

Banff National Park

Banff National Park is to Canadians what Yellowstone National Park is to Americans: their country's first and foremost national park. Banff is Canada's flagship national park—the most visible symbol of the dominion's natural splendor. Embracing more than 1.6 million acres on the eastern flank of the Continental Divide, the park belongs to a constellation of preserves that form the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site.

The idea of having national parks administered by the government originated in the United States during the late 1800s. People were concerned that urban and agricultural development was rapidly destroying the country's wild lands and appealed to the federal government to protect some of these lands. In 1872, Congress set aside part of the Yellowstone region to preserve its spectacular wilderness. In 1916 the National Park Service was established to administer the country's growing heritage of protected land. Inspired by the actions of the United States, other countries began to set aside portions of their lands as national parks, and today the interest in parklands is increasing worldwide.

Banff's scenery is known and loved by people around the world. But some say Banff is loved too much, that the park has grown too popular for its own good. Hugging the Continental Divide 150 miles north of the Idaho Panhandle in Alberta, Banff is bordered by three other national parks—Jasper, Kootenay, and Yoho. Together with three local provincial parks they form the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site, a rugged sprawl of wilderness freckled with hulking glaciers and countless lakes glimmering in shades of blue so electric they defy belief.

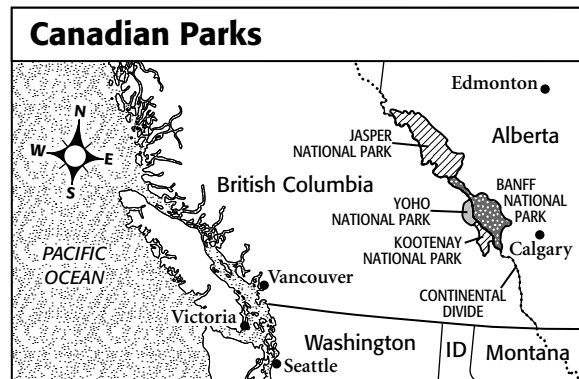
More than five million acres in aggregate, these preserves constitute one of the planet's largest protected mountain landscapes. More than four million people visit Banff annually. Canada's main transcontinental railway and transcontinental highway roll side by side down the length of Banff's main valley. Within the park lie three ski resorts and the town of Banff—home to 7,000 permanent residents. On a typical summer day the town may also see some 25,000 tourists streaming through the streets.

Some biologists feel that the human presence in Banff is wreaking havoc on the area's fragile makeup. Biologists believe there has been a major decline in most of the large predators—black bears, grizzlies, wolverines, lynx, and cougars. Such species are one of the best indicators of overall ecological health. Although there is a vast amount of undeveloped acreage remaining in the park, most of it lies at high altitude, in harsh alpine zones. Many species of wildlife cannot live in the rugged, inhospitable landscape of the high country.

Chapter 9, Critical Thinking Activity, continued

Complicating matters further, biologists now realize that in addition to paying attention to what happens inside Banff, they must also consider what happens outside it. Development beyond the park’s boundaries is having a profoundly adverse effect on Banff’s health. At the southern edge of the park, the sides of entire mountains have been carved into rubble by strip mining. And plans have been approved that will transform Canmore—a once sleepy village just outside the park’s south entrance—into a sprawling network of golf courses, hotels, and vacation homes.

According to experts, the problem is that all national parks’ boundaries are artificial. Plants and wildlife do not recognize lines drawn on a map. Now look at the map then answer the questions that follow.



1. Banff is located in Alberta, a Canadian province. What is the name of the province to the west of Alberta?

2. Why might large predator populations be a good indicator of the ecological health of an area?

3. Do you think human development should be limited near wilderness areas? Why or why not?

