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ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTLOOK

Sandford's latest book his 'life's work'

By Lynn Martel - Rocky Mountain Outlook

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We have our history wrong.

This, says long-time Rockies' resident Bob Sandford, author of more than 20 books on the mountainous West, is the main tenet of his latest, and arguably most substantial book, *Ecology & Wonder in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Sites*.

Published by AU Press (Athabasca University), *Ecology & Wonder* explores and analyzes the natural and human history of the UNESCO mountain parks – Banff, Jasper, Yoho, Kootenay, Robson, Hamber and Mountain Assiniboine.

The hefty 350-page tome is elegantly laid out with crisp colour photographs and dazzling translucent reveals heralding key sections: The West We Had; The West We Have; The East Slope; The North Slope; The West Slope; and The West We Want.

With its launch coinciding with the 125th anniversary of the creation of Canada's national park system, Sandford will present his "life's work" at the Banff Centre's Donald Cameron Hall on Thursday, May 20 at 6 p.m.

Our history is wrong, Sandford says, because the culture of the West is defined not just by what we built, but by what we saved – the land inside the park boundaries.

"That we restored a large part of the Rockies once we recognized its aesthetic and tourism value may in fact be the greatest public policy achievement in the history of the West," Sandford said. "Collectively, the protected areas in the Rocky Mountains are the foundation of our unique Western identity. Our goal in the future should be to create a culture worthy of what we have saved."

Sandford said he originally planned to update his 1994 *The Book of Banff*, published by the Friends of Banff and long out of print.

"The idea grew, however, that what I really wanted to write was a book about the nature, history and culture of the entire group of protected areas that comprise the larger World Heritage Site," Sandford said. "It took me 10 years to do that."

The book represents his life's work, he said, because it took 40 years to visit all the places in its pages and to live the experiences that allowed him to comprehend what those places mean to the identity of their inhabitants. Devoting four decades to understanding the natural and human history of the region provided new perspectives about how monumental landscapes such as the Rockies influence local identity and sense of place, including how he and all locals fit into the place they've chosen as their home.

"I discovered that the mere fact that such a vast protected area existed exerts a subtle but cumulative influence on the way people think about where and how they live," Sandford said. "I was compelled to write this book as a means of finding the words to describe why this landscape made me feel whole as a person and gave me hope for the future. It was my hope that if I could find the language to describe our great achievement in protecting these parks, others would be better able to articulate how these landscapes affected them, and this would lead to re-affirmation of the value of these places."



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Writing the first book to consider the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site as a single physical, ecological and cultural whole presented its own unique challenges, Sandford admitted.

“The most satisfying discovery was that natural landscapes provide new insights and discoveries to each subsequent generation that experiences them,” Sandford said. “The most worrisome part of writing this book was to be reminded of how fragile the idea of landscape protection can be in a world in which short-term market fundamentalism has become so deep and widespread that it only speaks to itself.

“The setting aside of protected areas and their designation as World Heritage Sites does not guarantee that economic forces within our society who do not see the long-term value in protection will not undermine our great past successes. Nor does designation prevent climate change from moving the ecosystems our national parks were set aside to represent and protect out from under current protected areas boundaries.”

At the same time, he pointed out, the Rockies’ intact ecosystems slow and moderate climate change as they operate as a thermostat controlling the region’s temperature while supplying its water.

“It is absolutely fascinating to observe that what we have saved, may now save us,” Sandford said.

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