

## **The Community of Communicators and the Communication of Sustainable Development Management to Visitors of a National Park**

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In spite of the trend towards business as a key element in society and tourism, governments still play an important role in the sustainable development debate. Like any social institution, governments and related organizations do not always function effectively. When they do not, for some reason, we (academics, business people, government officials and the general public) often argue that the solution is to impose a “made in business” solution. However, given the different goals of government and the business sector, that approach may not be appropriate or necessarily successful.

This paper develops a “made in government” solution to a public institution that was not functioning well. The solution had direct impact on the sustainable development of a major national park and international tourist destination – Banff National Park, Canada. It was a creative solution that also addressed a sustainable development issue; that of providing education to people in order to develop their knowledge of the sustainable development management of natural resources. Richard Sharpley (2000) identified one of the requirements for sustainable development to be “the adoption of a new social paradigm relevant to sustainable living” (Sharpley, 2000, p. 13), which necessitates learning and hence communication.

So how does the management of a governmental organization immobilized by bureaucracy, dwindling resources, and fights with and between stakeholders become an innovative leader? That is the question this paper will provide an answer to. It is based on a case study, including interviews with management and staff, of Banff National Park, Canada (the “Park”), during the 1990s and early 2000s. It will conclude by drawing out some of the conditions and factors that must be taken into account for successful innovation in public sector sustainable development initiatives involving communication and education.

The events that occurred during that period of time resulted in what has come to be known as the “community of communicators,” an innovative community involvement model for the communication of sustainable development management principles to visitors of the Park. The community of communicators has fostered a number of innovative experiences for visitors in the Park, such as the guided hike at Vermilion Lakes.

While the story has its roots far back in the beginnings of the Park, we pick up the story in the 1990s. In the early 1990s attempts to advance ecological protection management in the Park failed (Hodgins, Green, Harrison, & Roulet, 1999). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Canadian government was making “successive deep budget cuts, which seriously eroded some traditional services such as interpretation” (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996b, p. 8). At the same time, the federal government made tourism an economic priority (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996b). This all took place at a time when new legislation, reflecting changes in views on sustainable development, made visitor use subject to ecological integrity (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996b). As well, the 1988 legislative amendments placed a responsibility on the Park to involve public participation in management planning (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996b). Participation brought into open conflict those organizations concerned with conservation of the environment and business interests keen to take on the role of economic engine (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996b). These various forces brought increasing and conflicting pressure on Park management in a context of dwindling funding. As well, the legislation governing the Park did not allow for the independent thought and action necessary for public participation in the management planning process. Eventually, the situation broke and resulted in the establishment of Banff-Bow Valley Task Force by the Canadian federal government in 1994 (Banff-Bow Valley Task Force, 1996a, , 1996b). The report of the task force set out more than 500 recommendations (Ritchie, 1999); the most important ones relating to the development of constructive communication between the Park and stakeholders.

As well, legislation was enacted in 1998 that altered the relationship between Parks Canada and the Canadian federal government such that Parks Canada moved from departmental status to agency status (“Parks Canada Agency Act”, 1998). This allowed Parks Canada, and hence Banff National Park, to develop Park management different from what was previously done, through steps analogous to those suggested by Max Weber (1946) that bring about the democratization and opening of government. The Park also began to seriously implement internal participative management approaches.

One of the results of all these changes is what is known as the community of communicators. It is a collaborative effort involving Park management and most Park stakeholders. Its basic premise is that Park management involves stakeholders in the management of the Park not simply to advise on or ratify strategic management actions but to also be an integral member of the problem determining and solving teams. Along with this right that stakeholders have, the Park did something that is, at least in retrospect, radical. The Park put into motion actions that placed a concurrent responsibility on stakeholders. If stakeholders had say in how the Park was managed, they would also have the responsibility to communicate about sustainable development

management and the Park to visitors. In other words, stakeholders had the responsibility to tell visitors about the usual features of a natural heritage site and also to convey what was being done to manage the sustainability and development of the Park.

One outgrowth of this relationship was that the Park allowed other organizations, both private sector and not-for-profits, to provide interpretive services to visitors. This was a move that was unprecedented in the Canadian Parks system and has not been fully accepted by others in the system, as it has been seen as giving up the “birthright” of park stewardship. To implement the community of communicators, the Park facilitated or was part of a number of initiatives that they retained only indirect influence over, if even that. This included interpretive training by an outside organization and the provision of interpretive service by others, such as the Vermilion Lake interpretive hike. By all accounts (including the Park, locals, conservation organizations and businesses) this has been very successful.

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