

## Emotional processing as an important part of the wildlife viewing experience



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### ABSTRACT

Visitors to parks, protected areas and other natural settings are commonly awed by big mountains, beautiful waterfalls, and turquoise green lakes, yet often it is the chance sighting of a wild animal that ignites a feeling of excitement and passion. This research examined wildlife viewing experiences in the Canadian Rocky Mountain National Parks to identify which factors contribute to a meaningful wildlife viewing experience and to explore the value and meaning of that experience. Using a qualitative research approach designed to elicit rich descriptions of wildlife viewing experiences, key factors such as proximity and species emerged as important aspects which contribute to meaningful wildlife experiences and which are consistent with previous research. More importantly, however, was that making meaningful experiences appears to be a result of the emotional connections that are associated with a wildlife encounter and the emotional processing of that experience. This finding suggests that truly meaningful wildlife experiences may be developed through a series of stages from pre-encounter, to the actual encounter, to post-encounter and finally, longer-term reflection. Consequently, managers of parks and protected areas may choose to pay greater attention to visitors' emotional connections with wildlife and use these relationships to facilitate more meaningful visitor experiences.

#### *Management implications:*

1. The information obtained in this study demonstrates that visitor interactions with wildlife are important in creating meaningful nature experiences.
2. If park and protected area managers can encourage and enhance such types of experiences, several positive benefits may include such as increased visitation, positive economic impacts, and increased awareness, concern and efforts towards education and conservation.
3. Potential strategies include encouraging visitors to make an emotional connection with the wildlife they encounter and developing ways in which they can reflect on those experiences.
4. Additionally, managers can aid visitors in continuing to process their experiences after they occur.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, wildlife tourism has garnered increasing interest from governments, the tourism industry and researchers (Moorhouse, Dahlsjö, Baker, D'Cruze, & Macdonald, 2015; Newsome & Rodger, 2013; World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO], 2014). Much of the existing literature has focused on the impacts of tourism and recreation activities on wildlife (e.g. habituation, physiological impacts) (Knight & Gutzwiller, 1995), while limited attention has been paid to the benefits and satisfaction associated with wildlife viewing (Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Higginbottom, 2004; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). In particular, very little is known about what draws visitors to seek out wildlife viewing opportunities, what kind of

experiences wildlife tourists seek, and where and how they want to experience wildlife (Coghlan & Prideaux, 2008; Curtin, 2009).

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the profile of wildlife tourists (Curtin, 2009) who are generally described as individuals predominantly of Western origin who are educated, white, and have a significant disposable income (Ballantine & Eagles, 1994; Curtin, 2006, 2009). In addition, research indicates that individuals who seek wildlife viewing experiences range from tourists with a recreational interest in wildlife to individuals considered 'specialists', who seek out new or not commonly known wildlife viewing settings or destinations (Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Higham, 1998). Few studies have investigated what it means to enjoy wildlife experiences, what exactly is enjoyed, the process through which people perceive wildlife,

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or the responses it provokes (Cousins, Evans, & Sadler, 2009; Curtin, 2005, 2009; Moscardo & Saltzer, 2004).

There is evidence from non-tourism related research that encounters with wildlife elicit emotional and other affective responses from humans (Kellert, 1996). Taking an experiential view, wildlife tourism concerns the “emotional, psychological and physical benefits of taking a wildlife holiday” (Curtin, 2005, p. 1). Harrison (2003) notes that tourists want, “intellectual, physical, even spiritual stimulation” from their travels (cited in Curtin, 2005, p. 27). Further, Ulrich (1993) argues that emotional experiences are amongst the most important benefits recreationists derive from time spent in nature. A better understanding of the factors which contribute to a satisfying visitor experience is important to gain insights into the processes that underlie the development of human-wildlife relations, human interest in wildlife, and the nature and role of such relations (Newsome, Dowling, & Moore, 2005).

### 1.1. Case study background

The Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks is made up of a chain of seven national parks including Banff, Jasper, Kootenay, Waterton Lakes, Glacier, and Mount Revelstoke National Park (Fig. 1). Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984 (Parks Canada, 2015), the parks have long been popular destinations for tourists seeking wildlife viewing opportunities. In part, this has been reflected in early government policy on wildlife in the parks, which was largely designed to cater to the perceived needs of the park visitor (Cronin, 2011; Great Plains Research Consultants, 1984; Luxton, 1975).

Wildlife continues to play a significant role in the design of national park experiences (Cronin, 2011). Initiatives to help conserve wildlife are in place throughout the parks and include actions such as voluntary area closures for important wildlife habitat, educational visitor programs, and offering opportunities for visitors to report wildlife sightings (Parks Canada, 2010). In recent years, Parks Canada has gradually shifted the emphasis of their visitor programs towards increasing visitation and diversifying the activities offered in parks (e.g., the addition of tent cabins in campsites) to attract new types of visitors.

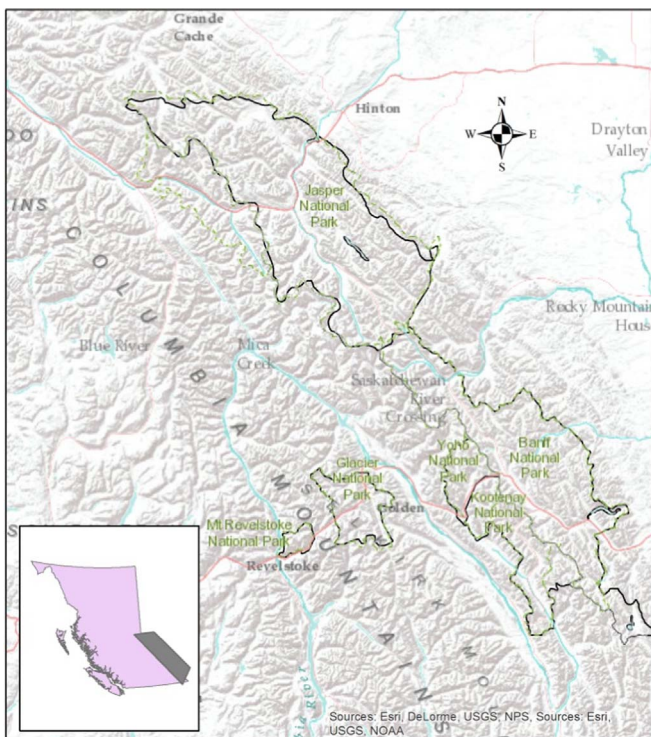


Fig. 1. Canada's Rocky Mountain Parks.

Although the focus of these initiatives is on helping visitors build a personal connection to these places (Parks Canada, 2011) the explicit link to national parks as providing meaningful nature-based opportunities is weakening (Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society, 2014; Wright & Mathews, 2014). This study examined the nature of memorable wildlife viewing experiences and the elements that contribute to visitors' engagement in these experiences in the Rocky Mountain National Parks in Western Canada.

### 1.2. Visitor wildlife viewing preferences

Wildlife tourism experiences vary greatly in terms of the emphasis or intensity of encounters and the aesthetic appeal of certain characteristics of wildlife species influences visitors' responses. Tourists' attraction to a certain species is informed by individual, social and cultural forces “and is often found to be greatly influenced by colour, shape, movement and visibility” (Kellert, 1996, p. 90) of the animal. Features such as size, skin texture and behaviour traits, particularly those that evoke a ‘cute and cuddly’ response garner more positive responses (Newsome et al., 2005; Woods, 2000). In contrast, animals which visitors perceive to be dangerous to humans are generally disliked.

Numerous studies have indicated that characteristics which contribute to satisfactory wildlife viewing experiences include: proximity to animals, variety of species, viewing natural behaviour, activity level of animals, seeing large, rare or new species, and the natural setting itself (Farber & Hall, 2007; Higginbottom & Buckley, 2003; Lemelin & Smale, 2006; Schänzel & McIntosh, 2000; Woods, 2000). Chapman (2003) also found that the most memorable experiences involved being in close proximity to a wild animal, feeling intimacy through activities such as eye contact, and the element of surprise.

Rare or endangered species are often the focus of wildlife tourism experiences (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001; Shackley, 1996) perhaps because of the novelty of these experiences (Newsome et al., 2005). Charismatic mega-fauna such as bears, moose, and elk play a key role in attracting many visitors to the Canadian National Parks (Lindsay, Alexander, Mills, Romanach & Woodroffe, 2007; Parks Canada, 2007) with more elusive animals (e.g., cougars) considered to be the most desired animals to see.

### 1.3. Understanding affective responses to wildlife

Several areas of research have explored human emotional responses to animals. Fromm (1964) used the term ‘biophilia’<sup>1</sup> to describe a psychological inclination of humans to be drawn to living and vital things. Following Fromm (1964), Wilson, (1984, 1993) developed the biophilia hypothesis which suggests that humans’ “emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (1993, p. 31) is inherited genetically, albeit weakly so (Kellert, 2009). Building on Wilson (1984), Ulrich (1993) discusses how, in addition to the biophilic response to living things, humans also demonstrate a biophobic response. In contrast to biophilia, biophobia addresses “fears related to natural hazards or life forms such as snakes and spiders” (Manfredo, 2008, p. 35) which have influenced human survival through time. Other theories describe human emotional responses to animals as an innate tendency that are given meaning through experience, culture and learning. This suggests that such tendencies integrate biological processes and environmentally learned responses (Katcher & Wilkins, 1993; Manfredo, 2008). Consequently, increased attention needs to be directed towards how emotional communication can be incorporated into discussions of natural resources and the effect that human emotions may have on behaviours and social interactions in natural resource settings (Manfredo, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> Fromm (1964) interpreted the term to mean “love of life or living systems”.

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