Alberta Wilderness Association
"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

September 16, 2026

Alberta Parks
Government of Alberta
By email: parks.engagement@gov.ab.ca

RE: Reclassification of Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is writing to express our concerns with the proposed changes to Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve. We object to the reclassification of the Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve lands to Kootenay Plains Provincial Park, as this reclassification would remove important protections that preserve the unique and sensitive ecosystems within the ecological reserve. We ask that these proposed changes be reconsidered, and the ecological reserve status of the area be maintained.

Founded in 1965, AWA strives to help Albertans understand the intrinsic values that wilderness provides. We engage with communities in conservation initiatives that will ensure a legacy for future generations. With over 10,000 members and supporters in Alberta and across Canada, AWA is dedicated to conserving Alberta's wilderness and maintaining the health of our natural ecosystems.

Kootenay Plains is described by Alberta Parks as "one of the most significant micro-ecosystems within the Parks system[1]." It protects a unique area of the Rocky Mountains, known to be warmer and drier than the rest of the mountain range, and contains some of the largest intact montane lands remaining in the province. Contained within this region are grassland and forest habitats, hosting a diversity of flora and fauna — including several rare and endangered species — and providing vital winter ranges for mammals such as elk and mule deer.

Because of its unique climate within the Rockies, Kootenay Plains also holds high cultural significance. Prehistoric camps have been found in the area, and records indicate it was a

[1] Information & Facilities | Kootenay Plains Ecological Area | Alberta Parks. (n.d.). https://www.albertaparks.ca/parks/central/kootenay-plains-er/

gathering place and sacred landscape for Indigenous peoples. The area was also part of a historic trade corridor used by Indigenous nations and later fur traders.

These ecological and cultural values already draw in many low-impact recreation users. Hikers frequent the area, with guides organizing tours in the Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve[2]. Increasingly, there is interest in low-impact ecotourism, especially in natural and well-protected ecosystems[3], with 82 percent of surveyed Canadians reporting an interest in ecotourism in 2024[4]. Maintaining the protection of this area supports ecotourism and the low-impact recreation activities already common to the region.

Kootenay Plains was established as an Ecological Reserve in 1987 "to preserve its incredible diversity, including rare plant species, wildlife, and sensitive cryptogamic soil[5]." Alberta's Ecological Reserves are managed under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act,* and provide certain protections. For instance, Ecological Reserves do not allow motorized recreation, hunting, trapping, and fishing, off-trail cycling, or overnight camping and campfires. These reserves are mainly established around representative ecosystems with rare, endangered, and unique species or ecosystems, with the intent to preserve the natural environment from disturbance.

In contrast, Provincial Parks are managed under the *Provincial Parks Act*, and are established both to protect the species, ecosystems, or natural features, and "to facilitate their use and enjoyment for outdoor recreation, education and the appreciation and experiencing of Alberta's natural heritage[6]." Compared to Ecological Reserves, there is more focus on recreation in Provincial Parks, and fewer environmental protections. Provincial Parks allow a greater range of recreational activities, including motorized recreation, hunting, and camping. As a Provincial Park, Kootenay Plains would become vulnerable to the impacts of extensive recreation and degradation, along with losing other protections.

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[2] Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies. (2024, December 15). 2024 at Kootenay Plains - Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies. https://skylinehikers.ca/2024-at-kootenay-plains/

[3] Rushton, B., Lemieux, C. J., Scott, D. J., & Rutty, M. (2026). On the path to regenerative nature-based tourism in Canada? Insights from the legacy of COVID-19 on Canadians' travel behaviours. Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, 53, 101003.

[4] Blue Cross (2024). Blue Cross Travel Study. https://www.bluecross.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2024-Blue-Cross-Travel-Study-Report.pdf

[5] Alberta Parks. (n.d.) Information & Facilities | Kootenay Plains Ecological Area https://www.albertaparks.ca/parks/central/kootenay-plains-er/

[6] Government of Alberta. (2023, April 1). Provincial Parks Act. https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=p35.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779843381&display=html

The area is already under considerable stress due to recreational activities. Previously, there have been reports of illegal off-trail mountain biking in the region, an activity that has caused extensive damage in the fragile soils of Kootenay Plains[7]. High-impact recreational uses will further degrade the area, impacting the rare plants found in the region[8]. Some activities, such as camping, are already permitted in the nearby Kootenay Plains Provincial Recreation Area, allowing these activities to be conducted while containing them within a portion of the land, and there is no need to expand this further and allow similar recreational activities in the Ecological Reserve itself. Enforcement and restoration are needed to reverse the damage that has already been caused; reducing the protections on Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve will only lead to greater degradation and ecosystem loss.

Kootenay Plains protects some of the most unique and important montane habitat in the Rocky Mountains. This is reflected in the Ecological Reserve classification, a designation intended to protect the fragile ecosystem and limit disturbance. The current consultation provides an opportunity to enforce current regulations and restore the damaged ecosystems of the area, as well as expand appropriate protections for the region. The changes should not reduce protection in a sensitive region that is already struggling under high-impact disturbances.

We would be interested in meeting to discuss Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve. Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION



Ruiping Luo, Conservation Specialist

[7] Alberta Wilderness Association. (2003). Bighorn Wildland.
[8] Floristic and rare plant survey of the Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve (1996-1997) - Open Government. (n.d.). https://open.alberta.ca/publications/floristic-rare-plant-survey-kootenay-plains-ecological-reserve