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Transcription results:

- Nicholas Milliken: 00:00 Christmas tree hunting. And so now that I've got the minister here I can actually ask him if we ever needed a license for something like that. But I think for the most part it was a reason for the whole family to just get together and drive around in the bush. And with that. Yeah. Thank you very much for being here. I look forward to seeing some of the questions. I've got some questions myself. Some of them have obviously been filtered through from a lot of the e-mails that we've gotten at the constituency and then even just talking to people on the streets. So again thank you so much for being here. I'm happy to be here and I'm looking forward to today's discussion and I will pass it off.
- Mike Ellis: 00:32 Thanks Nick. Mike Ellis I'm the MLA for Calgary West. I'd like to thank everybody for being here today. I know this is a topic that I'm certainly looking forward to and I know many my constituents are looking forward to and I'd like to thank everybody for being online to listen in on this town hall. I know my family and I are avid camper so I know I know not just my my friends my neighbors but certainly my family we have some questions here for the minister. So with that I'd like to thank everybody again. I'm going to pass it on to Mr. Jason Copping.
- Jason Copping: Thank you Mike. And again this comments on my my colleagues thanks everyone for attending. I'm the MLA for Calgary varsity. I've spoken with many constituents on the issue of parks something that's near and dear to my heart as well. Our family spends lots of time on the mountains particularly skiing in the winter and hiking in the hiking in the summertime. Lots of miss information out there so I want to thank Minister Nixon for agreeing to participate. So I think this is a great way to ask questions seek clarity and get clarification on what government is doing and how we're focusing on protecting our protecting our parks and basically making it more accessible for Albertans. And with that turn it back to the chair Emily Isaac.
- Whitney Issik: 01:49 Thank you so much. And we are also joined tonight by our special guest the honorable Jason Nixon who's the MLA for Randy Rocky Mountain House sundry and the Minister of Environment and Parks. And thanks so much minister for being able to step out of the legislature this evening to join us for this virtual town hall. Perhaps you'd like to say a few words to one for sure.
- Jason Nixon: 02:13 Thank you Madam Chair for bringing us all together. I appreciate the opportunity to go to the house duty tonight. A few of you guys are excited to get out the legislature for a little bit to be able to come and have a conversation about parks and some of the stuff that's taking place. I like you. I'm looking forward to an opportunity to be able to dispel some of the mistruths that have been put out there by certain members including particularly by the official opposition. So I'm looking forward to this opportunity. And so I don't want spend too much time talking about myself instead Whitney I'd rather get it right to it. Let's start answers the questions.
- Whitney Issik: 02:46 Well that's fantastic. Before we jump right into things I want to just remind folks that we have. We're able to take your questions and so what you need to be able to do is whether you're participating between either zoom or Facebook live. If you're participating with zoom you can ask a question at any time by clicking on the q and a button and typing in your name and question if you're watching on Facebook live, just leave a comment and our staff behind the scenes here will be able to make sure it gets in front of us and I want to thank all of our our folks that are here to help us tonight to make this run smoothly. Please note that we will be grouping similar questions together so if we don't get your questions specifically it's likely because we answered it as part of someone else's question. And as always please keep it respectful and family friendly in the comments and chat. And you know I think first of all we'll just go right back to Minister Nixon and perhaps you can just give us a little bit of a description of what our parks policy is right now.
- Jason Nixon: 03:59 Our parks policy as a whole remains the same as it has been inside this province for a long time. We continue to be dedicated to providing a park system to be able to provide recreation opportunities inside some of the wild places of our province. The focus of our government coming into this last election that was a key part of our platform was recognizing that the park system has grown since sometime in the early 90s for about thirty five hundred hacked acres to I believe over forty five thousand hectares in that period time over 30 years while at the same time the budget has stayed similar for that type of space. When you're dealing with that level of an increase our incoming government recognized and our party recognized that there was going to have to be steps made to be able to make sure that we could maintain our park system and we had large meetings with groups all across the province and some of the ideas that we could have to be able to make that happen. And one of the things that we heard loud and clear was the opportunity to continue to build on partnership opportunities inside the province. Now that's not something that is new. I know some people have tried to make it sound like partnerships within the park system is a new concept. It's not. It's a concept that's existed in

our province since 1932 well over 100 and some partnerships already exist to manage our our park system. And so we recognize that we should make a commitment to build to strengthen those relationships with nonprofit organizations in municipalities and indigenous communities and others to be able to strengthen the partnerships that we have when it comes to managing our park system. And so we followed through on that commitment this last spring by identifying potential sites that would work for partnerships and open them up for for potential opportunities. That doesn't mean that they will all receive partnerships. What it means is that we've identified a list of where there would be a reasonable conversation the short term I'm happy to tell you Whitney we've had lots of interest and we're looking forward to seeing some of those partnerships announced in the coming months. And we got lots to go on that but in general our our goal is to continue to maintain our parks and maintain access for recreation but while using Albertans to be able to help with the protection of their wild places something that we strongly believe in. Did we lose ya?

Whitney Issik: 06:12 Thanks Minister, I'm just switching screens here. Thanks so much for that. We have a question coming in for you and I'll just read it out. How do you determine that a park is underutilized when it is consistently booked.

Jason Nixon: 06:26 Well the determination of of which parks are utilized which parks and all utilize is something that the Department of Alberta Environment Parks would run the analysis on. Now they know how much money has come in from a site they know in some cases how many bookings take place not all of the parks our park system have electronic booking systems so they don't have the exact records on all the bookings in every campground yet. We're working towards that but they do know how much income is coming in from sites. They also have people on the ground that can determine whether a location is being utilized to its full capacity or not. That's something that is generally determined by the Alberta Environment Parks Department and by the staff on the ground. Again the conversation that we're having is less about whether or not a site is being fully used, the conversation about the best way to manage sites across our province. And so we saw a great example of this, the previous government that I support what the previous government did when it comes to this with Sylvan Lake Provincial Park. And for those of you who don't know what Sylvan Lake Provincial Park was, it was a provincial park right within Sylvan Lake City Limits on Silver Lake obviously. And they approached the government of the day about a potential partnership where it made more sense from their perspective for the town of Sylvan Lake to take over the management of the site. That's not about whether or not Sylvan Lake is being utilized or not. That's about who is in the best position to be able to manage and work with Sylvan Lake. And that partnership has went very very well. Alberta Environment Parks conservation officers are there on a regular basis, they're enforcing Fish and Wildlife regulations and doing the important work that we do for water protection and different things within the area. But the day to day management of the park has fallen on Sylvan Lake. So that's a great example of a partnership that's not about necessarily how many people go to Sylvan Lake. There's lots of people there. It's who's in the best position to be able to manage that piece of infrastructure.

Whitney Issik: 08:13 Thanks Minister. And I think Mr. Ellis now has that question to read out. I'll just let him do that.

Mike Ellis: 08:23 Thank you very much Whitney. Minister, so over the course of session we've heard from the opposition as well as letters that I received to my constituency office and I'm just going to be very very blunt with you because I hear this time and time again: are the parks in Alberta for sale? And because I keep hearing it from the opposition that they are for sale. I keep I keep getting messages to the constituency offices and I will speak for for some of my colleagues in Calgary because we keep hearing from constituents saying "please don't sell our parks". So I would like you to answer this question very straight. Are the parks for sale? Thank you.

Jason Nixon: 09:06 Well I'm happy that's not a question and glad we got it I thought I'd be the first question like So I'm glad that we're able to get to that right away. As you know Mike because you sit behind me in question period I've answered that question lots in question period. In fact I had my staff check earlier today, no less than twenty five times in Question Period have I answered this question but happy to do it again. To be clear no parks are for sale inside this province, at all. The official opposition and their environment critic have already admitted as you know Mike in the house that no parks are for sale. It's unfortunate that they continue to put that rumor out there to mislead the public and cause unnecessary stress. But one hundred percent no parks are for sale in this province and no parks are going to be for sale inside this province.

Mike Ellis: 09:47 Thank you sir.

Whitney Issik: 10:19 Let's try this again. What is the difference between park status and protected Crown status?

Jason Nixon: 10:29 Well at the end of the day the difference is between different acts or different laws within the legislature so there's a Parks act and there's public lands act and there are protections for land within both of those acts that are different levels of protection. In fact I know the Public Lands Act has lots of protection and often in some cases they have protected areas that are more protected than anything that the Parks act can provide. But the acts evolved over time in the legislature as I said earlier the provincial Parks Act came into place in 1932. It was redone at other times of course over the last almost 100 years but it's an act that has been around a long time and it was associated with the Parks Department that which was not always in Alberta Environment. So Alberta Environment was separate previously from departments that had parks. In 2015 the NDP brought provincial parks into the Alberta Environment Department created a department that I'm currently the Minister

of which is of course Alberta Environment Parks. Previous to that though the provincial parks portion of it had been in places like tourism in other departments over time. I don't recall them all now. And so it had a piece of legislation that was associated with managing that and then Alberta Environment would have had the public lands Act which protects. There are dozens of different types of land protection we can talk about some of them this evening but there are lots of different kinds of varying degrees some of them are more significant than parks provides protection and some of them that would be less within the entire piece of legislation. But the reality is now that we brought these departments together and we have Alberta Environment and Parks there's a process of figuring out which portions of the department are best able to manage certain campgrounds or day use zones, who's able to have the closer staff that are closer to those type of facilities. And so that's the ongoing conversation as you bring that department together to figure out which of those two acts are best to one protect that particular piece of landscape and provide opportunities for Albertans in those landscapes. And that second who has the best assets and employees in the area they were best able to maintain that landscape.

- Whitney Issik: 12:29 Thank you so much Minister. And I think MLA Jeremy Nixon has a question to read out now.
- Jeremy Nixon: 12:38 Yeah. Thank you. And this question is actually from a constituent mine now Bruce and I hope our Bruce is listening so you can tweet about this later. But the question that Bruce asked me a little while ago was about how does a partner group go about finding out about how to be a partner and work with the Government in regards to operating a potential campsite or a recreational area.
- Jason Nixon: 12:58 So the process is in place for a long time. It's actually the same process that was in place under the previous government and the government before that and is a process that as I mentioned earlier, Jeremy, has already been used often across our system as well over 100 existing partnerships within the system. And so that is spelt out how you go through that is easy to access through the Alberta Environment Parks website. I won't go through it all in great detail right now. Lots of it will be unique to the circumstances that we're there trying to get involved. But the best thing for your constituents to do if they want to look for an opportunity on that is to send us an email at AEP.Minister@gov.ab.ca, and my staff will connect them with the appropriate portion of the Alberta Environment & Parks Department so that they can have a connection to talk about those different opportunities and direct them to the right place to look. That's, as I said, that's it. We've had a lot of inquiries about that over the last seven months, it's quite exciting. From indigenous communities, from great non-profits all across the province that want to continue to partner with the province on managing our wild places and so if there's an opportunity that works, it's something the department will seriously look at.
- Whitney Issik: 14:05 Fantastic. Thanks so much for that. We have another question coming in from Narita. How will you protect access to parks for folks who cannot afford user fees?
- Jason Nixon: 14:19 Well we have a variety of different types of opportunities within our park system. The parks costs money. We are of course facing a fiscal situation this province is unprecedented, and we have to figure out how to be able to fund the park system. The park system cost money every year well above what is taken in from camping fees and other user fees. And we need to continue to make sure that the system is financially viable so it can be able to operate and do its job. But we have a different variety of locations all across the province that are in a variety of prices to be able to access depending on where you're camping, from free to you know of course if you're camping in a place like Mount Kid inside Kananaskis there's different fees. So there are opportunities, and we're going to continue to make sure that the department recognizes that we need to be able to make sure that people of a variety of needs are able to be able to access our provincial parks system and we'll continue to look for those opportunities. But at the same time to be clear we have to be able to put in place a system that's going to be able to last. And it's going to be able to be financially stable to be able to make sure that we can provide this beautiful park system for decades to come.
- Whitney Issik: 15:31 Thanks for that minister and I think Mr. Copping may have a question to read is that correct Mr. Copping?
- Jason Copping: 15:40 Thank you Whitney. And minister, I know we made an announcement a couple of weeks ago. One of the most common calls that I got at my constituency office was the concern of cross country ski trail track setting in K country that was part of the plan to find a partner. I know we made an announcement a couple of weeks ago but maybe not everyone heard about it. I was wondering if you can talk about the partnership that we have in place and what the longer term plans are to ensure that we can maintain track setting not only for use of Albertans but to attract tourists to this beautiful park and then help build our economy.
- Jason Nixon: 16:19 We were excited to be able to announce a partnership of Nordic Alberta in Kananaskis the other day. I was excited to go to Kananaskis and spend some time with them. We had been working on that relationship over the last several months to be able to come up with a plan for track setting in that area. I will say Jason that track setting elsewhere within the province does come with a fee to be able to access and our government ran on focusing on trails. And so we've promised to bring Trails Act which will come I hope in the spring depending of course how things progressed through the legislature but definitely by next fall which will make some clear legislation around being able to help create a system where we can protect trails of course for cross-country skiing is great example but hiking Club's, different off highway vehicle locations across the province, so we have lots of different types of trail systems that are important to build and maintain and we committed within

our platform that we would look towards a trail access fees to be able to create an infrastructure that will be able to make sure that you can continue to do those recreation activities in those areas for generations to come. One of the one of the big issues when it comes to trails is you know water crossings or in the case of ski trails, buying equipment as well as avalanche watching and different things that we have to do to be able to maintain the ability for people to be able to go and utilize those trails and not all Albertans utilize them. And so by putting in a moderate fee which in this case is voluntary at the parking lots. So we were able to not have to put staff out on the trail sites to be able to try to collect fees instead of the volunteer organization the non-profit organization that's involved. We'll collect the fees at the parking lots and that money will go to covering the administration costs as well as to covering the tracks setting costs inside the province and this is a model that we heard loud and clear both before the election and after the election that people wanted. I can't count the amount of letters that I've received from people that say hey bring in some sort of fee, a modest fee. We'd like to be able to help maintain these areas, we recognize the financial situation the government's in and we're happy to be able to pay a moderate fee to be able to continue to access this great resource. So that's a great example in Kananaskis, one of a partnership. But second of using a creative way to be able to make sure that we can protect trails for generations to come.

Whitney Issik: 18:36

Thanks for that minister. I have a pretty good question here coming in. Without going into how Albertans have access to all Crown land or pointing out one or two exceptionally underused parks, please answer why the government is considering, and this is in quotations, "delisting" over one hundred and fifty parks and recreation areas rather than just closing them?

Jason Nixon: 18:59

So we're not considering de-listing over one hundred and fifty some provincial parks, that is a myth that has been put forward by certain groups and by the official opposition. Unfortunately, that's just not accurate. We have identified one hundred and sixty four parks within the provincial park system. Those sites remain fully within the provincial park system under the provincial Parks Act and fully funded by Alberta Environment Parks and fully operated by Alberta Environment Parks. But they have been identified by the department as being in areas where they are in relation either to already existing type of organizations that want to and/or are already partnering with us to be able to manage those wild places or where there could be opportunities like the Sylvan Lake example that I identified earlier. There are 17 other parks within the park system. I shouldn't say all parks, they are campgrounds and day use zones in certain areas where it makes more sense from the Alberta Environment & Parks perspective as we merge Alberta Environment & Parks into one department that it makes more sense to be able to have them managed underneath the public lands act. Now that does not mean that those sites are unprotected or that they won't be accessible to Albertans. They will remain fully protected and fully accessible to people to be able to use them. But that's about making the right decision on the best way to manage those type of locations. It's as simple as that. There are some locations that are within that list that it's you know we've been hearing about like a three hour round trip of provincial park employees to be able to go and service those locations, and we have closer public lands employees to be able to go collect the money and clean the toilets and that type of stuff. So, this is not about de-listing parks. It's the reality is that Alberta Environment & Parks is one department now, we have over a dozen land designations that we can use to be able to protect landscapes and the department will continue to make the best choices depending on the individual location on who is best to staff them and the best way to be able to protect them and preserve them for future generations.

Whitney Issik: 20:54

Thanks so much for that. I think Mr Milliken has a question to read out.

Nicholas Milliken: 20:59

Thank you very much for the opportunity to ask you some questions Minister. I have in the riding of Calgary-Currie we have lots of signs that have gone up. There's been a lot of interest on this topic so I'm not going to mince words or anything I'm going to try to ask you the tough questions that I'm getting asked and I think that a lot of the people that I've talked to who are from Calgary-Currie who I've talked to on the phone or you know back and forth with emails and even just on the streets have had even during Halloween I had a lot of conversations with people while we were trick or treating. And so when I talked to people about this topic it's obviously become quite a large topic over the last few.... call it at least six weeks, probably a little bit longer. As I talk to people about this topic it often comes from a place where in the initial stages they were given information that parks were being sold so that got a lot of people's attention. And I think that was kind of the impetus behind a lot of people getting signs and things of that nature. I think it's fair to say that there are no parks that are being sold and we get that. I think that we've even heard that from the opposition in the house and I think that even as I talk to people on the phone about this issue still they they are coming to the sense that that is a true statement that parks are not for sale but what they do then do is they start to shift off and they shift towards and we kind of talked about a little bit but I wanted to get a clear direction on this and that is this idea of delisting. And often you hear the word semantics and things of that nature so I think what I find after having long conversations with people and we discuss you know the fact that we're passionate about parks the fact that you know people have been through the information that they've gotten that they've started to get worried and things that and it usually falls into this idea that they're starting to get worried that the government is de-listing parks in order to potentially sell them in the future or use them for industrialization or things of that. And that's where they get this this idea of I think a lot of the time it's been it's been kind of framed as this semantics thing where "oh you're not selling parks but you're de-listing them and then you're selling them" First and foremost, and I've got a couple supplementals on this because I do actually really want to I now that

I've got you right here and people are watching. If delisted, how will these areas, these lands, continue to be protected in law? That's the first one that I got for ya.

Jason Nixon: 23:31

Well against the de-listing comment is unfortunate that people have been confused, deliberately, by certain types organizations out there. The government and the Department of Alberta Environment & Parks has many different types of land designations to be able to protect landscapes. In fact, within the public lands act, I'll give you an example, in my neck of the woods there's something called the Panther PLUZ, panther public land use zone which is underneath the public lands act, you can have no motor vehicle access, you can only access that area by a horse. There is no new development in there and there hasn't been any development in that area since the late 1980s. There's some last little bit of oil and gas activity that has been finishing up that was grandfathered within that area but it doesn't exist. Now that is certainly significantly more land protection than most of the parks that we're talking about today. Most of the parks that we're talking about today are campgrounds, day use zones, boat docks, those type of, washrooms, those type of locations are not large landscapes. My point though is that both acts have ways to be able to protect landscapes and in fact the public lands act, I would argue, has in some cases more protection because parks, at the end of the day, is about creating recreation opportunities within the department which is important but not necessarily the number one way to do conservation of large landscapes bringing large amounts of people into an area comes with its own conflicts. The reason I want to emphasize this though, these areas, these campgrounds and the boat docks areas is that most of them are what's called a provincial recreation area. So underneath the parks act there is a provincial recreation area, underneath the public lands act there's a provincial recreation area, and basically there is no difference between the two because remember this comes from a time when these acts were in two different departments and now we're bringing one department together and trying to simplify the land designation things to make it easy to understand. And one of the problems is it's hard to understand. There are so many different types of designations it can be confusing at times but the point is when it comes to these facilities that we're talking about, they will remain protected. They certainly will not be developed. One won't allow them to be developed. Most of them are in locations with strict development rules. And second none of them would be big enough to be developed. Most of these as I said are campgrounds or boat launch areas or day use zones. And so I know I see the same stuff people saying they're going to build coal mines on top of these or do big large industrial complexes. There's none of these are of the size or the magnitude that that would even make sense, first of all. But second to reiterate that's not where Alberta Environment & Parks is headed with them; they will remain protected from industrial development.

Nicholas Milliken: 26:12

Okay. So my first supplemental then when people discuss this issue of semantics and de-listing from parks into the public lands act. OK there's this implication within that that they'll somehow be less protected. Now you kind of talked about this but I want to make sure that it gets tied to this question and this question simply is you've got the Parks act and you've got the Public Land Act. Which act provides more protection, if any.

Jason Nixon: 26:44

It would totally depend on how the landscape is protected. So you know as I said I went through the Panther Public Land Use Zone and that's in the Public Land Act. They get no motor vehicle access, very limited human access into the area, no roads, and all industrial activity in the whole area. It's a large landscape, has been stopped except for a couple of portions that were grandfathered from the 80s that are finishing up. Compare that to just across the road from there is a place called the Wild Horse Provincial Recreation Area which is about the size of my seven acre acreage where I call home, it's actually less than that, and is a group campground area that people come and camp in, and that's very important that they get to do that recreation activity. That's underneath the Provincial Parks Act currently. You tell me which one is more protected. The one that's already in the public lands or on the other side of the river that has no vehicle access or the one that has cars and trailers coming in to recreate in it. You know the reality is, you can't stress this enough, as both Acts have different levels of protection and it's about making sure that we have the opportunities to be able to protect different landscapes. But some of these landscapes need less protection i.e. because that's why they're in the Parks Act, some of them, to be able to have less protection which allows people to come and recreate there or allows you to build a boat launch so that people can launch into the lake and you know that it's not necessarily that one act or another is able to protect the landscape better than another.

Nicholas Milliken: 28:09

OK so then finally from a second supplemental and I've read the act and I see that even within the acts we are required to be stewards of our lands and things of that nature. But getting back to that when I was with my first question I talked about the originating idea of this for a lot of people was this idea of the statement that parks were being sold and again we I know that we've dealt with that side of things. But, what it then kind of implies is if you've got something out of the Parks act that gets delisted into the public lands act and then potentially get sold in the future, that's the going narrative that seems that I get that you've shown isn't the case but what I guess another way to help further drive this home for my constituents who are asking is with regards to that issue of selling these lands, can lands under the Parks act be sold?

Jason Nixon: 28:59

Well technically there's nothing within the Parks Act that would stop the government from selling land within that is under the Parks Act. Now the government is not going to be selling land that's underneath the Parks Act or any of these sites that we're referring to no matter what Act they're being managed under. But you are correct, which I think is the point you're trying to get at, is that there's nothing within the Parks Act that stops it from being sold. So if somebody was trying to sell them, the Parks Act does not stop that from taking place.

But to be clear, the government policy would be to not sell them. In addition to that, a lot of these locations are actually in areas where the government does not sell land anyway, so early on you probably heard some members of the official Opposition and others implying that portions of Kananaskis would be for sale. Kananaskis is protected by the Kananaskis policy from the 1990s, I believe it was signed by Premier Klein I've referred to in the house, you probably seen me do that, it stops any and all land for being able to be sold, including the public land that's in Kananaskis and the provincial park land that's Kananaskis. You may not know this, Kananaskis has both public land and provincial park land within Kananaskis, and none of it can be sold. So again, to be clear, none of these locations that we're referring to will be sold, period. They're not up for sale, they won't be up for sale at any time, and they'll continue to be protected, but we'll continue to have conversations about opportunities to be able to partner with people that want to help us manage these beautiful places.

Nicholas Milliken: 30:25 Thank you very very much. It takes my first set of questions anyways off the table and if other people are dealing with a lot of passionate constituents that are very interested in this issue so I do want to thank you for for answering those questions. Thank you very much.

Jason Nixon: 30:43 Thanks for the questions.

Whitney Issik: 30:44 Up next I have MLA Jeremy Nixon with a question.

Jeremy Nixon: 30:49 Thank you Whitney and it's going to be a hard to follow Nick but I actually have a question from another constituent of mine, Marine, it kind of builds on your earlier conversation about the hundred and sixty four campsites and the whole de-listing side of things obviously we've settled the de-listing thing that that's a myth and not something that's actually happening. I'm excited as the parliamentary secretary of civil society to hear about partnerships and I think people don't necessarily know about how much the government relies on great partnerships with civil society across the board not just with environment & parks but within social services and other program areas. So the question that I have from Marine though is about the hundred and sixty four sites that have been determined that would be great for partnerships and obviously hopeful to hear about all the work that's been done to find great partners. But what happens these hundred and sixty four sites or the number of sites that say you aren't able to find a partner within municipalities or indigenous groups or civil society partners.

Jason Nixon: 31:50 Well they're going to continue to be run. I mean those hundred sixty four sites are within the Alberta Environment Parks budget. They were never removed from the budget and they are being run and they've been fully staffed some of them are already operating under partnership agreements but they will continue to be operated as we've committed to. The intention of this conversation isn't about removing access to these locations it's about looking at different opportunities to be able to help encourage some of the great groups that are already working with us. You know Jeremy I know you know this area well because you lived there with with me for well over a while and you know my favorite place on earth is the Ya Ha Tinda and it's a very special place west of the town of Sundre that's actually owned by the National Park Service, is on Alberta land. It's the only private land within the forest reserve in the area. It was private land before confederation though so it's got nothing to do with it being sold, it was acquired by the National Park Service right up against Banff, and that area was closed to the public at one point because of things that were taking place in the area and the damage that was taking place on the land. And along came an organization that was founded in the community of sundre called the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, it's a great organization that's been around for decades that is full of a lot of hard working volunteers who have fundraisers and volunteer their time being able to protect what is now one of the greatest trail horseback riding destinations probably in the world, world renowned, and it's a beautiful place. They've expanded from there to be able to help manage other types of provincial campgrounds that are in the area. They have some provincial campgrounds already near them that are similar to these sites that we're talking about that they are already responsible for, and they manage with a partnership with Alberta Environment & Parks. I know they are very interested in adding a few more on and they've done a great job of being able to provide access to campgrounds for free in their case for people to enjoy it while being able to protect them. So that's just one example. And there are a lot more partnerships. You know right inside your hometown, the provincial park of course Fish Creek Park, a great famous Provincial Park right the middle of our largest city, and the Premier and I were there not too long ago to announce a half a million dollars to the Friends of Fish Creek who have dedicated their time to be able to help protect this great treasure that we have here in the province and in the City of Calgary. And that is where our focus is, is to continue to empower organizations like that to be able to help us protect our wild places. I mean one of the big differences between us and the former government on this issue is that we believe that we can trust Albertans to help manage their backyard. We recognize, as I said, the example of the Ya Ha Tinda that the reason that great asset is there for us to enjoy today is because of volunteer organizations not because of the government. And we want it to continue to be able to empower them to make sure that they can do the great work that they're doing while still being able to protect these landscapes so that your kids and my kids and your grandkids and my grandkids will be able to come and enjoy places like the Ya Ha Tinda Fish Creek Park in the years to come.

Jeremy Nixon: 34:49 And that's certainly encouraging, as you know my wife and I do enjoy going out and camping in that area. And I know one of the our favorite campsite spots is actually on the list of 164 campgrounds so very I know my wife

is.

Jason Nixon: 35:02

Let me guess falling timber!

Jeremy Nixon:

Well don't tell everybody that. Yes. But yeah we're excited to be able to continue to use that beautiful space and actually kind of building on the civil society partnership. I mean when you and I were lived out there we with the mustard seed we managed a number of camp sites out there and it was a good distance from anywhere. And I think that speaks to you know the cost saving opportunity as well if you can hire people or locally and live out there and partner with them to help operate these spaces. We can certainly do it at a much lower cost. So that's good to hear. I'm going to I'm going to take a little liberty here and ask one more question and something that I've heard a lot and you've kind of touched on this a little bit about the concern about industrializing these spaces. And so one of the e-mails that I get a lot on is about our coal policy. And I think that that's been used to kind of connect some of the changes around the coal policy recently to insinuate that we're opening up large sections of this land protected land for open pit coal mining and so wondering if you talk a little bit about the changes to our coal policy and why our public lands are still going to continue to be protected and why this is truly is a myth.

Jason Nixon: 36:13

Well first let me start Jeremy with being clear the campgrounds that we're talking about none of them are going to have a coal mine built on them. That is a complete lie that is being moved by certain people it's unfortunate that that has happened. But you know as I talked about earlier the fact is most of these places would not even be big enough for a coal mine. And second the government is not going to allow them to have industrial activity on them like a coal mine. The what's taking place with, I think you're referring to is a 1976 coal policy. To be clear that coal policy is not a Department of Environment or parks, Alberta Environment Parks policy. That's a Department of Energy, who was responsible for coal development. Alberta Environment & Parks is responsible for environmental regulations. The Department of Energy did remove the 1976 coal policy which was put in place long before the Alberta Energy Regulator who was ultimately the one responsible for regulating and determining where coal mines or other mines could exist. Well I should say coal mines could exist and then oil and gas type of activity, and they ultimately regulate them. In the case of coal, the federal regulator often involved too, depending on the size of the footprint. And so there's a pretty significant regulatory process that has been put in place since 1976 when that coal policy was built. And so what Minister Savage and her department were doing was putting the process all into one regulatory process, the Alberta Energy Regulator, focusing on the red tape side of that question to make sure that everybody understood what the processes is. We see it taking place right now in the south, I hope you get a question about that in the moment, but down the Crow's Nest Pass area where you are watching the regulatory process play out with both the federal and the provincial regulator involved. Hearings happening and people having their say on what's taking place there. We'll see how the regulator handles that situation ultimately. But when it comes to Alberta Environment policy when it comes to coal, water issues, that would be prominent obviously within that conversation or different protected landscapes, none of the rules have changed. We have not changed one rule in Alberta Environment & Parks when it comes to coal. All rules remain in place and will be enforced, and the regulator will be making sure. And in addition to that often what is referred to when it's associated with the 1976 coal policy is what we call internally Category 1 lands which would be very sensitive landscapes, a lot of them a lot along the border of the national parks where our headwaters are and those type of locations, and when the 1976 coal policy was removed by the Department of Energy and put into the Alberta Energy Regulator process, I signed a ministerial order reinforcing Category 1 land protection and making sure that that protection for places like headwaters and Category 1 protection would remain in place as it did under the policy. So at the end of the day what's taken place here is a streamlining of a process under the Department of Energy, the Department of Environment has done its job to make sure that environmental regulations will have to be enforced, and the regulator is doing the work when it comes to potential coal development that may or may not take place inside this province.

Whitney Issik: 39:13

Thanks for that minister. I think Mr. Ellis has a question coming in.

Mike Ellis: 39:18

I do. Thank you Whitney. My question was also about coal mines, so I'm certainly to hear more about this process you're talking about but I guess I'll be more again more forward maybe the police officer in me, let's ask the more forward question, but the questions that I'm getting from constituents is that that you have sold the parks or you've sold land and that there is coal exploration. Coal exploration and that there is mining that has been permitted and occurred under your watch and that there is there's some sort of development of coal that has been going on approved by you. And I would like to hear what you have to say about that.

Jason Nixon: 40:04

Thank you. Well first to be clear there's been no new coal mine that I'm aware of that came in underneath my time as environment minister. That aside though, it's irrelevant because I'm not the one who decides whether or not there's a coal mine. Period. Full stop. That's not the role of the minister of environment or the Department of Environment. As I said, we are responsible for making sure that regulations remain in place. But ultimately the Alberta Energy Regulator and the federal regulator and most of the coal conversations that I'm aware of that are taking place inside this province involve both the federal regulator and the provincial regulator and they ultimately go through that process that's been laid out. But the Department of Environment does not approve coal mines. And that's categorically false. It's kind of, you know, again it's a shame that

certain people have decided to confuse people by spreading that myth and I think it's caused undue fear for people thinking that some of those special places in our province are about to have a whole bunch of coal mines built on it. Now, there are companies that are exploring opportunities when it comes to metallurgical coal inside our province. We are a free enterprise province and they of course have the right and the opportunity to be able to go look and see if they can develop a mine in an environmentally friendly way that follows our regulations and landscapes that they're allowed to do it. But they would have to get through what is a very significant regulatory process that involves Indigenous consultation and involves open public consultation and ultimately goes through the regulatory process and that's what you see taking place down south. So I think some people have confused what has been taking place right now because there is an application working through the regulatory process. You can tell the process is working because people are aware of it and they're making it open to the public to be able to contribute. That process started long before this government was a government. In fact it was taking place under the NDP. That doesn't mean that the NDP approved a coal mine. That means that's when they started to explore it. I will point out there's also a first nation community that's involved down there. The Piikani, I've been down there and visited. This is a significant opportunity for their community. I don't know the details of the regulatory process. It's not our role, we'll be watching it and we'll see how it goes. But again to stress, they can not get just go in unilaterally make a coal mine. They would have to go through a regulatory process. They'd have to meet all of the environmental rules which are significant. And just because a company is exploring that opportunity does not mean that they're going to receive the permit.

Whitney Issik: 42:38

Thanks very much Minister. Now I have one for you. With tourism expected to be and this is from Jay with tourism expected to be a growth industry in the province. Can you comment on how often the parks are utilized by tourists from outside of the province and further, can you contrast the economic benefits derived from these tourist versus the amount of money you may be saving from any of these savings with the parks plan.

Jason Nixon: 43:07

Well the park's plan is not is not focused on saving. That's not the main focus again it's about working to be able to empower organizations that want to work with us to be able to provide a better access to our wild places and help us manage our beautiful backyards. Something that this government committed to in the last election and was is following through on. Now we do have to meet our fiscal obligations as a department just like any other department inside government and we are going to continue to work very hard at Alberta Environment & Parks will provide the services that Albertans need while helping with this great fiscal challenge that the province has. Tourism is a significant industry inside our province, not just from people that come out of province or out of country to be able to come and see the beautiful place that we call home. But right here Albertans like to access their backyard and we saw lots of that this year during COVID with some of the highest numbers going into not only provincial parks but all across public lands inside the province and their contribution is significant. Specifically, site by site, I don't have that with me, but certainly providing access to both provincial parks and public lands provides significant income for the province's GDP and it's a high priority for us. You see it as a big conversation within the 10 year tourism plan that was being worked on by the Department of Tourism pre-COVID and you'll see it as a big conversation that new tourism plan that will be rejigged as the reality of the new situation that we face. But that does not mean that we won't work with great organizations like the Friends of Fish Creek, like the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, like the town of Sylvan Lake and others that want to work with us to be able to provide a great place for Albertans to come and enjoy.

Whitney Issik: 44:51

Thanks for that. I think Jason Copping has a question next.

Jason Copping: 44:57

I do. Thanks so much Whitney. And thanks again Minister Nixon for doing this. One of the other you know some of the issues in regards to de-listing and selling of parks you've addressed, so thanks very much. But one issue I keep hearing again and again is about transparency and consultation, and this, some constituents of mine feel that the changes that were proposed in terms of the approach to dealing with a number of the parks was sort of sprung on them, that there was not consultation, and then that information that was provided was on the site, it was off the site, it's not back on the site. So I was wondering if you could comment the consultation that was done and the information that was provided and then and really I think what people are looking for is assurances that you know parks are very important to all of us. And if there are any future changes going forward, what type of consultation are we going to do in this regard, if we're gonna make any future changes.

Jason Nixon: 45:54

Well if we had actually made the changes that people accuse us of I would certainly see why people would be concerned about not being consulted. But the reality is that we actually have not changed anything really significantly within our system. As I pointed out earlier, partnerships have been an opportunity that we have used across the system for decades. They're already over 100 and some partnerships that are successful within our province. And so by identifying opportunities across the province and opening them up for conversation that is consultation. So by saying "Here are some sites where these opportunities could take place" that's all the government has done, is to continue to build on a system that is already a bit effective for them in the past. I would also point out Mr. Copping that this was something that was consulted on in the election. There was panels done in the development of the United Conservative Party platform where this was strongly suggested by groups that helped us build the conservation platform. That platform was announced by

the now Premier of Alberta the then leader of the opposition [unsure translation] in where we made very clear that we would be working to with non-profit societies to be able to help make sure we have the greatest park system inside the world. And not just park system but to recognize their role and to be able to help us with conservation and the protection of different types of public land or species all across the province. And we also committed within that platform to work hard and strongly with indigenous communities which is part of what this conversation is for potential opportunity. So it was consulted on during the election. But again, what has been presented on here is not significant changes. It's the same system that has been used to develop partnerships. This is just the identification of potential opportunities. With that said, we are going to go through as we committed in our platform a process to be able to look at the Parks Act and the Public Lands Act to be able to streamline some of these conversations to make sure protections in there but you know the fact that there are dozens of land use designations is causing confusion for people making it harder for us to be able to communicate. That's one of the things will be communicated. The NDP chose to bring Alberta Environment & Parks together in one department. Some of that work needs to be finished now to be able to make it one department. And so we're going to have to look at overlap between the acts and how we do that. At the end of the day, there's not Alberta Parks and Alberta Environment, there's now Alberta Environment & Parks, and so that work will take place, but there will be consultation on the options for that before we legislate on those issues as consultation coming on the Trails Act that I referred to. There's consultation coming on how we'll deal with the Provincial Parks Act, and how will do a Public Land Act. So stay tuned for that, you're going to see some more, actually very shortly, where we're going to launch that conversation. And there will be consultation on that. So I just want to close with on that one. I would certainly agree, if the government had come in and was actually selling parks certainly there should be some consultation, but the fact is that's not taking place. We're just building on a system that we inherited, and that has worked well.

Whitney Issik: 48:48

Thanks so much for that Minister. And here's a question I'm going to combine two from Nancy and Daniel. It has to do with wildlife and conservation. Nancy's wondering about whether any consideration was given to potential impact on wildlife or wildlife corridors when we were looking at the various sites and Daniel would like to know if you would speak on the discretionary conservation protections outlined in the Public Lands Act.

Jason Nixon: 49:18

So again these locations that we're talking about are primarily campgrounds and day use zones, they make up a fraction of a percent of the total landscape of the provincial park system and not even like a tiny, tiny percent of the entire public land system which is used to be able to conserve landscapes for the province's species. So, wildlife corridors and those type of issues have not really come to play in this conversation. This is about campground management, day use zones, boat launches. These facilities are not a key part of the infrastructure for species management. Now there are lots of important pieces of infrastructure for wildlife management both in the provincial parks system and more so outside the provincial park system, because the majority of our landscapes are not inside the provincial park system. And that important work on conservation species protection in certain areas, it continues and needs to continue within the department. You know you can almost have another hour just talking about the work that's taking place on that, but to be clear the conversations at campground management are not really bearing on species protection. In fact you know there could be an argument that these campgrounds are not very good for species protection, but this is about trying to find balance of being able access areas while protecting species.

Whitney Issik: 50:37

Thanks so much for that. Now very quickly Mr. Deputy Speaker, very quickly.

Nicholas Milliken: 50:44

Obviously, I talked to a lot of constituents about these issues and then when they when they call me under the impetus of parks a lot of the time they'll also say well now that we're chatting I want to talk to you about while for some of them had this idea that we're privatizing parks through the sale of parks which is we've gone over that about how there are no parks for sale. But then once they get into this word privatization then they want to ask about whether or not this whole parks thing everything that's happening around parks, if it's just as essentially a product of an overall government agenda with regards to privatization and applying equally to health care and to education and things of that nature. So I was wondering if you had anything to, again, these are comments that are coming out of my constituents, out of my constituency. And given that I've got the opportunity to ask you I have to ask you so, and I appreciate you taking the time so.

Jason Nixon: 51:40

So I think the question you're asking is whether or not we would prioritize Parks ie turn them over to businesses or those type of things so I think of is where you're headed if I'm following you. No, we have a provincial park system that remains owned and fully in the control of Alberta Environment & Parks, the department, and the government, and will continue to be. But partnerships of private operators who help come in and operate facilities have been taking place in this province for decades, including underneath the NDP and they do continue to take place. In fact most of the time you are probably camping inside one of our provincial parks and don't even know that it's being managed by a private operator. Jeremy talked about his favorite campground. He knows the operator I think because he goes there enough so he's probably met her but that is managed by a private operator. But they are not, they don't own the facility. They have an arrangement with the provincial parks department to be able to manage them. And that goes back to actually Jeremy mentioned him and I when we worked the mustard seed helped manage some provincial parks for the government at the time, in very remote areas and we happened to be running a lodge that was right next to him and it was way more affordable for our staff to be able to clean the washrooms and maintain the campgrounds for people to

enjoy. But those facilities always remain fully owned by... sorry, those parks always remain fully owned by the Provincial Crown. And will continue to.

Whitney Issik: Perfect. Can I ask Mr. Jeremy Nixon to ask, I think we have time for one last question and then Mr. Ellis if we've got extra minutes. Thank you.

Jeremy Nixon: 53:15 And I'll be real quick then we have a question that came in and I think it's worth noting how much does it currently cost to keep all of our parks as protected areas? So I think it's worth noting that there continues to be an investment in this government for parks. And I wonder if you can talk about that.

Jason Nixon: 53:30 This year. You know we'd be in the range of, and we're not talk about public lands, which again is where most of the landscape is, just for locations underneath the provincial Parks Act. Well over one hundred million dollars a year will be invested inside the provincial park system, which is significant. This is a large landscape as I said, I think about 45,000 hectare within the provincial park system is spread across a province that's bigger than most European countries. And so it does cost money to be able to to manage those facilities and you know I know there's a myth out there that the park system brings in enough to be to cover all the expenses. That's just not accurate. Taxpayers subsidize the system, that we recognize the importance of the system, that's why we continue to do it and we will continue to invest in it, but to be clear the park system does cost Alberta taxpayer significant money.

Jeremy Nixon: 54:20 And you kind of missed a little part of my question. I'm totally sorry about this, but with regards to the idea that this idea of privatization of the parks and whether or not it applies equally to health care and education, since your here and just putting on your government house leader hat.

Jason Nixon: 54:37 Well we're not privatizing health care we're not privatizing education this party. I'm proud to have been one of the negotiators that made the founding documents of the united conservative party that were ratified by both the legacy parties of our government and within those documents it is extremely clear that we support a publicly funded health care system and I don't want to go too far into that because that opens up a whole bunch of questions tonight, we're almost out of time, and we are certainly going to continue to focus on school choice and parent choice within our education system that's a priority for our government. I know very important to my constituents, your constituents, but we will continue to have a robust publicly funded education system in our province.

Whitney Issik: 55:14 Thank you so much for that, and Mr. Ellis.

Mike Ellis: 55:16 Very brief and this has more to do with final thoughts. So Minister, what do you have to say to all those people that have the lawn signs in front of their houses that say 'Save our parks'. Is there a place that they could go, for example, OurParksWillGoOn.com or maybe there's another place where they could go to dispel any of these, this misinformation, that's been put out there. Thank you very much.

Jason Nixon: 55:42 So our parks will go on our website is a great place to go. There's also the Alberta Environment & Parks there's some information up on just the facts I think is what it's called. We'll try to put it up in the link because I actually don't have the website right in front of me at the moment. But then go and get information and also contact us if they want to ask about a specific site. There's hundreds of sites all across the province, so if they're interested in something that's happening in their local area again send us an e-mail at AEP.minister.gov.ab.ca and we'd be happy to track down that information. But again our parks are going to go on and I do think that as we go into the next season and we all head in there to enjoy our beautiful backyard, a lot of people out with signs on there are going to realize that the NDP made a lot of stuff up and that's disappointing and we're not going to focus on that, instead were going to focus on continuing to provide a great system. I do also want to, we don't talk a lot about this today, but there's a lot of fear elsewhere within the province about what happened with the previous government trying to stop access to certain areas inside our province. And this government is going to continue to be strongly committed to making sure that Albertans have access to their their backyard. And so stuff like what you saw them attempt to do in my backyard in Rimby-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre will not be taking place in this government. We continue to trust Albertans to be able to help us protect our backyard. We're going to enforce the rules but we're going to make sure that Albertans can enjoy their backyards now and in future generations.

Whitney Issik: 57:07 Thank you so very much. Minister thank you very much for joining us. I know that you've provided a lot of information to folks today and tonight and I would encourage any of you who have maybe not had your questions answered tonight. We tried to get to everybody as best we could. But you are encouraged to write in to UCPcaucus@assembly.ab.ca. Once again, that's UCPcaucus@assembly.ab.ca and I would also encourage you to join us on our website Ourparkswillgoon.ca. And thank you very much everybody for joining us. Thank you to all of our panel participants Sir Jeremy Nixon Nicholas Milliken Mike Ellis Jason copying and and again for me thank you from Whitney Isaac and have a great night and please keep the questions coming if you'd like us to keep answering them. Thanks.