



Emerald Lake, one of the more visited spots in Yoho National Park, could see visitor use changes under the new management plan.

RMO FILE PHOTO

Human use management way of future for parks

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LAKE LOUISE – Visitors to tourism hotspots in the mountain national parks can expect to see changes in human use management in the coming years.

Under the new management plans for Banff, Yoho and Kootenay national parks, trail use reservations, quotas, shuttle systems or random draws like the one at Lake O'Hara are all on the table for consideration as ways to deal with challenges that come with exploding visitor demand for finite spaces.

François Masse, the superintendent of Lake Louise, Yoho and Kootenay field unit, said environmental protection, public safety and visitor experience are all triggers for visitor use management.

"It's pretty much back to pre-COVID-19 levels, and before then, there has been a very steady increase in visitation so we have to be very mindful of that," he said.

"When we start to see pressures, then we need to act. It's a case-by-case basis and it's not going to get triggered at the same time at all places and the response is not going to be the same at all places."

Potential closures of roads such as Lake Louise Drive, Moraine Lake Road and Takakkaw Falls to private vehicles in lieu of mandatory public transit are a possibility in future as Parks Canada goes through a visitor use management planning process.

"That's something we would absolutely consider, yes, but is it something that we're ready to move on at this stage? Not yet," said Masse.

Masse pointed to protected places in the United States such as Zion National Park in Utah, where access to the Zion Canyon scenic drive is by shuttle bus only from March through late November, with private vehicles only allowed when the shuttle system is not in operation.

"There's a lot of examples out there and each model is slightly different," he said.

"What makes a model work is that it has to be fit for purpose in the local context."

Masse said there is a community of people that use these sites and they don't all have the same needs – and that will be taken into consideration as part of Parks Canada's upcoming visitor use management planning process.

"There's the mountaineers, there's the folks who come in for the sunrise picture, there's the hikers and there's those who come to snap a shot at the side of the lake and they're out in 10 minutes," he said.

"All of these different user groups need to be considered before we introduce change."

The new management plans for Yoho and Kootenay national parks, which were approved and tabled in parliament this summer, indicate human use management strategies would be developed and implemented where needed.

Visitation to Yoho National Park increased by an average of 3.1 per cent per year between 2011 and 2020, reaching a total of 700,900 in 2019-20. Most visitors stop at one or more of the scenic destinations in the park such as Takakkaw Falls, Emerald Lake, and Wapta Falls.

These tourism hotspots are all located at the end of secondary roads, leading to concerns around traffic congestion and visitor crowding. Managing increasing demand was one of the key issues identified in the State of the Park assessment.

A visitor use management plan will be prepared for high-demand areas of the park such as Takakkaw Falls, Emerald Lake and Field, outlining strategies, tools and appropriate improvements to infrastructure and services.

In addition, Parks Canada has committed to evaluating the feasibility of developing alternative transportation options to provide access to Takakkaw Falls and Emerald Lake prior to 2025.

Masse said flaggers are occasionally used at these very busy locations to manage traffic as best as possible.

"But we are also looking at the longer-term picture and we're going to be assessing whether alternate transportation options are feasible in those areas," he said.

However, Masse said alternate transportation is just one tool in the toolbox to ease pressure.

"We could also include fees or we could include restrictions, basically putting a total capacity limit and making it available through a draw or something like that," he said.

"We're not committed to a response yet; we have to do more planning and we have to see also how the demand evolves."

Specifically, the random draw reservation system in place for Lake O'Hara will also be monitored to assess its effectiveness and potential for use at other locations. "It could very well be (applied elsewhere)," said Masse.

In Kootenay National Park, visitation increased by an average of 2.6 per cent per year between 2011 and 2020, reaching a total of 529,000 in 2019-20.

Most of these visitors are coming to experience popular areas such as the Stanley Glacier valley, Marble Canyon, the Paint Pots, or Radium Hot Springs.

For busy day-use areas and trailheads such as Stanley Glacier, they will be evaluated for ecological impacts, visitor experience concerns and parking lot congestion issues.

"Management tools such as improved parking lot configuration, trail use reservations or shuttle systems will be considered in order to alleviate these challenges," according to the park's management plan.

In Banff National Park, visitation has grown 30 per cent over the last decade, now at more than four million people a year, primarily during the summer and ski seasons. In some of the busier areas, such as Lake Louise Drive, vehicle traffic has increased by 70 per cent over the

past 10 years.

Parking lots at Lake Louise and Moraine Lake are often full by sunrise while roadways are jammed with vehicles that create backups that can extend to the Trans-Canada Highway. Washrooms, picnic sites and rest areas are often overcrowded.

As a result, Parks Canada officials say the experience visitors are seeking in national parks may suffer and environmental impacts include disturbance of wildlife, reduced wildlife corridor effectiveness, and damage to vegetation.

Parks Canada will develop a strategy to manage the area, which includes a sustainable transit system with one or more centrally located staging areas and the intercept parking lot that is considered key to delivering this strategy.

As part of the Lake Louise area strategy, the management plan indicates that low traffic volumes are to be maintained during sensitive periods on Lake Louise Drive and Whitehorn Road to allow for wildlife movement.

In terms of environmental protection, which is a trigger for managing human use, Masse said the federal agency has a strong monitoring system in place, including tracking wildlife movements.

"We manage parks to make sure the ecosystems we are protecting are safe, so we are keeping a very close eye on the capacity of these sites for visitation numbers," he said.

Masse said another trigger for visitor use management is public safety, pointing to Moraine Lake Road as just one example, where cars have blocked emergency vehicle access in the past.

He also said the intersection of Moraine Lake and Lake Louise Drive is also proving tough to manage given the volume of traffic.

"It could also be there is a site that is very small and vehicles are spilling out on the highway, and that is a risk for people moving in and out of their vehicles if they're right by the side of the highway," he said.

Visitor experience is another prompt for consideration of human use management.

"If it gets to a point where everyone is unhappy about their visit because it's just crazy congested, it is not providing a good experience of the park," Masse said.

"There's a collision between visitor expectations and what they see on the ground."

With the national park management plans having gone through two rounds of public engagement prior to approval, Masse said visitor use management is "not something that is coming out of the blue."

"This is something that's coming out of the public input and it is a key piece to guide us going forward, as we are looking at feasibility studies, as we are looking at taking more steps in terms of monitoring and responding to increasing visitation," he said.

"We're still engaging before we make the big changes."