

AKAMINA- KISHINENA

Advocates push for Glacier's neighbor to be added to

international peace park

story and photos by ROB CHANEY

A single mud puddle sums up the wonder and weirdness of this place. Barely two miles over the hump from Waterton National Park's busy Cameron Lake Road, a soggy spot in the trail bore the prints of a grizzly bear, an all-terrain vehicle, a wolf, hiking boots and a bicycle wheel. Elk scat lay nearby in the grass. So did a horseshoe.

British Columbia's bit of the border above Glacier National Park defies easy understanding. While it shares the same chain of spectacular mountains as the International Peace Park, it has been a Canadian provincial park just 16 years. While Glacier and Waterton have extensive staffs of rangers and concessionaires, the Akamina-Kishinena park headquarters is an unoccupied 12-by-20-foot cabin.

"We haven't had staff permanently on site for about four years," said Alex Green of the British Columbia

Parks Department. "The area receives quite a bit of use, but it disappears in the background of Waterton."

That background vibrates with change. U.S. and Canadian leaders announced plans to protect the Flathead River Basin from mining and energy development last year, but the details remain unfinished. Waterton and Glacier just celebrated their centennial birthdays, but calls to boost Akamina-

RIGHT: A 700-foot-tall nunatuk remains where an ice-age glacier split as it carved a major valley in British Columbia's Akamina-Kishinena Provincial Park.



“The British Columbia Flathead is one of the most extraordinary places on Earth for biodiversity. It’s a dream worth pursuing.”

Harvey Locke,
senior adviser to
the Canadian Parks
and Wilderness Society

Rob Chaney has reported news in Montana for 23 years, serving at the Hungry Horse News, Bozeman Daily Chronicle, Montana Magazine and currently the Missoulian. Chaney earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. He was a fellow at Columbia University Teacher’s College for work on Montana’s Tribal History Project, and last year received a University of Montana Matthew Hansen Endowment fellowship for coverage of Superfund restoration of the upper Clark Fork River drainage. He currently covers outdoors, environment and science issues for the Missoulian in Missoula, Montana.

BELOW: Stalks of Devonian coral roughly 400 million years old snake through a chunk of rock found in the North Kintla Creek Valley in Akamina-Kishenina Provincial Park. The same basin also contains billion-year-old stromatolite fossils, among the oldest life forms on the planet.



Kishinena to federal status went unfulfilled. “We continue to pursue the dream of Kootenay Brown (Waterton’s first superintendent) 100 years ago to put the missing piece of the Peace Park in place,” said Harvey Locke, former president and now senior adviser to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. “The British Columbia Flathead is one of the most extraordinary places on Earth for biodiversity. It’s an essential part of the long-term future of Glacier and Waterton parks. It’s a dream worth pursuing.”

This 27,000-acre park runs from the Alberta border west above Glacier Park’s Upper and Lower Kintla Lakes, with a big cherry-stem of provincial national forest poking into its middle. The corridor includes old logging roads where some motorized travel is allowed, although it’s prohibited in the provincial park. Big-game hunters regularly use the area, and do much of the trail maintenance into remote camps. “There’s not much of a question if that should be a part of the Peace Park and World Heritage site,” said Casey Brennan of the Canadian conservation group Wildsight. “Making it a national park would get at least a half-dozen park rangers in there, plus education and interpretation for the schools. And there’d be science, more than the once-a-year fly-over that provincial ministry officials make to be sure there’s still goats in there.”

It’s not because of a combination of Canadian historical development and contemporary land management issues. Both those things could be changing. First the Canadian history. In the 19th century, what’s now Alberta was part of the Northwest Territories, owned by the federal government. British Columbia was a separate province that joined the Canadian federation in 1870. So while the Canadian central government could designate Waterton as a national park after creating Alberta in 1905, British Columbia retained provincial control over virtually all its public land. And British Columbia’s southeastern corner has rich underground wealth. The Elk River drainage north of Eureka supports major coal mines. The Flathead River drainage just to the east (which forms Akamina-Kishinena’s western border) has shown equal promise.

Locke recalled major efforts to expand Waterton when American and Canadian



ABOVE: Michael Jamison of National Parks Conservation Association looks through Grizzly Wide Pass into the North Kintla Creek Valley of Akamina-Kishenina Provincial Park in British Columbia.

Rotary Clubs pushed for the International Peace Park designation in 1934, in the 1970s when nature writer Andy Russell led a campaign, and again in the 1990s when former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien proposed expanding the country’s national park system.

It was only in that last push that British Columbia decided to make Akamina-Kishinena a provincial park in 1995, Locke said. And in doing so, it created a boomerang-shaped space with all its low-elevation timberland excluded from protection.

Much of the Elk River area was a British Columbia wildlife refuge until 10 years ago, when British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell ordered it changed to

a mining zone. The Akamina-Kishinena was simply provincial forest. In 2010, Campbell reversed course and signed a similar order making the Flathead off limits to mining and energy exploration. The deal was part of a memorandum of understanding with Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer, backed by the state’s senators, Max Baucus and Jon Tester.

That’s put new wind in the sails of park supporters. But the memorandum of understanding remains unfunded on the American side and unlegislated on the Canadian side. Baucus has a bill moving through the Senate to buy out the mining interests, but the British Columbia Parliament hasn’t yet produced a measure to make Campbell’s order

permanent. “It’s written in pencil,” said National Parks Conservation Association Crown of the Continent program manager Michael Jamison. “We’d like to see it written in pen.”

Two of Akamina-Kishinena’s features do draw regular attention. Forum and Wall lakes lie just across the British Columbia border of Akamina Pass. They rival Glacier Park’s Avalanche Lake for accessibility and beauty.

Beyond there, park visitors are on their own. The park’s webpage warns it is a “wilderness area, without supplies or equipment of any kind. All arrangements for supplies and transportation must be made beforehand.”

See next page

"I don't think four Americans have ever done this," said Will Hammerquist as he led the way through a cliff notch between the Starvation Creek and North Kintla Creek drainages. "Hardly any Canadians ever get here."

Below was a U-shaped valley punctuated by a 700-foot-tall nunatak - a Devil's Tower-like pillar that defied the glacier that carved the rest of the drainage. Fossil algae swirls called stromatolites, 1.5 billion years old, littered the basin. The trunk of a dead whitebark pine tree 36 feet around had a chunk of stromatolite tangled in its roots. Hammerquist peeked over the valley's southern lip, searching for the concrete obelisk signifying the U.S.-Canadian border. While he could see Glacier's Upper Kintla Lake 3,000 feet below, the four-foot-high marker was buried in snow.

For Hammerquist, Akamina-Kishinena's provincial status causes both social and environmental problems. Compared to Waterton, it has virtually no personnel to explain its wonders, enforce its rules or explore its scientific treasures.

That results in little control of the noxious weeds visitors track in, a hunting zone shoehorned between two high-protection wildlife parks, and a stalled effort to unify the whole area as a world heritage site.

"The whole notion of combining Waterton and Akamina has the weight of history behind it," Hammerquist said. "It's been there for 100 years. It's not some idea we just came up with."

In 2009, a Canadian opinion poll found 77 percent of the East Kootenay (including Cranbrook, Fernie and Sparwood) residents supported creating wildlife sanctuaries in southeastern B.C., where hunting and mining would be prohibited. But the 2010 international agreement on the Flathead specifically included hunting and trapping as permitted uses.

"It has global significance," said Sarah Cox, spokeswoman for Sierra Club B.C., which advocates protecting a 100,000-acre swath of southeast British Columbia, including the Akamina-Kishinena. "It's the largest, longest wildlife corridor left in North America."

"The Akamina is only a few hundred meters wide in some places," Cox said. "You can hunt a grizzly there. A bear that's fully protected in Waterton and Glacier can step across the border and be shot in B.C."

Published by permission from the Missoulian

An unnamed massif on the border of Montana's Glacier National Park and British Columbia's Akamina-Kishinena Provincial Park dominates the North Kintla Creek Valley. The provincial park has no permanent staff and few developed visitor facilities.

