



# South Okanagan-Similkameen



## NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

### THE PERFECT PLACE FOR A PARK RESERVE



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@ClimateChar

Imagine riding on the back of a horse over five feet off the ground and yet the tips of bluebunch wheatgrass reach up high enough to brush your knees. The seeds stick to your legs — catching a ride to spread over the vast landscape.

“Grasses were belly high to a horse back then,” said Len Marchand of the Okanagan Indian Band as he recites stories of the grasslands before European settlement. First Nation elders remember the grasslands as a place where people, elk, horses and sharp-tailed grouse roamed freely. Together they sought water, foods and daily needs. And nestled within the tall grasses hid many of the species now facing extinction.<sup>1</sup>

South Okanagan-Similkameen has undergone extensive changes

since those days, including increased urban development, vineyard expansion and cattle grazing. Even so, scattered throughout houses, vineyards and highways are pockets of grasslands that could return, with a little love and bold conservation steps, to a healthier state. Although they face numerous threats, including habitat loss and degradation, many species of those days before still have a fighting chance.

Under the moonlit sky of the Okanagan you can find the highest diversity of bat species across

the country as they dart around for insects. Bats indulge on a diverse diet and 69 insect species have their Canadian or B.C. ranges restricted to this region. Seven insect species exist only here and nowhere else in the world. And they're not the only ones who depend on the South Okanagan. Almost half of breeding bird species in the country use the rugged terrain for nesting habitat and eight vertebrate species in Canada are found only here.<sup>2</sup>

There's nowhere else in the world

quite like the South Okanagan. In one day you can visit native bunchgrass grasslands, endangered antelope-brush ecosystems, rolling hills of ponderosa pines and mountain tops which offer views of a thousand summits.<sup>3,4</sup> These unique wild spaces are becoming more rare and in desperate need of protection.

Safeguarding this precious region permanently must be a priority. To decrease threats and ensure permanent protection for this endangered landscape, the governments of B.C., Canada and the Okanagan Nation Alliance have agreed to work together to establish the South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve. Read on to find out more about this exciting opportunity.

**...unique wild spaces are becoming more rare and in desperate need of protection**



Photo top: near White Lake grasslands (Charlotte Dawe).  
Photos above: yellow-breasted chat (Jared Hobbs), Kilpoola grasslands (Wayne Lynch).



## A REGION SCARRED BY HISTORY

Baskets made of paper birch, Saskatoon shrubs for healing and arrowleaf balsamroot for nourishment, the First Nations of the Southern Interior relied on grasslands for at least ten thousand years. A variety of native plants species are used for food, medicines, technology, and spiritual and ceremonial purposes.<sup>5</sup>

A history of colonialism and European settlement scars the region of the South Okanagan-Similkameen. The gold rush of the 1850s brought many settlers to the region, depriving Syilx/Okanagan people of their land and resources they relied on. When British Columbia joined confederation, settlers were given the right to own lands and First Nations were removed from their lands onto small reserves.<sup>6</sup> The Syilx/Okanagan people still affirm the land is theirs as no treaty has been negotiated.<sup>7</sup>

This period also marked the beginning of intense cattle grazing which forever damaged the grasslands.<sup>8</sup> According to Don Gayton, an ecosystem management specialist from the region, after European settlement, a “full-scale ecological conversion took place.”<sup>9</sup> Where bunchgrasses once dominated the grasslands, now they are replaced with low-growing, grazing-resistant shrubs, leafy forbs

and invasive plants.

A national park reserve in this region co-managed by the Syilx/Okanagan Nation is an important step towards reconciliation. The Nation will provide leadership to ensure conservation and economic goals can be reached, while participating in traditional land uses and spiritual activities.

There’s no way we can change the past injustices of this land. However, we can support the Okanagan Nation Alliance in co-managing a national park reserve.



Photos: Chief Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos Indian Band. Formal announcement to establish a national park reserve with politicians from federal, provincial and First Nations governments (Richard McGuire).

## GROWING THREATS, URGENT CONCERNS

The South Okanagan-Similkameen is a unique region as it combines jaw-dropping diversity from vast arid desert landscapes to towering mountain peaks. It draws visitors to the region each year who enjoy its many lakes, breathtaking hikes and hidden wild treasures. However, high-impact activities are severely destroying and degrading ecosystems throughout the region. Urban development has and is continuing to expand into natural areas due to a rising population. Increased industrial activities along with off-road vehicles are destroying key species at risk habitat.<sup>17</sup>

Many locals worry about the state of the Okanagan. Gwen Barlee, the Wilderness Committee’s former

national policy director grew up in the Okanagan and was instrumental in the vision for this national park reserve. She once said, “Every time I go back, I see another little piece has been lost. If we don’t seize the moment, the opportunity to save it will be lost.”<sup>18</sup>

An example of this loss are the endangered grasslands of the South

Okanagan. Across the country grasslands are disappearing. Seventy per cent of prairie grasslands have already been lost and in 2016, grasslands in Canada were disappearing faster than the Amazon Rainforest. This is deeply concerning. Grasslands support rare species, bird migrations and are important carbon sinks. From 1940 to 2014,

grassland bird populations in Canada declined by 69 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

In the South Okanagan less than half of the grasslands and shrub-steppe habitats of the bunchgrass zone remain intact and only nine per cent are in a truly natural

state.<sup>20</sup> Remaining grasslands are at risk of degradation due to various threats, including overgrazing by cattle, motorized vehicles, extensive vineyards, expanding human settlements, invasive species and not allowing important grassland wildfires.<sup>21</sup> A national park reserve is desperately needed to protect what’s left of remaining ecosystems.



Photo: Gwen Barlee (WC files).



Photo: arrowleaf balsamroot (Gwen Barlee).

## BROKEN HOME NEEDS PROTECTION

The burrowing owl, standing a staggering 25 cm tall (roughly the height of a loaf of bread), stealthily chases a beetle through scattered bunches of wheatgrass.<sup>10</sup> A coyote hides behind a sagebrush shrub, watching the owl intently. A snap of a twig or a slight movement out of the corner of its eye causes the owl to abandon the hunt. It makes a break for it and the coyote lunges in pursuit. Just before teeth meet feathers, the owl burrows into a nearby hole dug up by an American badger. It has escaped the coyote and can thank the badger burrow for saving its life. This is just one example of life in the South Okanagan-Similkameen.



Photos: burrowing owl (Jared Hobbs), American badger (Wayne Lynch).

Species are intricately connected. American badgers are endangered from hunting, collisions with motorized vehicles and habitat loss.<sup>11</sup> Loss of burrows made from American badgers has contributed to the decline of the burrowing owl — now also endangered. When we lose one species, it threatens the ability of others to survive.

While the diversity of living

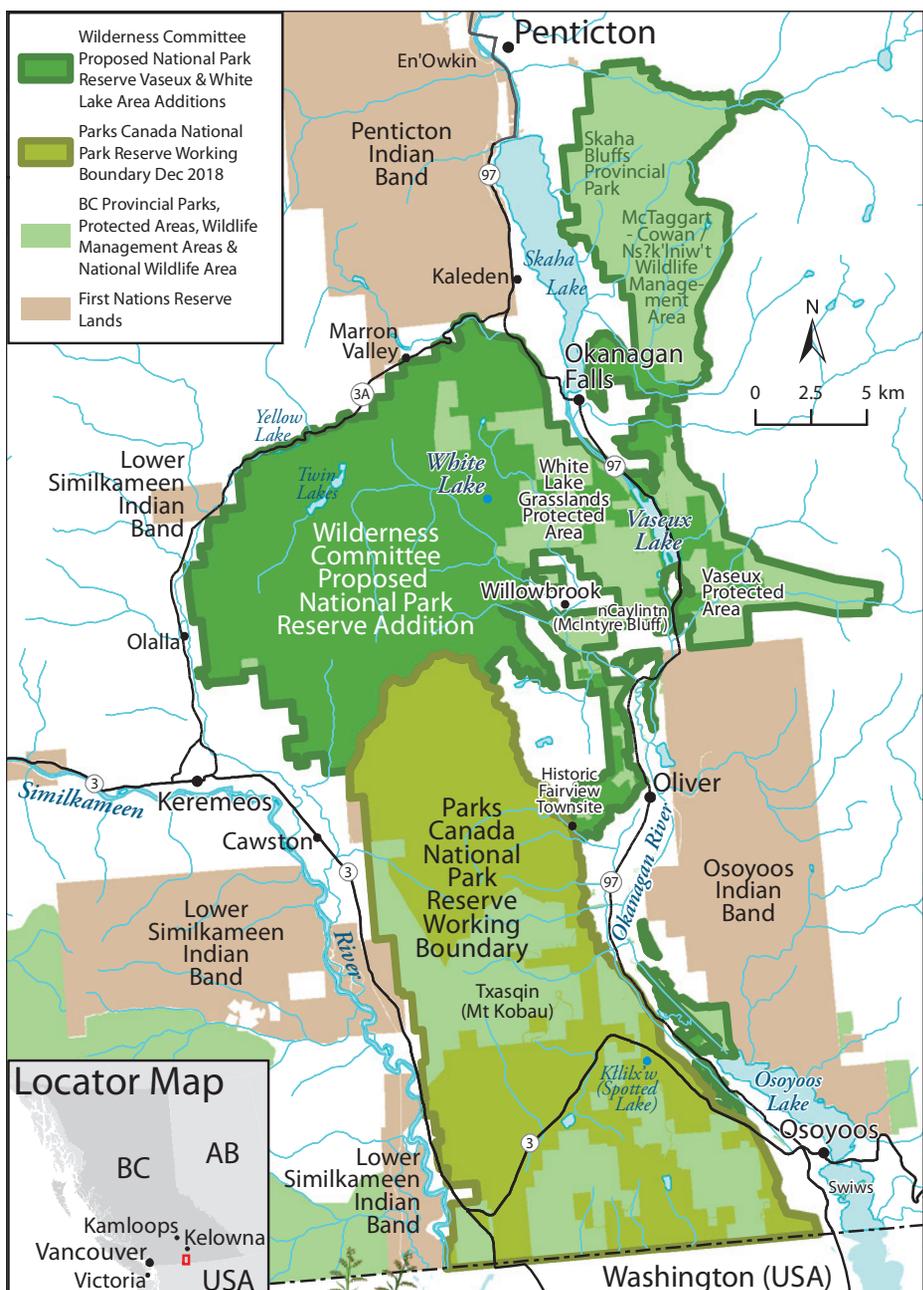
creatures in this region is awe-inspiring, many are at risk of extinction. The South Okanagan is home to 76 per cent of British Columbia’s species at risk and one of the four most endangered ecosystems in Canada, the antelope brush grasslands.<sup>12</sup> The pallid bat, Lewis’s woodpecker, western screech-owl, western rattlesnake, northern leopard frog and grand coulee owl-clover are just six of the 65 federally listed species at risk found

in the region.<sup>13</sup> Many of these species need specific habitats and their survival depends on them.

Sage thrashers need large sagebrush shrubs for nesting.<sup>14</sup>

White-headed woodpeckers rely on old and mature ponderosa pines for seeds and nests.<sup>15</sup> Tiger salamanders need specific habitats like arid grassland and open forests.<sup>16</sup> Destruction and degradation of natural wilderness in the South Okanagan are some of the main reasons for the high number of species at risk. Permanent protection of these habitats are critical to their future survival.

## PROPOSED NATIONAL PARK RESERVE BOUNDARIES



# THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

Everyday forests are chopped down, wetlands are drained and grasslands are replaced with pavement. Climate change threatens grasslands with droughts, heat and raging wildfires.<sup>22</sup> We must protect the little wilderness we have left for the benefit of wildlife and to ensure we have a future on Earth.

The reasons for a national park reserve here are numerous — protecting this area as a park is critical for conservation in the South Okanagan and in Canada.

▶ A national park reserve would be off-limits to urban expansion, increased cattle grazing, motorized vehicle use, new vineyards and would not allow new industrial developments. Hunting would be off limits within the boundaries while First Nations could practice traditional, spiritual and cultural

▶ uses on the land.<sup>23</sup> Unless a species at risk is a migratory bird, aquatic species or located on federal land like a national park, they receive no automatic protection from being harmed or having their habitat destroyed under the federal *Species at Risk Act*.<sup>24</sup> In a national park reserve species at risk would finally receive protection. There would be strong laws against harming them or their places of dwelling within the park reserve. Sadly, there are no such current protections.

▶ Grasslands are incredible carbon stores. The proposed national park reserve has the potential to store 5.9 million tonnes of carbon over 50 years. That's the equivalent of taking 4.6 million cars off the road for a year.<sup>25</sup>

▶ Protecting natural vegetation and water bodies throughout the park reserve will help the soil hold more

water which prevents floods and droughts, decreases soil and debris run-off, and naturally filters water.<sup>26</sup>

▶ A national park reserve will help diversify the economies of local communities. It's expected to provide economic benefits to the area including investments, employment opportunities, expenditures from park visitors and millions in income opportunities. This economic diversification will stabilize communities and ensure they'll be able to withstand industry booms and busts.<sup>27 28</sup>

▶ Although some of the lands in this region currently receive different levels of provincial and private protection, a national park reserve comes with additional government resources for park rangers, conservation officers,



Photo: barn swallow (Robert McCaw).

interpretive centres, educational and cultural activities, and ongoing infrastructure upgrades and repairs.<sup>29</sup>

▶ Right now, private development and urban sprawl are quickly erasing natural spaces. Without a national park reserve there's no guarantee the wilderness enjoyed by local people will remain public land. Natural wilderness must be publically protected so local communities and visitors are able to continue enjoying the benefits of natural spaces in the South Okanagan.

▶ The Syilx/Okanagan Nation has assessed and concluded there are potential benefits to their culture in forms of increased access to resources, research funding and increasing employment opportunities.<sup>30</sup>



Photo: bitterroot herb (Gwen Barlee).



Photo: agriculture in the Okanagan (Gwen Barlee).

## CRITICAL AREAS OVERLOOKED

There are a couple of South Okanagan treasures that must be included in the national park reserve. Vaseux Lake, White Lake and the lands surrounding these lakes are rich in diversity and are of high ecological importance. They must be protected.

North of the town Oliver is the picturesque Vaseux Lake. Thickets and wetlands border the lake and draw in many migratory birds. If you're an avid birder, spend some time here and you'll cross a fair number of bird species off your list.<sup>31</sup> Looking out beyond the lake you'll see the vegetation transform from grasslands to hillsides, with exposed rock and ponderosa pine. These hills are perfect for mule deer, cougars and California bighorn sheep. Unfortunately, Vaseux Lake and the surrounding areas aren't included in the current proposed park reserve boundaries although many species at risk have critical habitat here.<sup>32</sup>

To the west of Vaseux Lake

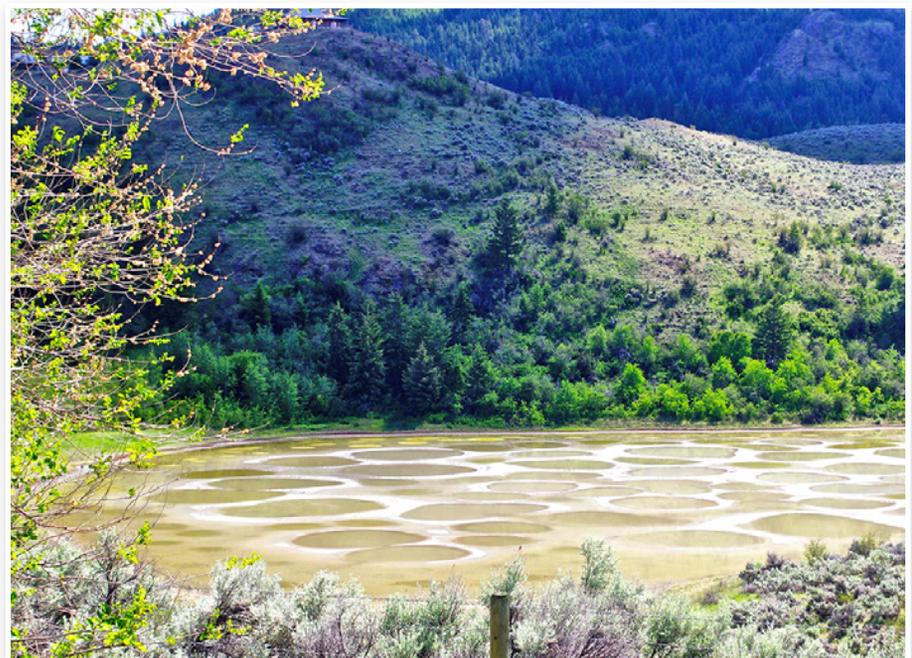


Photo: Vaseux Lake and Okanagan River (Joe Foy).

is White Lake. The lake and its surrounding lands are a top conservation priority.<sup>33</sup> It includes important mid-elevation grasslands and old-growth ponderosa pines. This region is overflowing with species at risk. It's home to the sage thrasher, tiger salamander and painted turtle and these are just some of the at-risk species living in the area. If the White Lake area is included in the national park reserve, the *Species at Risk Act* would automatically protect all these at-risk species and their homes.

Some of the area surrounding White Lake is provincially designated as the White Lake Grasslands Protected Area. However, there've been challenges in properly managing and protecting it. Off-road vehicle use has been difficult to manage.<sup>34</sup> ATVs damage the sensitive ecosystem and put further pressure on species at risk.<sup>35</sup> Some of these species even end up as roadkill. The national park reserve would ensure at-risk areas are protected and would have staff to monitor and enforce regulations.<sup>36</sup>

We recommend increasing the park boundaries in negotiation with the Syilx/Okanagan Nation, to include Vaseux Lake, White Lake and surrounding areas in the national park reserve.



Photos: tiger salamander, big horn sheep (Jared Hobbs), Spotted Lake (Gwen Barlee).



# A VISION WE CAN'T LET GO

After more than fifteen years of negotiations and planning, it's finally time to solidify the federal and provincial governments' commitment to creating a national park reserve.

A federal election in the fall of 2019 could change the political climate for this park and the B.C. provincial government could also change during the years needed to establish the park reserve. That's why it's crucial for the governments to sign a memorandum of understanding by this summer. A memorandum of understanding would ensure, despite changes to governments, the national park reserve moves ahead.

The idea of the South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve began in 2003. Since then there've been numerous economic studies, intention papers, polls to determine support and consultations.<sup>37</sup> The latest consultation on the proposed boundaries and impacts and benefits of the park was completed in February.

Parks Canada expects to have a memorandum of understanding ready by August.<sup>38</sup> We must ensure this happens. It's time to let both

the provincial and federal governments know creating a national park reserve is a top priority.

At a time when the current extinction rate around the world is 1,000 to 10,000 times the natural rate, alarms are ringing loud for humanity. Landscapes supporting wildlife are falling apart at the seams.<sup>39</sup> The same ecosystems supporting wildlife are the ones supporting us. We must hold onto all the wilderness spaces we have left as a way to safeguard against rapid climate change. Humanity's survival hinges on protecting at least 50 per cent of the planet as wild nature to halt species loss and slow climate change.<sup>40</sup>

Next generations deserve to grow up in a world with wilderness to explore, wildlife to wonder about and a healthy stable planet. That's why we must protect more wildlands, starting with the creation of the National Park Reserve.



Photos: ponderosa pine (Adrian Dorst) western rattlesnake (Jacob Dulisse) hiking group near Okanagan Falls (Gwen Barlee).

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# TAKE ACTION

## Create the South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve!

Please contact federal minister of environment Catherine McKenna, B.C. minister of environment George Heyman and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Ask them to:

- In collaboration with the Okanagan Nation Alliance sign a memorandum of understanding by August 2019 to ensure the South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve will proceed
- Create a park as big as possible — include areas like Vaseux and White lake
- Continue to work in partnership with the Okanagan Nation Alliance towards a park reserve



Photo: western screech owl chicks (Wayne Lynch).

**Federal Environment Minister** – email: [ec.ministre-minister.ec@canada.ca](mailto:ec.ministre-minister.ec@canada.ca) or phone: 819-938-3813  
**BC Environment minister** – email: [ENV.Minister@gov.bc.ca](mailto:ENV.Minister@gov.bc.ca) or phone: 250-387-1187  
**Prime Minister Justin Trudeau** – email: [justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca](mailto:justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca) or phone: 613-992-4211

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