MAYBE NATIONAL PARK:
Consultation, Conservation, and Conflict in the Okanagan-Similkameen

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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, cows had stamped down a muddy wallow, their hooves 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 Txasqin, and that I did not.

Txasqin, or Mount Kobau, lies in the heart of Unit 1 of a proposed national park reserve in the Okanagan-Similkameen.[1] As currently envisaged, this park reserve, the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen (SOLS) National Park Reserve (NPR), would encompass 284 square kilometres tucked into the rugged hills between the Similkameen on the west and the Okanagan on the east. It would also include a "northern component" around Vaseux Lake, a little sliver of blue in the valley floor, roughly fifteen kilometres northeast of the main park boundary.[2] This area is the southernmost Canadian section of a strip of grasslands stretching from the 49th parallel to Prince George and representative of the Dry Interior Plateau, one of thirty-nine "natural" regions recognized by Parks Canada, which intends to establish a national park in each.[3]

[1] A national park reserve, as opposed to a national park, was a new concept set forth in the National Parks Act, 1974. As Claire Campbell succinctly defines it, it was intended to use "land set aside for a future national park pending settlement of any land claims," in particular those of First Nations who regard any particular land area as a part of their traditional territories. In the case of the potential SOLS NPR, the Okanagan Nation Alliance, who have not ceded their traditional territory, include that land area in their territory. See Claire Campbell, ed., *A Century of Parks Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 10.

[2] Canada–British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment* (Canada: Parks Canada, 2011), 7. Available online at http://cpawsbc.org/upload/South_Okanagan-Similkameen_National_Park_Feasibility_Study.pdf.

[3] See "Parks Canada Agency Background to Corporate Plan 2008-09/2012-13, Table 3: National Park Proposals in Five Unrepresented Regions," Parks Canada, 2009, available at http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/docs/pc/plans/cont-back2008-2009/section1-1.aspx.

Figure 1. The top of Mount Kobau. Photo by author.

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-kilometre-long gravel road up Txasqin provides arresting views.[4] The peak, at 1,863 metres, is high for the region and far enough south of the Okanagan's characteristic patchwork of green orchards and vineyards on sandy, bleached 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 Txasqin could not be conjured. Other signs are evident: the wood posts of fences, with thick wires strung between them, line the drive up Txasqin. A sign that would otherwise mark the boundary of a provincial park lies on the

[4] Txasqin and Mount Kobau are the same – "Txasqin" is the Sylix word for this mountain. The Sylix people include the Okanagan Nation Alliance.

ground with three gaping bullet holes through the metal, and its post has been shattered in two. Perhaps the sign was merely a convenient target for a practising sharpshooter; maybe it was shot at in anger, reflecting disapproval of government-designated conservation areas. I have heard both views during conversations with stakeholders. 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 and hooves long before I pulled up to that gravel parking lot in a borrowed sedan.[5]

In contrast to the semi-urbanized, agriculture-rich floor of the Okanagan Valley, the larger Okanagan-Similkameen region comprises high hills covered with bunchgrass, sage flats, and mixed Douglas fir forests.[6] Almost all of the land is under grazing tenure, and all is within the traditional territory of bands of the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA). The western edge of the proposed park reserve, bounded by the winding Similkameen River, abuts private homes, vineyards, and the Lower Similkameen Indian Reserve No. 2. Ownership of the land is split three ways: ninety-three square kilometres are within provincial protected areas; eighty-three square kilometres are multi-use Crown land; and ninety-eight square kilometres are private land.[7]

So what is the view from Txasqin? 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 subdivision nor a grand, sweeping landscape. It is somewhere in between. Cows tread the hills and feed on the grasses

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[5] My research process consisted of three trips to the Okanagan-Similkameen. Before any visits, though, I gained permission to interview stakeholders, including First Nations, in the Okanagan-Similkameen from the University of British Columbia's Human Ethics Review in May 2012. I conducted research trips to the area in August 2012, October 2012, and May 2013, staying, respectively, in Summerland, Penticton, and Keremeos. I recorded eleven interviews, which are quoted throughout this article, albeit anonymously. I talked with more people than these eleven but took no notes from, and no recordings of, them, nor do I quote them in this piece as they did not wish to be cited. I also gathered information from publicly available government and conservation organization documents and news articles about the progress of the planning process. All of the planning documents cited can be found online and downloaded for free.

[6] In the rest of the article, "the Okanagan-Similkameen" refers to the general region. The terms "the SOLS" and "park reserve" refer only to the area within the proposed park reserve's boundaries.

[7] Canada–British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 9. Provincial protected areas are administered under the Environment and Land Use Act, and the different kinds of uses allowed vary from area to area, as determined by a Land Use Committee of Cabinet. Crown land is owned by the provincial government but is available to the public for many different purposes, including industry, research, and recreation. Private land is held by individual landowners.

– 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 hold on among the bunchgrass and sagebrush. Indeed, the balance of these seemingly at-odds activities within such an in-between place as the Okanagan-Similkameen weaves together the apparent opposition of grand vista and tended pasture. Straddling the mountains between the Similkameen and the Okanagan, two very different valleys in both physical appearance and economic character, and balanced between potential conserved space and working landscape, the Okanagan-Similkameen is a liminal space. First Nations advocate conscientious, careful use, tied to their culture and history. Environmentalists treasure 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 park reserve was first proposed in 2002. It has since faced serious political roadblocks and has 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 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 an article about the process of trying to establish a park reserve may seem premature, but I contend that there is much to learn from situating such an analysis within larger narratives of environmentalism and conservation of working landscapes and determining the environmental concerns of the Okanagan-Similkameen's people. If the park reserve is established, then, because of its community-oriented planning process, it will be a testing ground for balancing a variety of stakeholder interests and a landmark national park. If the park reserve idea fades away, this analysis of the process of proposal and negotiation

[8] Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 13.

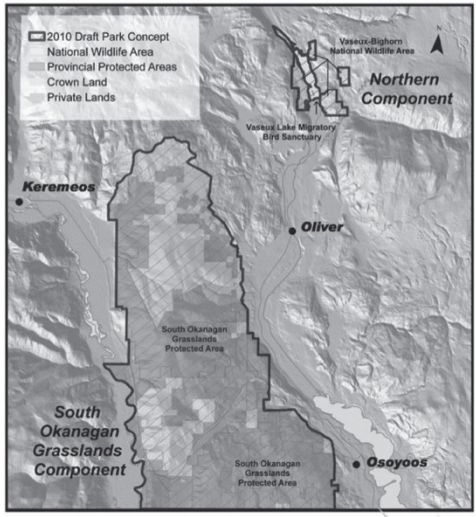

Figure 2. Current proposed boundaries for the SOLS, from the feasibility study. *Source*: Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), 10.

in the Okanagan-Similkameen will become a bittersweet story of the difficulties and intricacies of reconciling different visions of conservation and land use among stakeholders, conservation organizations, and government bureaucracies.

The proposed SOLS is a unique case within Canada because of the variety of stakeholders involved in the planning process. The creation of a national park or park reserve in Canada is often fraught and lengthy, but few national parks or park reserves are as divisive as is the proposed SOLS. Few proposed park reserves are as close to such a dense population or so small in their land area (especially national park units in western Canada). Parks Canada maintains thirty-seven national parks and eight national park reserves. Only one of those, Grasslands National Park, incorporates grazing as a part of its management strategy.[9] And while national park reserves have been forged through alliances between Parks Canada and First Nations, no national park unit in Canada has contended with such a complex set of stakeholders as exists within the proposed park reserve. The SOLS has been proposed as a national park reserve because of the ONA's land claims. However, it expands beyond the traditional definition of a national park reserve, which ostensibly

[9] Parks Canada, *Grasslands National Park of Canada Management Plan*, June 2010, 43. Available online at http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/sk/grasslands/plan/plan6.aspx. Grasslands National Park is the park unit that is most analogous to the proposed SOLS. Its most recent plan emphasizes adaptive land management strategies in its goals to restore and maintain a healthy grasslands ecosystem and asserts Parks Canada's eagerness to work with neighbouring private property owners and First Nations.

contends with First Nations territory alone, because of the presence of ranchers within its boundaries. While a number of national parks have contested histories of creation, the making of the SOLS has been different because Parks Canada must include all of these stakeholders within the planning process and within the park itself. These efforts make the SOLS a proposition without real precedence in Parks Canada history.

The debate around the park reserve signals a major departure from traditional, and oft-studied, discussions about national parks.[10] Most studies of national parks in the last quarter-century have spoken to and tended to confirm a proposition familiar to environmental historians and historical geographers: that wilderness is a cultural, aesthetic construct originating from settler societies' obsession with the empty, fruitful frontier – a fixation that eliminates, first rhetorically and then physically, the presence of Native populations or economically disadvantaged groups from desired territory. This settler perspective depends upon the acceptance of a dichotomy between nature and humanity, a divide that privileges colonial interests and erases other 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 ideology.

This divide is all but irrelevant for the park reserve and does not explain the conflicts that have arisen. The Okanagan-Similkameen is sufficiently developed that no group or individual is (or was) under the illusion that any part of it is an untainted wilderness. The land within the potential

[10] For more histories of Parks Canada, see Ken Atkinson, "New National Parks in the Canadian North," *Geography* 86, 2 (2001): 141-49; L. Bella, review of Bill Waiser, P*ark Prisoners: The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks, 1915–1946* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1995) *Canadian Historical Review* 78, 1 (1997): 130-32; Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, "'Let the Line Be Drawn Now': Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada," *Environmental History* 11, 4 (2006): 724-50; Jeri Cronin, *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Philip Dearden and Rick Rollins, eds., *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002); William Fox, "Aboriginal Peoples, Archaeology and Parks Canada," *Plains Anthropologist* 44, 170 (1999): 35-42; Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935–1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); J. Opp, "Public History and the Fragments of Place: Archaeology, History and Heritage Site Development in Southern Alberta," *Rethinking History* 15, 2 (2011): 241; Joanna Reid, "The Grasslands Debates: Conservationists, Ranchers, First Nations, and the Landscape of the Middle Fraser," *BC Studies* 160 (Winter 2008-09): 93-118; John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Jocelyn Thorpe, *Temagami's Tangled Wild: Race, Gender, and the Making of Canadian Nature* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012). Many of these grapple with issues of First Nations and stakeholder dispossession, land use and interpretation within the national parks or park reserves, the consumption of national parks as contested sites of tourism, and the constructed wilderness within park boundaries.

park reserve is entirely under grazing tenures, and a dozen privately owned ranches checkerboard its hills; all of the land (excepting Vaseux Lake) is within the traditional territory of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band; and private homes line the western edge of the proposed park reserve. The Okanagan-Similkameen is a landscape that holds memory and cultural importance: as a 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 project did not begin with the construction of a wilderness narrative.[11] While the park reserve study area does represent various types of "nature" to stakeholders, its supporters view the potential SOLS not as a tract of rare untouched wilderness to preserve but, rather, as 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.

It is yet unclear how community visions – while potentially compatible, pending execution – will link together or whether 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 into 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 article seeks to examine the range of perspectives regarding the process of making the SOLS. It attempts to order and understand the values embodied in these perspectives and to clarify the nature of resistance to and support for a national park reserve in the Okanagan-Similkameen.

Efforts to conserve the high, desert-like grasslands between the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys began years before the park reserve was proposed in 2002. Indeed, First Nations in the region have been crafting respectful methods of resource use in these valleys for thousands of years. The Interior Salish speakers of the Sylix dialect, who now comprise the handful of bands within the ONA, built the earliest settlements in the region. An interview with the chief of a local band

[11] See Binnema and Niemi, "Let the Line Be Drawn"; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Joseph Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin*. All are excellent texts that describe this process. Works cited in footnote 10 often follow similar themes.

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 someone's lobbying for logs or areas to log … We're not just environmentalists because GreenPeace started, we're environmentalists when the beginning of time came.[12]

One of the earliest efforts by settlers to preserve land in the Okanagan-Similkameen involved the formation of the Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society in 1966. This organization, comprised of concerned local environmentalists and ecologists, helped coordinate the creation of numerous provincial parks in the region. 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 nineteenth-century naturalists and the government bureaucrats who pioneered the first national parks in Canada and the United States.[13] 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 fits within that framework, as those communities re-evaluate, compromise, and forge those connections between ideology and practice.

Today, half of the existing parkland in the Okanagan-Similkameen is intended for recreation, and only 1 percent of the land base within the regional district is parkland – as opposed to the 10 to 15 percent typical of other BC regional districts.[14] Conservation organizations, such as the

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[12] Interview B, May 2013. Each interview quoted is anonymous and is denoted by a letter randomly assigned.

[13] Including Cathedral Provincial Park in 1968; Conkle Lake Park in 1973; Okanagan Mountain Park in 1973; and Cascade Recreation Area in 1987. Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society, "Projects," 2013, available at http://okanagansimilkameenparkssociety.ca/projects.htm.

[14] South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program, *Keeping Nature in Our Future: A Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for the South Okanagan-Similkameen* (British Columbia: South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Project, 2012), 39. A fascinating planning document, publicly available online at http://www.soscp.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Biodiversity-document.pdf.

South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program, 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 Okanagan-Similkameen. These calls for 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.[15] Many residents of the Okanagan-Similkameen are all too aware of the need for balance and moderation – values reflected in the liminal "nature" of the proposed SOLS. The South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program, 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.[16] The combination of the arid ecosystem and the built environment necessitate an expansion of the conservation agenda – and so the Okanagan-Similkameen has become a landscape of negotiation. Numerous conservation efforts and community debates underline the difficulty of planning in an inclusive, stakeholder-oriented fashion and conserving land that is either prime real estate or a working landscape.

In 1995, representatives from public groups and government agencies began to develop the Okanagan-Shuswap Land Resource Management Plan (LRMP), which was intended to guide protection and use of Crown land within the Similkameen, Okanagan, and Columbia-Shuswap valleys of British Columbia. The planning process was consensus-based and thus brought together stakeholders from a wide variety of groups and occupations. The published plan, approved in 2001, is 826 pages long, provides management strategies for 2.5 million hectares of forest and grasslands, and creates forty-nine new protected areas of 123,000 hectares in total (each of which has its own roughly thirty-page report).

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[15] Hobson and Associates for the Environmental Advisory Committee, "Environmental Issues and Options for the South Okanagan Regional Growth Strategy," June 2006. Available online at http://www.rdosmaps.bc.ca/min_bylaws/planning/rgs/ReportsAndStudies/RGSVol1EnvIssuesOptionFinal06.pdf.

[16] 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, 2-6 March 2004, Victoria, British Columbia, 3. Available online at http://www.arlis.org/docs/vol1/69415913/bezener_edited_final_feb_8.pdf.

Such a gargantuan document reflects the effort it took to coordinate these groups and to facilitate the resolution of various viewpoints.

The stakeholders involved also created the protected area that now makes up roughly one-third – exactly ninety-three square kilometres – of the proposed SOLS.[17] 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. 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 Txasqin 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," as a contributing member of the planning process recounted, visitors and residents "could still continue to hunt and fish and graze cattle," an important point for stakeholders and a major reason that there is opposition to the national park reserve, which would discontinue hunting and fishing.[18]

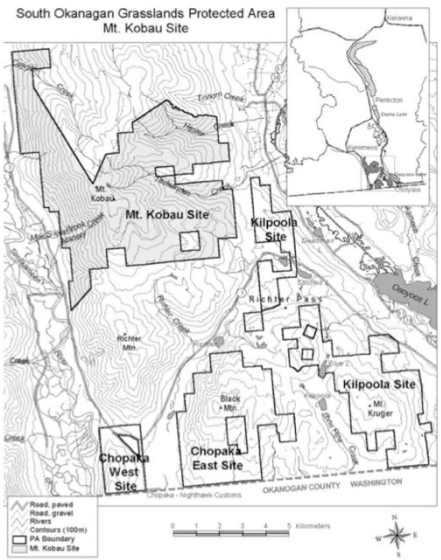

Figure 3. Protected areas in the proposed SOLS. *Source*: Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, Environmental Stewardship Division, "Okanagan Region Management Direction Statement for Mount Kobau Site, South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area," OS-LRMP, March 2003. Available online at http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/planning/mgmtplns/s_okanpa/mtkobau.pdf.

[17] Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 9.
[18] Interview F, May 2013.

Opinions about the levels of protection afforded to 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 Txasqin, and they want to have land to graze their cattle. For most 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.[19] Nonetheless, the Okanagan-Shuswap 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 proposal in 2002 by a small number of well connected residents of the Okanagan-Similkameen.

There have been three stages to the debate over a park in the Okanagan-Similkameen: (1) a period of curiosity and uncertainty between 2002, when the park was first proposed, and 2006, when altered boundaries were proposed; (2) a period of disillusionment and near failure between 2006 and the release of the feasibility study in early 2012; and (3) a period of resurgent community interest and bureaucratic stalling continuing to 2015. 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 especially significant. Although community groups and organizations drove initial conservation efforts in the Okanagan-Similkameen, the immediate impetus for creation of a park reserve came from a well known local environmentalist couple, John and Mary Theberge. 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 reserve for the Okanagan-Similkameen to then prime minister Jean Chrétien. According to an interview with a local environmentalist:

> [Chrétien's people] were very impressed with the idea, they were impressed that First Nations seemed to be in favour of it … and things happened very quickly. And by … the fall of 2003 there was a memorandum of understanding signed in Vancouver between Gordon Campbell and Jean Chrétien.[20]

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[19] All information collected from interviews, October 2012 and May 2013.

[20] Interview E, October 2013. This particular account is repeated in several other interviews and can be found in this article: Allan Casey, "The Lost Eden of Okanagan," *Canadian Geographic*, (July/August 2008): 40-56.

That memorandum led to a park feasibility study, which a joint Canada-British Columbia steering committee began in 2004 and finished in November 2010 (though the study was not released to the public until May 2012, after two Freedom of Information Act requests were filed). Local environmentalists and First Nations were primary among early supporters of the park reserve initiative. Many of these environmentalists had been involved in earlier campaigns to raise awareness about endangered species in the Okanagan-Similkameen. The ONA also supported the project from its inception.[21] First Nations interest in the project can be attributed to a desire for increased preservation of land and to the business-minded efforts of Osoyoos Indian Band chief Clarence Louie, who sought to improve the economic life of the band through the creation of Canada's first Indigenous winery, a resort, and a large cultural centre that doubles as the entrance to a substantial protected piece of arid valley-bottom grasslands.[22] These supporters saw the park reserve as a welcome route to conserving important parts of the vulnerable Okanagan-Similkameen environment.

However, the timing of the proposal, not a year after the finalization of the hard-won LRMP, 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.[23]

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.[24]

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.

[21] Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 3.
[22] See the OIB's website at http://oibdc.ca/.
[23] Interview G, May 2013.
[24] Interview H, May 2013.

> 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!"[25]

Early negative reactions to the SOLS proposal stemmed from three major points: (1) the timing, immediately after the release of the LRMP, seemed disrespectful to the accomplishment of that plan; (2) the usurpation of community discussion (because the federal government both withdrew from and did not mention a national park during the land resource management planning process); and (3) the fact that it was the brainchild of a small, elite group. Parks Canada did not pitch the national park during the LRMP process (an otherwise ideal venue for discussion) due to mechanistic, ill-timed reasons. It had spent much of the 1990s focused on a proposal for a national park at Churn Creek and had done there exactly what residents of the Okanagan-Similkameen wished it had done on their home ground: it 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 LRMP process was already ongoing.[26]

The initial proposal outlined the current boundaries of the proposed SOLS, encompassing 284 square kilometres of hilly grasslands from the mountains just north of Keremeos all the way down to the US–Canada border and a 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 park reserve ten square kilometres of aquatic habitats, the valley floor's endangered "pocket desert" antelope brush, a shrub-steppe ecosystem, and an impressive view of McIntyre Bluff; 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.[27] With these components, the park reserve would encompass habitat for fifty-six federally listed species at

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[25] Interview F, May 2013.

[26] Parks Canada worked with the LRMP process in the Cariboo–Chilcotin from 1991 to 1995 in an effort to establish a national park at Churn Creek, and it had a project manager facilitating the process. A feasibility study was only partially completed because stakeholders rejected the plan in 1995. In the mid-1990s, then, is when Parks Canada tried to turn to the Okanagan-Shuswap LRMP to launch interest in a national park in the Okanagan-Similkameen, but it was turned away because the process had already begun.

[27] Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 9.

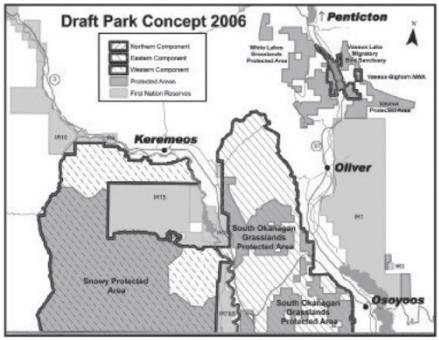

Figure 4. Park concept area, 2006. *Source*: Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen, Feasibility Assessment*, Parks Canada (Jan. 2011), 23.

risk.[28] The Okanagan-Similkameen is "one of Canada's richest areas of natural biodiversity," as would be the park reserve.[29]

Without a published feasibility study, it was difficult for stakeholders to understand the goals of a national park reserve in the Okanagan-Similkameen, why that piece of land was 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. The 2006 park concept doubled the size of the proposed park reserve by adding Snowy Mountain Protected Area, a set of peaks that forms the western edge of the Similkameen Valley protected by the 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 park reserve. Due to the grandiosity of Snowy Mountain, it would have included within the parks reserve a type of landscape more familiar to national park visitors.

That Parks Canada felt compelled to add a sublime view, a tall mountain, and rare large fauna to the park reserve without consulting the community indicates the difficulty of shedding traditional concepts of nature. Grand national parks are also the most popular and most lucrative because their nature is recognizable as such – old rangelands less so. This new park concept triggered the heated controversy over the park reserve 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.

[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

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 affirms:

> 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 hugely problematic.[30]

A former Parks Canada representative corroborates this account: "It was added a. for representation, and b. for size … It's all part of Region Three, so it filled out the representation package."[31] The 2006 boundary expansions were opposed for two major reasons: (1) Snowy Mountain is a richer hunting ground than Txasqin and (2) it is a site sacred to the Lower Similkameen Indian Band. The expansion turned First Nations in the area against the park reserve and galvanized opposition, making 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. The Lower Similkameen Indian Band could not support the addition of sacred sites to the national park without consultation, and so it rejected the new boundaries as "disrespectful."[32] In an official statement in May 2008, the ONA withdrew because of this lack of engagement from Parks Canada.[33] Area hunters and recreationists could not support the loss of access to Snowy Mountain game. The recreationists 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 neighbours.

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[30] Interview E, October 2012.
[31] Interview A, May 2012.
[32] Interview B, May 2013.
[33] "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.

> 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.[34]

Stakeholder opposition to the park 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 admission fee; that all commercial activities, including ranching, would be forbidden; that the park would be a "net loss project" to the area's economy; that the park would lead to "increased risk for catastrophic wildfire," despite Parks Canada's expertise in the area of fire management.[35] Misinformation had a negative impact on the proposed park reserve – though it is important to understand the perspective from which these objections emerged and why local stakeholders so feared the loss of this land to a national park reserve.

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 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: "There seemed to be a lot going on behind the scenes, that was done in secret, and was never really explained to people."[36] Stakeholders' swift rejection of the 2006 park concept sent the steering committee responsible for the feasibility study back to the drawing board to re-evaluate its 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 twenty thousand signatures that was presented to the province and accepted by BC minister of the environment Barry Penner.[37] This immediate action, however, did little to shake the opposition of groups who felt ignored by Parks Canada following the expansion.

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[34] Interview G, May 2013.

[35] Grasslands Park Review Coalition, "Do We Need a National Park? What Will We Lose?," 2006. Pamphlet available online at http://lists.envirolink.org/pipermail/wcwcaction/2006-May/000293.html.

[36] Interview E, October 2012.

[37] See the South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Network, "History of the National Park Proposal," available online at https://sosnationalpark.wordpress.com/about-2/thesupport/timeline-of-support/.

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 former project manager's having been replaced by a new manager, a man experienced in grasslands conservation efforts, in 2011.[38] In 2010, a major public opinion poll conducted by a research firm based in Vancouver interviewed, at random, 405 residents of the Okanagan-Similkameen in late May and found that 95 percent of the respondents agreed that "it 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. Sixty-three percent of those presented with the question "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 favour.[39] One-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, BC minister of the environment, Liberal Terry Lake, released a statement in which the province suddenly and tersely 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."[40] 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 20 January 2012, Parks Canada rescinded.[41] On its website, it cited its "respect [for] the position of the Government of British Columbia" and its recognition "that it [could not] proceed without the support of the Government of British Columbia," as well as its intention to re-engage publicly with stakeholders only if the province did so first.[42]

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[38] "SOS for National Park," *Osoyoos Times*, 25 November 2011.

[39] McAllister Opinion Research Firm for Western Canada Wilderness Committee, *Local Support for a National Park in the Southern Okanagan-Similkameen, Public Opinion Study*, 2 June, 2010. Available online at https://sosnationalpark.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/poll-briefing-note-final-2015-study.pdf.

[40] Judie Steeves, "Province Drops Support for National Park," *Penticton Western News*, 27 December 2011.

[41] Ibid.; Mark Brett, "Parks Canada Steps Back from Public Process," *Penticton Western News*, 31 January 2012.

[42] "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

The province ignored two key requests to reopen debate in the months that followed its announcement: one from the ONA and one from the board of the Regional District of the Okanagan-Similkameen. In February 2012, the ONA'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.[43]

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 a park plan that accommodated and respected First Nations concepts for the park – but its appeal was rebuffed by Minister Lake, who reaffirmed the province's refusal to pursue a national park reserve in the Okanagan-Similkameen.[44] In April 2012, 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.[45] But the province disregarded the ONA and the regional district board and, as of April 2015, is still aloof from the park reserve project.

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 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."[46] A former rural director and farmer speculated that the province was

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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 province's perspective, Parks Canada will not publicly engage stakeholders on the proposal at this time." The statement can be seen, in full, at http://www.pc.gc.ca/progs/np-pn/cnpn-cnnp/so-os/index.aspx.

43 Mark Brett, "Park Plea Falls on Deaf Ears," *Penticton Western News*, 7 February 2012.

44 Ibid.

45 Joe Fries, "National Park Plan Gets a Boost," *Penticton Western News*, 19 April 2012.

46 Interview H, May 2013.

acting for the benefit of the stakeholders because it had not seen Parks Canada make "an effort to change what [its] agenda was."[47] Pointing to the provincial election to be held in May 2013 and the vocal nature of the opposition to the park, a former mayor of a local town ascribed the province's withdrawal to "Politics. Politics."[48]

However, the province's abrupt refusal to participate due to a supposed lack of widespread public support contradicts both the aforementioned 2010 public opinion poll, which showed that 63 percent of Okanagan-Similkameen residents supported a park reserve, 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 it disengaged with the park creation process.[49] One request was submitted by *Penticton Western News* and one by the board of the Regional District of the Okanagan-Similkameen. The province sat on the feasibility study for months, deliberately withholding it from the public, and it withdrew from the process despite that study's support for the park reserve.

Once the Freedom of Information requests pried the feasibility 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 LRMP, and more closely hewn to the type of conservation promoted by residents who opposed the park but who nonetheless considered themselves conservationists. Rather than simply a conservation analysis of the endangered ecosystem or a promotional release to attract tourists, the study comprises 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 park reserve 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

[47] Interview F, May 2013.
[48] Interview D, May 2013.
[49] Joe Fries, "Study Rekindles Debate over National Park," *Penticton Western News*, 17 May 2012.

> the burrowing owl, and to collaborate with the broader ranching community to achieve stewardship of this valued landscape.[50]

The study reads as a simple mandate with an eye to stakeholders' interests in, and the ecological integrity of, a landscape that incorporates both. The 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; second, it makes clear that Parks Canada is "committed to an adaptive management framework," ensuring that ranchers will not be dispossessed of their property.[51] 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 framework;[52] First Nations voices were heard and responded to;[53] and the eight-member Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Committee, comprised of local elected officials representing all nearby towns, was given briefings throughout the study.[54]

The feasibility study does make concrete promises to a variety of stakeholders. To the twelve ranchers living within the park boundaries, it promises a flexible, cooperative willing-buyer/willing-seller arrangement, such that no ranchers 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.[55] 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."[56] 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.[57] To those concerned about endangered species and habitat restoration, the study asserts that

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[50] Canada-British Columbia Steering Committee, *Proposed National Park Reserve*, 3.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 11.
[53] Ibid., 12.
[54] Ibid., 14.
[55] Ibid., 11.
[56] Ibid., 12.
[57] Ibid., 18.

the park reserve adequately includes "key biogeoclimatic zones, as well as priority habitats and special features."[58] To the two helicopter companies that use the hills for training grounds, Parks Canada agreed to grant permits, "subject to environmental impact assessment."[59] The study does not shy away from listing the concerns over potential economic losses to the area – indeed, multiple tables list and attest to them – but it mitigates them by indicating the benefits and "opportunities" of the park reserve.[60] Finally, the study builds a series of strategies to start the actual park creation process, which would require five major steps that support and reflect both the earlier guarantees to local stakeholders and Parks Canada's mandate.[61] Parks Canada's model for the SOLS envisages a park reserve created by and for the benefit of the community as much as for potential visitors.

Response to the study has been varied. The ONA has changed its mind about the park reserve – from initial support, to rejection in 2006, to reacceptance in 2008 – because of shifts in government plans for the park. Today, the ONA again supports the park reserve, and its support is detailed in a feasibility study developed by the Syilx Working Group, which formed in November 2010, on behalf of the ONA's Chiefs Executive Council. The working group included members from the Penticton, Upper Similkameen, Lower Similkameen, and Osoyoos Indian bands, in consultation with Syilx elders.[62] The study, completed in November 2012, has six major recommendations for managing Txasqin that would enable reopening the park's creation process, working with government agencies for its realization, and publicizing the ONA's support for a park reserve.[63]

The study was conducted to ensure that the park reserve would protect and preserve the ONA's title and rights, to determine strategies for including First Nations ecological and cultural knowledge in the park reserve's planning and management, and to develop a plan to put the SOLS in action. The Syilx Working Group's plan, like Parks Canada's feasibility study, promotes community conservation efforts that preserve both the ecological landscape and living cultural traditions. The

[58] Ibid., 13.
[59] Ibid., 16.
[60] Ibid., 20.
[61] Ibid., 21.
[62] Syilx Working Group, *Building a Sylix Vision for Protection: Final Report, Assessing Feasibility of a Syilx/Parks Canada Protected Area: Findings and Guiding Concepts*, 2012. 26. Available online at http://www.soscp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Assessing-Feasibility-Syilx-Final-Report.pdf.
[63] Ibid., 14-15.

provincial government has yet to respond to the ONA's study substantively, despite the positive public reaction to its release and the hope that it would revive discussions between stakeholder groups and the different levels of government.[64] Interviewed stakeholders, even those who oppose the park reserve, responded to the ONA study in an overwhelmingly positive manner: they argue that the fact that the study "garnered a lot of participation and thinking from the ONA" should stand as an example to Parks Canada for future community consultations.[65]

Meanwhile, members of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) have developed strikingly new perspectives on environmentalism and on the justifications for a national park reserve. 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."[66] To push that economic-minded front, CPAWS held a series of twelve presentations in nine communities in the Okanagan-Similkameen intended to win over the support of area business people and local politicians.

To environmental activists eager to see the park reserve become a reality, recasting the SOLS as an economic boon to communities helps stakeholders understand that parks are not simply "green blobs on a map" representing "economic sinkholes."[67] 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."[68] CPAWS cites revenue figures based on studies of the economic benefits of national parks in British Columbia to the tune of a GDP of $37.1 million/year, labour revenue of $25.62 million/year, and tax revenue of $3.4 million/year; it cites the proposed park reserve as providing twenty to twenty-five new, permanent full-time jobs, and indicates that as many as 571 permanent full-time jobs are associated with the service

[64] 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," *Globe and Mail*, 26 February 2013; Joe Fries, "Park Plan Resurfaces," *Penticton Western News*, 26 February 2013.

[65] Interview H, May 2013.

[66] Interview I, October 2012.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

industry in the area.[69] CPAWS even made a pitch for towns on the edge of the proposed park reserve: Princeton, for example, could become a "gateway community to the park," where tourists along their way to the park reserve "could gather information about the national park, could walk on … trails, could stop and have coffee."[70]

The interviewee admitted that convincing the environmental community to get on board with this economic revision of ecological preservation goals is difficult: "We've been reluctant – the environmental community has been reluctant to say that this is a business opportunity. Or a green industry."[71] 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 mindset is closely tied to the model of some of the earliest national parks in Canada, which promoted and relied upon tourism and insisted, as John Sandlos puts it, that visitors to the parks would be "consumers of experience."[72] 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 preservation. The recognition that parks have to be sold rather than simply admired lends a twist to any idealistic vision of environmentalism for its intrinsic value. Both views, taken at their most literal, are faulty: (1) that nature must be marketed and consumed if it is to be protected at all and (2) that nature is inherently recognizable and sublime.

Between these two views is the modified perspective held by many stakeholders: (1) that culture, work, and tradition must be recognized as tied to the land and (2) that lifestyles and local economies must be balanced with ecological conservation. Interviews with stakeholders revealed some of the recreationists' key points of opposition to the park reserve in any incarnation (but especially the 2006 concept): the proposed park is too small; the hills up there require ranching and hunting as a form of land management both to keep the grasslands healthy and to reduce mule deer populations; and a national park would prevent

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[69] Amounts generated by British Columbia's existing seven national parks: Glacier, Gulf Islands, Gwaii Haanas, Kootenay, Mount Revelstoke, Yoho, Pacific Rim. South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Steering Committee, *Economic Benefits Study, South Okanagan Similkameen National Park Reserve, British Columbia*, 2005. Available online at https://sosnationalpark.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/sos_economicreport_lr.pdf.

[70] Interview I, October 2012.

[71] Ibid.

[72] John Sandlos, "Nature's Playgrounds: The Parks Branch and Tourism Promotion in the National Parks, 1911-1925," in *A Century of Parks Canada*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 53.

residents from recreation on the land as they are accustomed. Embedded in these protests is an expression of local expertise and even fundamental identity: many of these stakeholders have grown up hunting, ranching, and riding ATVs on that land. Because of these forms of use, they express a deeply felt connection to and understanding of the environment in the Okanagan-Similkameen 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."[73]

Environmentalists' (or naturalists') traditional ways of engaging with place – bird-watching, hiking, botanizing, and so forth – are seen as distinct from those of recreationists. Many of the stakeholders who support the park come from white-collar oriented jobs, even if they have relatives a generation or two back who were orchardists or ranchers. After all, the Okanagan-Similkameen's European settlement is recent, and residents have had only a few generations to specialize in different occupations. After heralding the recreationists' connection to the land, an interviewee discussed the naturalist experience of the Okanagan-Similkameen: "There's people bird-watching and hiking. You respect them. They've got every right to be out there as you do."[74] This dichotomy of recreation versus environmentalism emerges from differences in the various physical uses of land; however, interviews revealed that the emergence of this duality suggests more a distinction of form than of ideology.

Though the majority of the debate over the park reserve has taken place as described above, some of it has been notably contentious. Two key examples stand out: (1) local meetings about the park and (2) the YES/NO parks signs. During a string of twelve meetings in nine days that CPAWS organized in the Okanagan-Similkameen in 2012, a type of protest against the park forged a memorable set of images. As one CPAWS representative recalled:

> Then all of these people in their flak jackets and army fatigues 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.[75]

[73] Interview G, May 2013.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Interview I, October 2012.

Events like this have promoted an impression of the opposition to the park as stemming from a small but vocal group, difficult to speak over – or with. A main opponent of the park laments this, shaking his head and saying that such expressions of opposition belie that the "coalition [behind it] has tried to be credible."[76] Opposition to the park reserve was often accurately characterized as coming from "a small group of directly affected stakeholders," but the general impression that members of this group are "fairly loud" probably gives too much emphasis to the performative actions of a minority.[77] Most of the opposition, strident or not, is rooted among recreationalists, who are closely tied to a labour-oriented understanding of land.

The NO NATIONAL PARK signs appeared along roadsides after the 2006 park concept was proposed and was subsequently angrily rejected by stakeholders who felt slighted by Parks Canada. The NO signs do create a strong impression of local public opinion regarding the park reserve. 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 otherwise.[78] And, indeed, one or two prominent NO NATIONAL PARK signs are on the land of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band, which now supports the park, so there is a possibility that some of the signs may be outdated. Putting up a sign for or against a park reserve may not appear to be a brave or notable political act; however, in small communities where everyone knows everyone else, the act of using one's property to declare support or opposition to the park is a bold gesture. 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 … And it was up for ten days, and it was rudely vandalized … 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

[76] Interview G, May 2013.
[77] Interview H, May 2013.
[78] Interview I, October 2012.

> the federal government that … there are people here who want the national park.[79]

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, which I photographed in October, was damaged when I returned in May. I 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. I asked him to tell me the logic behind his "maybe."

> 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.[80]

This response ties in closely with one question that I asked every interviewee: What would be your ideal vision for Txasqin's future, if you could wave a wand and have your vision become reality? 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 mentioned by the MAYBE NATIONAL PARK stakeholder:

> 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 … 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.[81]

> 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 … We would be balancing the need to protect agricultural land with ecosystem management.[82]

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[79] Interview C, October 2012.
[80] Interview D, May 2013.
[81] Interview I, May 2013.
[82] Interview H, May 2013.

> 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![83]

> A well-run, efficient, small national park. Going back to the original boundaries that were announced in 2003.[84]

> To go from a bottom-up standpoint … 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 … Generally I've found most people, if they're given all the correct information, usually come up with the same decision.[85]

> 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 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.[86]

With the exception of some who explicitly mention a "national park," the responses are functionally similar: to strive for a sense of community, for balanced conservation, for open, respectful discussion. Many residents of the Okanagan-Similkameen seem to have similar long-term goals for regional conservation, and many profess to want the communication 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. Given that most stakeholder goals are essentially the same, and that some stakeholders have shown themselves able to work through conflict, one wonders what it will take to lay this controversy to rest, or what lengths must be traversed before

[83] Interview E, October 2012.
[84] Interview D, May 2013.
[85] Interview F, May 2013.
[86] Interview J, May 2013.

Figures 5, 6, and 7. Signs declaring landowners' stances on the proposed national park reserve line the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. Photos by the author.

these stakeholders reach the top of their mountain, their Kobau, their Txasqin.

Right now, the fate of the proposed park reserve is unclear. The BC provincial election in May 2013 kept the Liberal government in office. This result was a surprise to many. The last interviews I conducted took place 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 park reserve proposal. However, the results, as they stand, leave the proposal in limbo.

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 colour and light, and the highway was empty. I snapped a picture, just of the sign, with a high blue sky, wisps of cloud behind it. The sign was held aloft with sturdy wooden stakes; MAYBE was painted in blue, NATIONAL PARK in green. I looked southeast into the valley towards Txasqin, 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 Txasqin, perhaps facing down a roaring ATV or an unsuspecting birder. It was a beautiful evening – though not a quiet one, 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 park reserve 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, they do 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, most do understand the limitations on development and growth in the Okanagan-Similkameen. Whether residents do or do not want a park, they do want community-driven conservation efforts.

A delicate, pressured landscape like the arid Okanagan-Similkameen represents an opportunity for an approaching era of conservation. It is a working landscape in a populated region that is nonetheless marked as ecologically important. Rather than rocky and iced over, or a place to visit but not stay, the peak of Txasqin 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 Okanagan-Similkameen 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 Okanagan-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. Abstract beauty and material use can coexist. Labour 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. 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 Okanagan-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 need to be erased in order to hold a discussion about conservation. Land connects, just enough.