

Nature Wise column Feb 2017 Thoughts on a SOS National park

Regular readers of this column will know that I've been a staunch supporter of a proposed South Okanagan Similkameen national park for many years. So you might be inclined to think that I'm pretty happy about Friday's announcement (Jan. 27) in Osoyoos by BC Environment Minister Mary Polak that the Province's "**Proposal for South Okanagan land protection to move forward**". Well keep on reading! That quote by the way is the exact wording of the press release put out by the province. The words "Parks Canada" and "National Park" were not mentioned until line 23 in the press release. Pardon my cynicism, but I don't think this announcement has nearly as much to do with a national park as it does with trying to get Linda Larson re-elected as evidenced by the lack of a timetable for talks getting underway except to say it will be after the May election! The Liberals might find however that it is so wishy-washy that it has ticked off everyone. I can imagine the small anti-park group being upset because despite Larson's railing against the park concept since her election nearly four years ago, it is now back on the table. Many of the pro-park majority are upset because the announcement is so obviously a ploy to get the park issue out of the election and because Area 2, Mt Kobau, a critical piece of the landscape is being left out of the park concept by the Province. Of course governments never, ever, put out good news on a Friday afternoon! To many, the very best part of the entire announcement is that the three First Nations communities most affected by any park proposal are participating in the yet to come discussions about what a south Okanagan Similkameen national park should look like. Parks Canada and First Nations communities across Canada have such a good record of working together that most observers feel that the participation of these communities is a major plus.

And despite a very strong message from respondents to the Province's intention paper of August 2015 seeking public input, that Area 2, (Mount Kobau), should be included in any national park, the Province indicated on Friday that Area 2 will be targeted for preservation under provincial legislation as a Conservancy (a status even lower than a Provincial Park) leaving the National Park as two separate pieces to the north and south of Area 2. This is so wrong in so many ways.

The Mt Kobau area is currently protected under provincial legislation as a "Protected Area". As I wrote in last month's column, provincial Protected Areas actually give very little protection. The inclusion of Mt. Kobau in a national park will achieve a more continuous core protected area that represents the greatest elevational range and diversity of ecosystems, visitor opportunities, and community benefits 'from the desert, through the grasslands, to the sky' and will provide habit connectivity. Although Area 1 does an excellent job of showcasing low to mid elevation ecosystems, especially grasslands, it is missing the upper elevation ecosystems found in Area 2 that make for a more complete representation of the flora and fauna of the South Okanagan-Similkameen. For this national park to be world-class, it must include Area 2. Without this essential component, our national park will be a second-class national park, thereby minimizing its visitor experience, tourism benefits, and business potential. Area 2 needs to be included within the national park to provide a full range of ecological zones and the high-quality experience tourists to national parks expect.

Mount Kobau is Canada's premier location for astronomical viewing, and provides an opportunity to have this national park designated as a Dark Sky Preserve - an international draw. Parks Canada has an

international reputation for Dark Sky Preserves and Kobau could become the centerpiece in the south, with the Dominion Radio Astrophysical Observatory, in Area 3, being the astronomical feature of the northern portion of the national park reserve. The annual Star Party at the top of Mount Kobau already draws people from across the continent.

The South Okanagan Naturalists' Club meets on the fourth Thursday of the month at 7PM. See our website ([southokanagannature.com](http://southokanagannature.com)) for meeting details.