiatives appropriately lie outside the scope of the strategy at the broader scale of the management plans for Banff and Jasper national parks.

3. As part of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site and two national parks, the Parkway will inspire visitors through its high standards for ecological integrity and cultural resource protection. Key elements of ecological health include maintaining or restoring ecological processes (e.g., fire), aquatic ecosystem health, viable wildlife populations, key habitats and habitat connectivity, and ensuring that human-caused wildlife mortality and disturbance does not increase.
4. Concentrating efforts on the most popular day use areas, viewpoints, and campgrounds will ensure a safe, enjoyable experience for visitors and make the most efficient use of investments. Services and facilities at less well-known sites will provide additional opportunities. At both primary and secondary locations, experiences and opportunities to learn will engage visitors with different needs and interests.
5. Planning will focus on the quality of visitor opportunities.
6. Providing incentives or removing barriers will encourage visitors to stop more often along the Parkway. Better use of existing accommodation, especially campgrounds, means people will be more inclined to stay overnight.
7. Maintenance of this scenic heritage highway will focus on experiences and safety rather than through traffic.
8. Parks Canada will play a leadership and coordinating role in enhancing visitor experiences, and a stronger role in promoting broad national awareness of the Parkway, Banff and Jasper National Parks and the World Heritage Site, by working cooperatively with relevant destination marketing organizations and with individual operators who provide opportunities along the Parkway.
9. Parks Canada will collaborate with stakeholders, commercial operators and partners to develop common key messages about the Parkway and its national park and World Heritage Site status for staff training and for visitors. These groups will build seamless, high-quality visitor experiences by working together to develop products, sharing best practices for presentation and stewardship, and cooperating on promotion.
10. Visitors from the region are a primary market for the Parkway. By providing satisfying experiences, the Parkway will continue to resonate with Canadians and visitors from other countries and maintain its international status.
11. Consistent and clear information will allow visitors to plan their trip, visit the Parkway and share their memories.
12. Discovery and learning will be fundamental. Key themes reflecting the area's environment and culture will shape opportunities and infrastructure. The Parkway is

a natural “interactive space” where visitors can gain personal insights into the area’s ecological and cultural heritage.

13. Parks Canada, Aboriginal people and tourism partners will cooperate in managing visitor opportunities, storytelling, and fostering the comfort, safety and convenience of travelers.
14. Monitoring programs for both the parks and the Parkway will help determine the need for mitigation or management adjustments. Of particular interest are the numbers of visitors, patterns of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, wildlife mortality, wildlife conflicts, etc.

Strategies

Five strategies and a corresponding set of key actions are proposed to move the Icefields Parkway towards its future best.

1. *Offer visitors a variety of ways to connect with their surroundings.*
2. *Provide opportunities for continuous experiences.*
3. *Work closely with stakeholders to design and implement key actions and to monitor success.*
4. *Adopt and celebrate stewardship practices and designs that maintain and restore the natural environment.*
5. *Retain the quality of the Icefields Parkway as a scenic drive and an important link between Banff and Jasper.*

Strategy #1: Offer visitors a variety of ways to connect with their surroundings.

Parkway visitors have a wide range of backgrounds, expectations and desires. The magic and uniqueness of the Parkway rests in its ability to provide each of these visitors an opportunity to experience the area's history and its natural and cultural features. As stewards of the Parkway, Parks Canada, the tourism sector, Aboriginal Peoples, non-profit groups, etc., will value and provide for three broad relationships:

1. ***A view from the edge of wilderness*** - most visitors experience the Parkway from their vehicles, stopping occasionally to admire the view. The Parkway introduces these visitors to the mountain wilderness that Banff and Jasper national parks represent.

Key Actions

- a. Review facilities and infrastructure (day use areas, pull-offs, viewpoints, picnic spots, and campgrounds) to identify ways to enhance opportunities.
- b. Address the needs and safety of visitors, improve operational efficiencies and reduce environmental impacts by consolidating, redesigning or revitalizing facilities.
- c. Cluster¹ opportunities or facilities where feasible.
- d. Identify and possibly close viewpoints and facilities that have minimal recreational potential, receive low use, or are a hazard.
- e. Use highway signs and exhibits at Howse Pass and Hardisty viewpoints to highlight the significance of Howse and Athabasca Passes as national historic sites.
- f. Create activity checklists and guides tailored to the various interests and time constraints of visitors.
- g. Increase the presence of Parks Canada staff at popular sites.
- h. Remove brush and selected trees at key locations to restore the view and promote the safety of wildlife and visitors.

¹ For example at picnic areas include formal strolling opportunities, play areas for children, learning opportunities etc.

- i. Prepare and implement a sign plan, consistent with national guidelines, that communicates necessary messages while avoiding visual clutter.
 - j. Orient visitors to the Parkway at major locations.
 - k. Increase basic awareness and appreciation for Canada’s mountain parks and historic sites through interpretive programming/exhibits that reflect the “view from the edge.” Pique visitor’s interest in learning and/or exploring.
 - l. Maintain the Parkway in winter so people can enjoy the “view from the edge” and occasional stops at basic facilities such as pull-offs and privies.
2. ***A step into wilderness*** – Visitors who prefer to linger can get closer to the wilderness without leaving the Parkway too far behind. The focus here is on short, safe, high-quality opportunities for recreation and learning.

Key Actions

- a. Provide introductory level opportunities for self-guided learning that arouse curiosity and allow exploration.
 - b. Offer more intensive learning opportunities for day-use and overnight visitors.
 - c. Create and implement a camping strategy that supports the unique heritage and wilderness character of the Parkway:
 - upgrade campgrounds to offer services for large recreational vehicles, smaller campers, and tents in the same campground
 - offer opportunities for camping that meet the needs of a wider range of visitors and that reflect the cultural context of the Parkway (e.g. wall tents; equipment rental)
 - provide information about opportunities, services and facilities for different campers
 - maintain the rustic ambiance and design elements that characterize a classic Icefields Parkway camping experience
 - provide opportunities for families, seniors, youth and groups
 - implement camping reservations in some or all campgrounds
 - consider converting Silverhorn overflow to a full time RV campground
 - assess winter camping in light of the needs of current campers and projected future demand
 - build short walking trails at day-use areas and campgrounds that reflect Parkway themes with a strategy to manage maintenance costs; post information about the trails (e.g., distance, difficulty) at the trailhead
 - d. Work with Aboriginal groups to determine the potential for a site or sites for ceremonial use along the Parkway.
3. ***Beyond the edge of wilderness*** – These visitors leave the road behind – physically or mentally – in search of a better understanding of the area and its natural and cultural

features. For this group, the Icefields Parkway is a starting point for trips of a day or more².

The focus is on providing resources and opportunities for sustained, year-round exploration. These can include convenient and well-designed basic services such as pre-trip information and clearly marked trailheads.

Key Actions:

- a. Work with outlying commercial accommodations and hostels on opportunities for learning that are consistent with the area's key themes.
- b. Install highway signs to identify trailheads and associated facilities (e.g., privy, horse ramp, etc.) for summer and winter backcountry access/activities.
- c. Ensure adequate parking at trailheads; respect both site specific and broader ecological considerations.
- d. Ensure the design of trailhead kiosks, information/orientation panels, and park publications is consistent in Banff and Jasper national parks.
- e. Maintain winter access to select trailheads with basic facilities (parking, garbage cans, privies)
- f. Ensure visitors have access to avalanche bulletins and the avalanche terrain rating program.

Strategy #2: Provide opportunities for a continuous visitor experience that engage interest from pre-trip planning to post-trip memories.

The Visitor Experience Cycle will serve as the framework for a variety of experiences that reflect the three broad visitor relationships. The cycle will recognize a range of trip lengths for independent travellers and commercial tour operators and will offer opportunities to learn and to practice stewardship.

Key Actions:

- a. Create an identity with a distinctive look and feel that visitors immediately identify with the Parkway and its promised opportunities; ensure this identity reinforces Banff and Jasper National Park, Parks Canada and the mountain national parks story.
- b. To encourage an interest in learning, link opportunities to key themes that reflect the area's natural and cultural features and history. Develop themes based on the following topics:

² This could include visitors who spend several days on the Parkway taking advantage of most front country recreational opportunities and who explore in-depth learning opportunities, or those who simply use the Parkway as a staging area for single or multi-day backcountry activities.

- *Backbone of the Canadian Rockies* -- mountain building, spectacular landscapes, life “on the edge”
 - *The Wild Side: Habitats and Wildlife of the Canadian Rockies* -- mountain animals, habitats, elevation, wide-ranging species, species at risk
 - *Glaciers and Flowing Waters* -- significance of this area for Canada’s watersheds, water dynamics, climate change
 - *People and the Land* -- First Peoples, European explorers, mountaineers, building the Parkway
 - *Protected Landscapes* -- stewardship, national parks, Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site; this is a core topic, to be woven through each theme
- c. Create a distinctive design, inspired by the area’s themes, for interpretive panels/bases, signs identifying geographical features, bridges and highways (steel rails/guide rails).
 - d. Set consistent standards for viewpoints, day-use areas, and trailheads that take into consideration seasonal visitors, ecological integrity, education, and efficiency of operation.
 - e. Increase the availability of pre-trip information, both electronic and print, that reflects the Parkway’s identity and messages.
 - f. Present the Icefields Parkway as a complete experience and not as isolated stops or destinations.
 - g. Promote opportunities for multi-day visits.
 - h. Create a distinct sense of welcome, anticipation, arrival and departure at the three Parkway gates.
 - i. Carry the common look and feel guided by key themes throughout the Parkway to strengthen its sense of place as a unique Canadian heritage route through two national parks and a World Heritage Site.
 - j. Provide in-depth interpretation at outlying commercial accommodations, hostels, and campgrounds; provide interpretation at key campgrounds for visitors who are there for a few hours or a few days.
 - k. Identify winter opportunities and required levels of service.
 - l. Present information about ways to enjoy the Parkway in different seasons.
 - m. Consider integrating day-use facilities and campgrounds to make the best use of facilities and improve the cost-effectiveness of upgrading campgrounds.
 - n. Provide follow up and reflection opportunities for visitors after their trip – on-line, books and CDs, podcasts, etc.
 - o. Offer opportunities for visitors to share stories and experiences.

Strategy #3: Work closely with stakeholders to design and implement key actions and monitor success

Parks Canada, Aboriginal People and stakeholders will cooperate to enhance the quality of opportunities along the Parkway. This includes a range of activities from storytelling, to protection, to fostering the comfort, safety and convenience of travelers.

Key Actions:

- a. Develop and share Best Management Practices related to orientation/training programs, education, stewardship, information, marketing, etc.
- b. Identify opportunities to implement the strategies using public-private partnerships and smaller joint ventures with individual operators.
- c. Continue to work with the Interpretive Guides Association and other interested parties to strengthen interpretation (key messages, story ideas, etc.) and to develop and present the themes.
- d. Collaborate with partners to promote and market the Parkway and to increase national awareness of the two national parks and World Heritage Site status.

Strategy #4: Adopt and celebrate stewardship practices and designs that maintain or restore the natural environment.

This strategy recognizes the important interactions between the built and natural environment and the role of effective environmental stewardship in maintaining or restoring ecological health. It enables the Icefields Parkway to be an experiential classroom where visitors learn about the relationship between humans and the environment.

Education promotes local and global environmental stewardship, while on the Parkway and back at home.

Key Actions:

- a. Expand the use of meaningful and effective environmental stewardship practices such as alternative energy, rigorous wastewater treatment standards, etc.
- b. Base communications on key ecological concepts that reflect Parks Canada's resource management objectives (e.g., connectivity, aquatic ecosystem health, forest health, etc.); where feasible, include cultural stories.
- c. Identify educational initiatives to increase stewardship of the Parkway by Canadians.
- d. Engage pertinent audiences through broader mountain park outreach initiatives (e.g. species at risk, climate change, healthy forests, etc.).
- e. Integrate messages promoting stewardship and personal safety.
- f. Ensure the design of facilities does not detract from the setting (e.g., roads, trails, buildings, campgrounds, etc.).
- g. Reduce environmental impact when building or modifying infrastructure.
- h. Profile the importance of the Howse Pass regional wildlife corridor at Saskatchewan Crossing and the Howse Pass 'node' to increase awareness of the value of wildlife corridor protection to ecological health.

- i. Redesign sensitive wildlife viewing areas (e.g. Mountain Goat Viewpoint, Tangle Hill) to address safety, quality of experience, and wildlife issues.

Strategy #5: Retain the quality of the Icefields Parkway as a scenic drive and an important link between Banff and Jasper.

The road will remain a scenic heritage highway with an emphasis on the visitor experience and safety, not speed. The impact of the road and its associated infrastructure on the environment will be kept to a minimum.

Visitors and residents will recognize that travel on the Parkway can be challenging in the face of mountain terrain and weather, and plan accordingly, particularly in winter when safety may require closures for avalanche control or extreme weather.

Road standards and design will contribute to the visitor experience and ecological goals. Adequate investment in maintenance will allow visitors to experience the Parkway and to reach their destinations in Jasper and Banff national parks safely.

Key Actions:

- a. Provide a highway standard that recognizes the heritage drive experience within the limitations of the existing right-of-way (inconsistent shoulders, etc.).
- b. Review the needs of cyclists and develop options. Explore options to enhance opportunities.
- c. Give priority to the elements of the highway standard that encourage a more leisurely drive with frequent stops and that discourage speeding.
- d. Continue to restrict commercial truck traffic (weight restrictions).
- e. Provide information so motorists can plan their stops well in advance, while driving on the Parkway.
- f. Ensure travelers know what to do and what to expect in an emergency (i.e., warden stations, emergency phone locations, etc.).
- g. Create realistic expectations about road conditions in both winter and summer.
- h. Ensure information about changing road conditions is up-to-date.
- i. Promote safe practices by visitors while driving or participating in recreational activities and encourage them to assume some personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of others.
- j. Involve partners in distributing consistent, accurate messages about safety that create realistic visitor expectations.