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## Visiting the Wilderness of Banff National Park: Achieving Touristic Well-Being by “Disconnecting” from Everyday Life and “Connecting” to Nature

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# Visiting the Wilderness of Banff National Park: Achieving Touristic Well-Being by “Disconnecting” from Everyday Life and “Connecting” to Nature

Morgane Müller-Roux

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## Introduction

- 1 Located in the Canadian Rockies, Banff National Park was established in 1885 as Canada’s first national park. It is an iconic destination in North America and embodies both isolation and accessibility. These characteristics have contributed to the park’s popularity, attracting waves of adventure-seeking tourists who yearn for an escape from urban life (Héritier, 2006; Müller-Roux, 2021). The allure of this type of nature is fueled by a powerful tourist imaginary of natural spaces. For many visitors, the aesthetic beauty and immersive experience of these mountain areas allow them to fulfill a deep-seated desire to connect with a wild form of nature that differs from the environment that they call “home” because it offers a pristine wilderness and a mystical dimension that promotes a state of well-being. The wilderness contained in natural parks—and beyond—is advertised by the tourist stakeholders as beneficial for our physical and moral health and the solution to our social ills. This discourse is also associated with the medical and therapeutic world because based on scientific evidence of the benefits of nature, Canadian doctors now prescribe “nature baths” to patients to help them improve their mental and physical health (Bernbaum, 2006; Smith in Chen & Prebensen, 2017; PaRx Canada, 2022). It is also a moral discourse with a strongly held value: the idea that engaging with nature is essential and virtuous. Popular press publications like National Geographic and GEO magazines have frequently portrayed

nature as essential to our well-being, in an almost “mystical” way, thereby reinforcing the current tourist imaginary about natural spaces (Williams, 2016).

- 2 According to the scientific literature (Bulbeck, 2012; Chen & Prebensen, 2017; Dickinson, Hibbert, & Filimonau, 2016; Fletcher, 2014; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016; Vidon, Rickly, & Knudsen, 2018), this discourse on nature drives an increasing number of tourists to visit places considered as wilderness (Depraz, 2008). Furthermore, certain natural spaces, such as those managed by Parks Canada, employ communicative strategies to reinforce the tourist imaginary around nature practices that are beneficial for visitors. This ideology fuels tourists’ desire to visit and experience these places.
- 3 Contemporary discourse on nature practices emphasizes the importance of having an authentic and intense connection with nature, in contrast to the extreme anthropization of the city. Despite the artificiality of modern life, nature’s role in promoting health remains a common topic of discussion, as it was in the late 19th century. The idea that clean air, physical activity and stress relief in nature contribute to our overall well-being and happiness is supported by several studies (Bernbaum, 2006; Chen & Prebensen, 2017; Saarinen, 2014, 2021).
- 4 This study aims to demonstrate that Banff National Park is not exempt from the ideological emphasis on “nature emparquée”. The ideology is driven by a tourist imaginary of the wilderness and the mountains when visiting the park. The concept of wilderness is sometimes translated as “sauvagerie” or “nature sauvage” in French; however, none of these words in French fully capture the complexity of the English term. Close contact with the wilderness could reinforce our moral values, unlike civilization and urbanity, which can degrade the depths of the human being.
- 5 Natural parks, in particular, have become associated with the wilderness. With the creation of the first parks, nature became “tamed” because it was contained and presented as pleasant. All natural elements are considered strange and wild but also lovable because they are aesthetically pleasing to look at. Thus, nature is exoticized to make it accessible to tourists (MacLaren, 2007; Stock, Coëffé, & Violier, 2017). Banff National Park in the Canadian Rockies contains a civilized nature developed for tourists and Canadians. The wilderness is splendid and “attractive” because urban developments make it comfortable and easily accessible. This is reflected in the construction of hotel infrastructure, roads etc. in Banff (Hart, 2015; Luxton, 2008).
- 6 The author will demonstrate that the pursuit of “wilderness”, which originates from a specific imaginary, motivates these tourist practices within the Canadian Rockies. For some visitors, the tourist imaginary of the wilderness contained in this mountain range creates or implies a community of tourist practices that involve the contemplation of nature. Nature is perceived as liminal, which allows visitors to access an emotional state never before attained and contributes to their well-being.

## **Tourist Imaginaries and the Concept of Wilderness: Identifying Connections to Nature**

### **The Tourist Imaginary**

- 7 The concept of the imaginary is frequently used in social science and is essential to both geography and tourism studies. Imaginaries are multidimensional and touch on

many fields within the social sciences. The term “tourist imaginary” refers to the imaginary of geographical places that is created through tourist activities, practices or actors. The notion of the imaginary allows us to examine the thoughts, myths, symbols and views that shape tourist places and spaces. Tourist imaginaries produced through social media and other traditional visual media, for example, play a role in shaping the connections between tourists and nature.

- 8 Many researchers have embraced and redefined this concept of imaginaries, which in this research represents the symbolic meanings and realities that humans project onto part of the world. Here, the concept will be viewed from the perspective of geography, as “the set of interconnected mental images that give meaning and coherence to spaces and spatialities. The imaginary helps to organise spatial conceptions, perceptions and practices” (Debarbieux in Lévy & Lussault, 2013, p. 534). Tourist imaginaries can be defined as spatial imaginaries that refer to the potential “virtuality” of a place as a tourist destination. Tourist imaginaries represent a specific vision of the world, certain social groups, territories and tourist places projected onto places other than the potential tourists’ place of origin. They also allow individuals to represent themselves, imagine a tourist destination and fuel their desire to leave, making a place (more or less) attractive and, thus, actively participating in realizing tourist projects (Salazar, 2012; Salazar & Graburn, 2014).
- 9 Tourism and its production of images participate in the (re)creation, (re)production and (re)invention of local identities found in tourist destinations (Salazar, 2011). The creation and cultivation of imaginaries reduce the distance between home and the tourist destination, thereby taming its exotic character. Tourist imaginaries act as a buffer zone between the here and the elsewhere and allow us to understand the sense of otherness experienced during travel (Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2012; Salazar, 2011). Travelogues, paintings, logbooks and postcards fuel a desire for otherness, adventure and the exotic, thus setting the engine of the “tourist machine” in motion. Currently, the imaginary evolves through various communication channels. Digital technologies have revolutionized the dissemination and transmission of this concept. Our society is increasingly dominated/controlled by images, with an incessant quantity of visual information invading us every day: Advertising posters, television, films, newspapers and the Internet continuously feed our geographical imaginations. For all these reasons, we understand that these media contribute to a shared and collective imaginary: “Personal experience is not the only factor; the practices of others also inform our imagination and shape our tourist practices.”<sup>2</sup> (Equipe MIT, 2005, p. 251). The extent and speed with which images/representations are disseminated have evolved greatly over the past 20 years. With the ubiquity of connections, social media can reach a significant number of individuals almost immediately, allowing for the constant creation, recreation and revitalization of tourist imaginaries. Tourism actors are sometimes caught off-guard by the influx of tourists wanting to replicate the performances they have seen online. Thus, studying and mobilizing tourism imaginaries by tracing their origins and identifying their material effects helps to demonstrate that they can be powerful drivers of socio-cultural and/or environmental change (Salazar, 2012). The role of tourism imaginaries is unavoidable because they allow individuals to confront a tourist location with preconceived expectations and ideas about the place in question. Within this research, the imaginary of nature and

wilderness in Banff National Park constitutes a powerful tourism driver for individuals visiting the park.

- 10 This article aims to demonstrate not only that some tourists possess an Orphic imaginary of the wilderness and perceive nature as a mystical, monumental and beneficial place for the body and the mind but also that the managers and local tourist actors constantly reinforce this vision of nature as “pure and natural”, pleasant to look at and untouched.

## The Wilderness

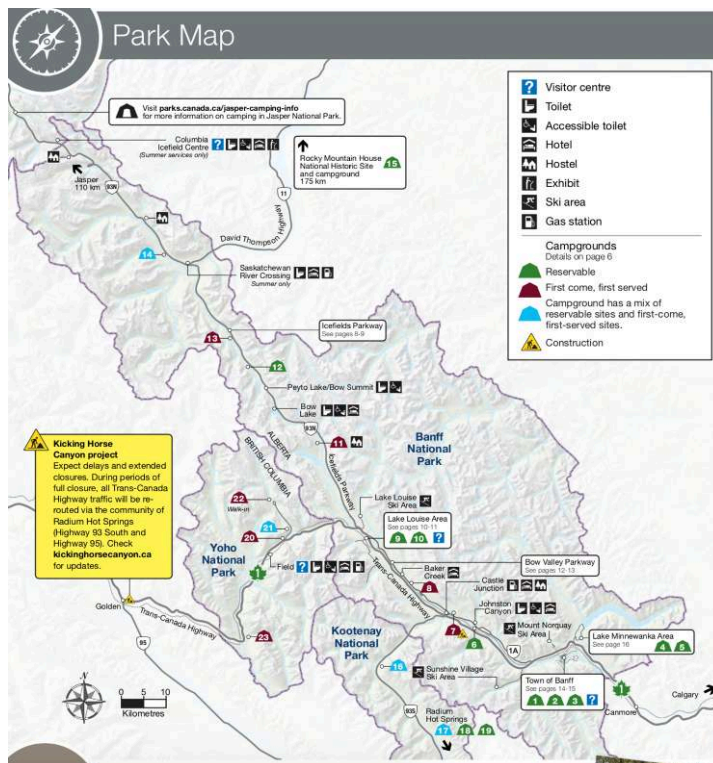
- 11 This article questions the concept of “wilderness”. In the beginning, wilderness referred to, according to Arnould and Glon (2006, p. 228), “(...) être en dehors du social car l’Homme “est tout au plus un visiteur qui ne reste pas” (Wilderness Act, 1964). Largement inhabitée, elle abrite parfois des groupes humains épars et non sédentaires aux cultures dites primitives. Dépourvues de pratiques agricoles, de lois écrites et de gouvernements organisés, ces populations sont considérées comme hors de la civilisation. Ce sont des sauvages. (...) La wilderness c’est le sauvage c’est-à-dire cette nature laissée à son propre sort et des individus jugés primitifs ”. This notion is not prevalent in Europe and is strongly linked to the process of North American colonization (Cronon, 1995, 1996). As mentioned before, there is no term that accurately translates this concept into French. The imaginary of the wilderness and the practice of wilderness were based on a romantic, idealized vision of nature. The Romantic era, which began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, heavily influenced cultural ideology at the time, privileging emotion and intuition over reason and emphasizing the importance of experience over rationality (Locquet & Héritier, 2020). It was based on a clear ideology conveyed, in particular, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the rejection of urbanity. Cities were synonymous with moral decadence and material greed, with nature perceived as the saviour of these evils. As a result, the Romantics advocated the idea that confronting natural elements would be a source of strong, righteous emotions antithetical to urbanity (Depraz, 2008). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, discourses aimed at “the general public” argued that the wilderness and nature were separate/distinct from the human experience; they were literally and figuratively outside the boundaries of modern life. In fact, the wilderness was not only separate but also different, seen as virginal and untouched by humans. The utility and value of wilderness lay in these qualities and in the rarity of true encounters with it. Engaging with nature was only possible through a disruption of normal routines: People had to take time off from work and withdraw from everyday life (Locquet & Héritier, 2020; Loo, 2001).
- 12 While the concept of wilderness is more common in North America, this article aims to demonstrate how this notion is gradually gaining ground among French-speaking and European tourists (Barraud & Périgord, n.d.; Locquet & Héritier, 2020). Although the term “wilderness” is not yet widely used, the imaginaries and representations (via social media) attached to it can be associated with the practices of natural mountain spaces. Tourist practices of the mountain and the wilderness contained in it are “lived” and relayed as places suitable for disconnection, allowing individuals to cut themselves off from their daily lives and offering privileged contact with various elements of the

natural environment. This project will question this concept, which has complex meanings and interpretations, and attempt to shed light on how nature lovers use it.

## Methodology

- 13 This research was conducted within Banff National Park, Canada's first national park, located in the province of Alberta in the Canadian Rockies (see Figure 1). The results presented here are derived from methodological approaches applied during various fieldworks undertaken for a total of three months between the summer of 2016 and the winter of 2018

Figure 1. Map of Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada



Parks Canada 2022

- 14 In this article, the author emphasizes the importance of adopting a qualitative approach, with a strong interest in visual data. First, visual materials, including photographs, tourist brochures, local archives, websites and a selection of Instagram accounts, were collected. This collection led to an analysis of both discourse and images. Image analysis in this project allowed us to demonstrate that advertising campaigns and the social network Instagram—specifically, certain specific accounts dedicated to tourism practices in Banff National Park—produce particular representations and currently promote a specific imaginary of this “nature emparquée”. Additionally, image analysis allowed us to understand how images “in free circulation” feed and produce imaginaries, leading to the development of certain practices and behaviours connected to nature. In summary, this collection of visual materials constituted a strong corpus for analyzing the current imaginaries of the wilderness contained in Banff.

- 15 Second, participant observation was conducted. In this case study, the researcher observed and photographed tourists (and their practices) in a context where new tactics and strategies were being implemented to deal with new realities. Specifically, these observations were made during various group activities dedicated to tourists, including guided tours, kayaking and horseback riding, during which brief semi-structured interviews were carried out. During each of these group activities, the author also acted as a tourist, collecting visual materials with her camera, reflex camera and cell phone while keeping in mind her role as a researcher. Some of these group activities were essential to the case study presented in this article and allowed for the collection of valuable data, including informal conversations with local actors and tourists.
- 16 Finally, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourists throughout their stay in the Banff National Park to address issues related to the wilderness, tourism practices and personal use of digital technologies for non-daily practices. Several interviews with park officials were also conducted to gain insights into the park's management and policies. A total of nearly 70 formal interviews were conducted with tourists, local stakeholders and park officials.
- 17 Banff National Park was chosen as a case study because it combines various aspects of this research and serves as a vast natural “playground” for tourists. Moreover, Banff National Park and the Canadian Rockies are considered iconic spaces on a North American scale, symbolizing places that are both isolated yet easily accessible. All of these advantages have led to the park's increasing popularity, attracting millions of tourists annually thirsting for adventure and a break from their daily urban lives. Banff National Park alone receives more than 4 million visitors per year; attendance at all seven of the mountain parks that comprise the Canadian Rockies pushes the figure to 9 million (Parks Canada Agency 2015; Héritier 2006). These impressive numbers undoubtedly demonstrate visitors' interest in parks and nature.

## A Tourist Imaginary Turned towards the “Well-Being Wilderness”

### The Construction of the Park's Tourist Imaginary: An Orphic Vision of Nature Masking Anthropic Development

- 18 The author supports the view that the common discourse and aesthetic representations of places considered to be wilderness—as promoted by Banff's tourist actors—contribute to the development of Canadian parks and, specifically, Banff National Park. The current tourism discourse revolves around the contrast between nature and humans: Brochures and certain websites attract a multitude of visitors to the park by showcasing and promising breathtaking and extremely “pure and natural” landscapes, which imply an absence of anthropization. For example, Banff Lake Louise Tourism's communication strategy presents the place as an ensemble, then follows a series of adjectives or characteristics to describe its aesthetic assets and its “naturalness” and, finally, includes the future visitor in this same landscape by promising a striking and rejuvenating experience. Moraine Lake is described in the following way:

Its waters are the most amazing colour, a vivid shade of turquoise that changes in intensity through the summer as the glaciers melt. Set in the rugged Valley of the

Ten Peaks, Moraine Lake is surrounded by mountains, waterfalls, and rock piles, creating a scene so stunning it almost seems unreal. Sit lakeside and absorb the sights and pure mountain air, or explore further by canoeing and hiking. It's an iconically jaw-dropping place that is sure to leave a lasting impression. (Banff and Lake Louise Tourism, 2016)

Figures 2 and 3. Various views from Moraine Lake



Author



- 19 Therefore, this description emphasizes the role of the visitor during their visit to the park. The tourist is expected to do only one thing: gaze at and contemplate the nature on offer and forget everything else around. This point is reminiscent of Urry's famous concept of the "tourist's gaze" (1990). Furthermore, by presenting the tourist in this way, we cannot help but think of the concept of performance as proposed by Edensor: Tourists put in place a series of codified tactics during their tourist practices, aware of the social norms and the role they must play once they are there (Edensor, 1998). These same social norms and collective imaginaries are "dictated" by the prescribers of practices (in this case, the tourist office). As a result, the discourse on nature published in promotional literature continues to produce an imaginary of Banff consisting of "natural" spaces, where visitors have the opportunity to forget the codes and norms that govern urban life while offering all of its conveniences (e.g., highways, restaurant, golf, spa, ski resort, etc.). However, the development of the Canadian Rockies parks is paradoxical as it involves infrastructure within nature. The promotional material used by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) at the time the study was conducted seemed to ignore the irony that the pristine nature of the wilderness was continually being developed to pave the way for tourism development. This discourse remains relevant today, as road and hotel infrastructures serve as a means, or even a pretext, for bridging the gap between impressive nature and controlled urbanity.
- 20 The official website of the Parks Canada Agency presents Banff National Park as follows:
- Rocky Mountain peaks, turquoise glacial lakes, a picture-perfect mountain town and village, abundant wildlife and scenic drives come together in Banff National Park—Canada's first national park and the flagship of the nation's park system. Over three million visitors a year make the pilgrimage to the park for a variety of activities including hiking, biking, skiing and camping in some of the world's most breathtaking mountain scenery.
- 21 Here, visitors contemplate the aesthetic criteria contained within the park while enjoying a variety of outdoor activities. The timeless beauty of this "nature emparquée" is perfectly compatible with "mass tourism", offering a variety of nature sports activities, thus highlighting a certain "urbanity" in the park. However, the promotional materials and tourist imaginaries of Banff and its neighbours remain frozen in time, trapped in an aesthetic ideal already present at the turn of the century, emphasizing a romantic dimension. These tourist imaginaries perpetuate an Orphic vision of nature, referring to Orpheus in Greek mythology who is in harmony with nature and coincides with this contemplative practice (Müller-Roux, 2021; Stock et al., 2017). However, in the different examples above, as well as in the tourist brochures, we understand that the communication strategies for the development of Banff National Park also convey a Promethean imaginary. It is Promethean because the wilderness in the park is controlled by human hands but remains accessible and open to tourists. It is a domesticated, contained nature that is available for the enchantment of visitors.

### **Achieving Touristic Well-Being by "Disconnecting" from Everyday Life and "Connecting" to Nature**

- 22 This Orphic imaginary of nature is also evident in the discourse of the tourists on-site. When asked how they feel in nature, the interviewees often expressed the idea that being in nature increases personal well-being:

Um, how do you feel when you're in nature (e.g., Banff)?

I feel good, except when I have to walk too much uphill (laughs). But I feel rejuvenated.

Why?

Because it's supposed to be a quiet place, no noise, no disturbance. Yeah, no noise, or city noise. (pause) Yes, it's mostly the nuisances of the city and the traffic everywhere. (Delphine, Switzerland, 27 years old).

23 The interviewee perceives nature as a place that is distinct from the urban environment. Delphine's perception is that nature is a "quiet" place without the noise pollution that is more characteristic of cities. The opposition between the urban environment and nature allows her to reach a state of resourcefulness and "find herself".

24 The nature within the national park is part of an Orphic imaginary dominated by a romantic vision of nature. It is a way to reach a state of contemplation that can be difficult to achieve in everyday life, which is marked by ubiquitous urbanity. The wilderness of Banff serves as an aesthetic view that allows one to distance oneself from the worries of daily life, enabling some of the interviewees to reach an emotional state that is not often present during daily practices. For Albert, a young man in his thirties, the act of "doing nothing" (i.e., contemplating) allows him to feel at peace:

When you were in nature, in the backcountry, how did you feel?

Alone in the world.

And that feeling brings you joy?

No, peace, inner peace. I often stayed outside, just doing nothing. I listened.

Is it important for you to be alone and confront nature?

No, I'm not confronted. I'm more in tune with nature. (Albert, Switzerland, 29 years old)

25 This contemplative practice of wilderness is almost like a state of awakening to the world. It is as if nature, and consequently travel, allows one to "re-create" oneself and distance oneself from everyday life (MIT Team, 2002). Here, immobility and contemplation of the landscape become a source of new sensations that transcend the place and the present moment. Theo, another interviewee, reflects on his experience while standing with his feet in the sand at the edge of Lake Louise:

In that moment, I don't think about the past or project myself into the future. I only think about the now. I think about us, here on the other side of the Earth, 10,000 km from home, surrounded by mountains that are not ours but yet so similar. We're in an environment and an exceptional nature (...) my legs tired from walking. Then I also think of the contrast between my cold feet, the water flowing on them and the sun hitting my cheeks. It all brings on a weird, almost euphoric feeling. (Theo, Switzerland, 28 years old)

26 The contemplation of nature, as well as the journey itself, allows one to reach this state of "recreation" and break with daily life, which is promised by a certain tourist practice. This account shows that both discovering an elsewhere (even if it is similar to "home") and being confronted with an aesthetic nature enables this young man to fully "benefit" from the present moment. This creates a new temporality that is linked to the practice of wilderness during off-duty time. In this way, the imaginary of nature as transcendent, thanks to its untouched and saving beauty, is found in the visitors' discourses and observed in their (immobile) practices on-site. In fact, during the four field visits made by the researcher, observations revealed that numerous people were

sitting on the edge of a pathway, looking at the landscape and soaking up their surroundings. In short, “they were contemplating” (cf. Figures 4 and 5).

Figures 4 and 5. Visitors sitting on the edge of a pathway, meditating and/or contemplating nature



Author

## The Rockies, a Natural Landscape Dedicated to Contemplation

### Constructing Tourist Contemplation: Park Facilities

- 27 Banff National Park is designed to make it easier for tourists to “gaze at” and contemplate the wilderness. The park is physically laid out in such a way that visitors can contemplate the landscape as easily as possible, with main tourist sites accessible from major highways and easy to reach by car. For example, a visitor to Lake Louise can drive for 30 minutes on the Trans-Canada Highway (from the town of Banff), park in the huge parking lot provided for visitors, and after a 3-minute walk, access the shores of the lake, which are built in the form of an arena to contemplate the seven glaciers. A similar scenario is offered to tourists wishing to discover Moraine Lake, where the moraine mound has benches, railings and paths fully fitted out for the tourist practice (see Figure 6). In recent years, Parks Canada has also made wooden “red chairs” available for people to sit on:

Connect with nature and make memories in Canada’s most unique and treasured places. Find over 200 red Adirondack chairs placed in peaceful, breathtaking locations from coast to coast. Rest, relax and discover the wonders Parks Canada has to offer. While some chairs are easy to find, others require more of an adventure. There is no better feeling than finding the red chairs at the end of a challenging hike, or simply happening upon them during a leisurely stroll. (Parcs Canada, 2020)

Figure 6. Viewpoint at Moraine Lake



Author

- 28 This “red chair” programme was initiated by Parks Canada to create new opportunities for visitors to connect with nature. The programme offers new experiences that are accessible to all audiences and target a younger generation of visitors. Parks Canada is

promoting the red chair campaign online through various social media to reach a wider range of potential visitors. According to Parks Canada: “Visitors are encouraged to seek out the red chairs to enjoy these special places and to share their experience through social media and other communication channels.”

- 29 In Banff National Park, the programme has been very well received, and visitors have shared many special moments on social media (Parks Canada Agency, 2017). While some of the red chairs are easy to spot, others are tucked away in slightly more secluded areas of the park. Surprisingly, during various field visits, these chairs were often empty, especially in high-traffic areas, as visitors preferred to go directly to strategic viewpoints.
- 30 In short, the aesthetic dimension and the contemplative practice of nature are strongly encouraged by Parks Canada. Nature is presented as a setting available to park visitors for consumption and contemplation, as it allows them to experience “extraordinary” moments that stand out from the everyday. The “immobile” practice of contemplating nature is accessible to all the park’s tourists and enables them to get closer to nature. It doesn’t require any particular skill except “gazing at”. Not only is tourism experienced as a displacement (i.e., a practice of another place) but it also involves aesthetics and, consequently, the “gaze”. John Urry emphasizes that tourism is a matter of “gazing at” because tourism is a way of looking at places and people (Urry, 1990). Urry also states that this gaze is different from the gaze of everyday life, as it takes a new interest in objects, scenes and views. This is how certain groups of people appear as exotic because they are characterized by a new alterity. Thus, the nature contained in the park is considered different from everyday life, as it is located in an “other” place and has strong aesthetic value. The tourist, therefore, looks at nature as a landscape or a “décor”.

### Coping with social media success: managing tourism pressures

- 31 One of the main objectives of this article is to demonstrate that the practices of contemplating wilderness, which contribute to the well-being of some people, also involve a series of codes and normative practices on the part of visitors that affect the environment. One such tourist practice documented during fieldwork is the staging of a main protagonist alone in front of nature for photographic purposes to emphasize the monumental character of the mountainous landscapes in Banff. Seeking to immortalize the wilderness and the mountains while being a tourist has become a common practice. Capturing iconic places and photographing them in a way that shows them in a way that is as natural and aesthetically pleasing as possible has quickly become an obsession among visitors. In this way, tourists immortalize hot spots in a deliberate and carefully planned way, with the main objective being the art of posing alone. For example, John, a solo outdoor enthusiast, wanted to capture Johnston Canyon when it was as quiet as possible, without the presence of other tourists:

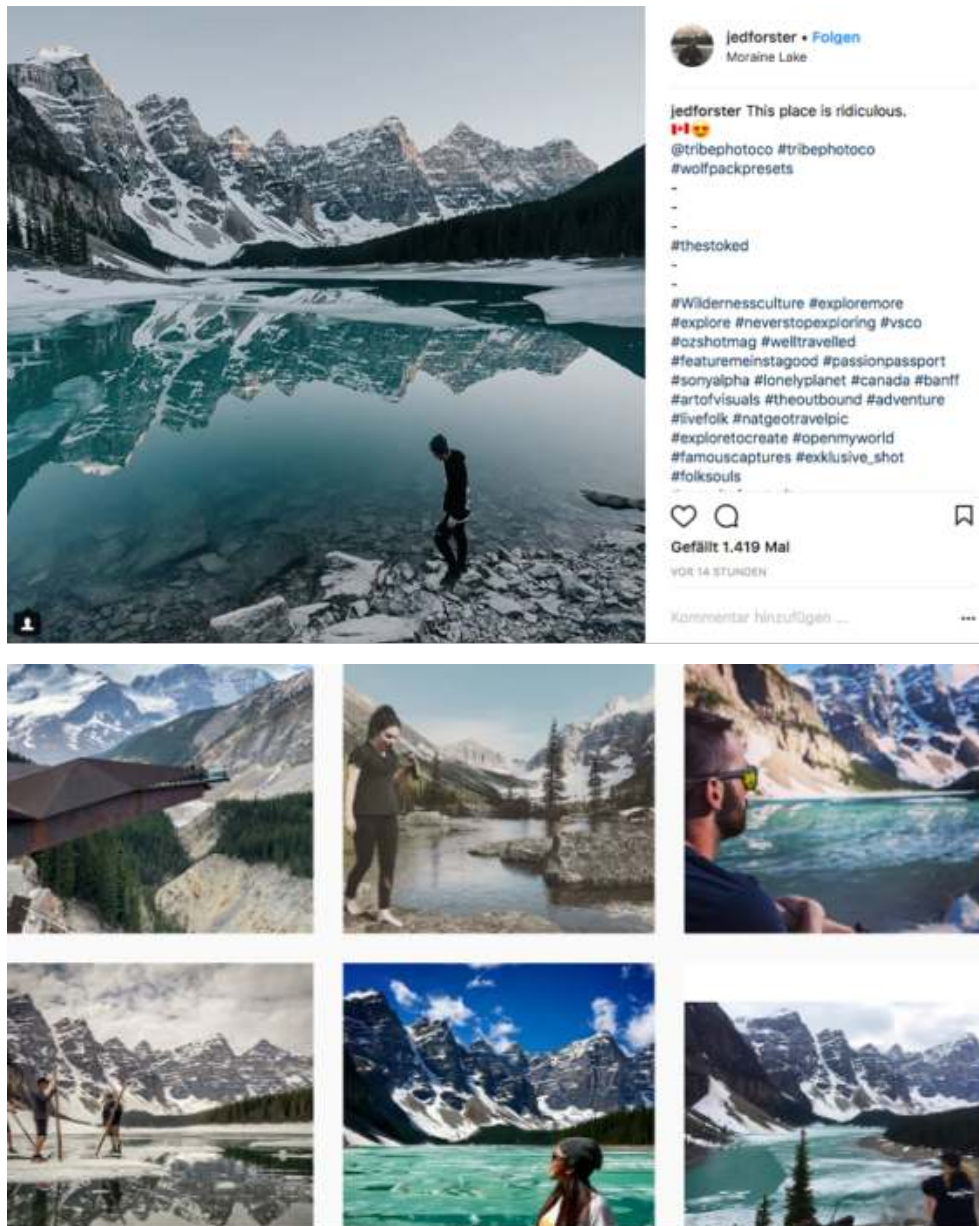
I try to get nobody else in the shot. Sometimes it’s a bit tricky, as you can see. (John, USA, 40 years old)

- 32 He later explained that he wanted to capture this exact spot without anybody else in the shot, in accordance with the imaginary of the wilderness (i.e., an absence of people). To achieve this, he arrived relatively early (about 9 a.m.), but the place was already crowded with other tourists. Undeterred, he set up his tripod, connected his

phone to his camera and patiently waited for the right moment to trigger the photograph remotely. Thus, he had to adjust his tourist practices to align with his photographic goals.

- 33 This style of photographic practice is also widespread online. An analysis of certain Instagram accounts confirms that this trend of posing alone while facing the “wilderness” has become a popular trend on social media among visitors to hot spots like Banff (cf. Figure 7).

Figure 7. Examples of people posing “alone with nature” on Instagram

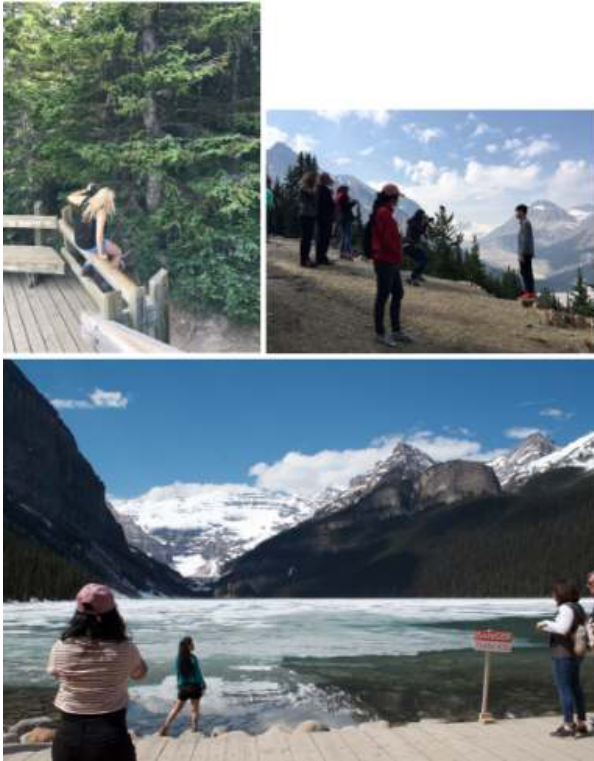


Source: Instagram

- 34 During a visit to Lake Louise, a young couple asked, “Could you take a picture of us? So there’s only us in the picture?” Lake Louise is one of the top spots where this trend can be easily observed. The physical layout of the place is conducive to aesthetic photography, and it is possible to venture to the edge of the lake, in summer or winter,

to distance oneself as much as possible from other tourists (see Figure 8). This effect is achieved by mobilizing different tactics to fit the representations as seen on Instagram. In some cases, achieving these poses involves strategies that transgress the laws enacted by the park authorities, such as going off-trail, climbing on or over barriers, walking on ice or balancing on logs to capture the expected shot. These tactics are deployed to obtain a photograph that fits the different imaginaries of it on social media.

Figure 8. Examples of tourists in the field posing “alone with nature”



Author

- 35 These photographic performances have not been without consequences for the local fauna and flora, however. The massive sharing of certain places on social media has resulted not only in traffic jams on-site but also in environmental degradation. Some natural sites are simply not equipped to handle so many people and are under pressure. Johnston Canyon and its “secret cave” is a typical example of an “ultra-trending” place via Instagram. The park had to close access to the area because the presence of visitors was disturbing local wildlife, but this decision took a long time—nearly two years—to be implemented. Some regular visitors to the park also express concern about the impact of the rising visibility of certain spots on Instagram:

It’s very clear that if you go to Johnston Canyon, it will be crowded. If your travel ideas for Banff come from Instagram, then it’s absolutely certain you won’t be there alone. Then again, if you do more research on the side, it’s really not difficult to find a place where you can experience solitude. (Trent, Canada, about 50 years old)

- 36 The use of Instagram is seen as a means of highlighting certain locations in Banff National Park, and park officials are sometimes caught off-guard by how quickly these spots become extremely popular.

## A necessary territorial management

- 37 In addition to the nuisances caused by the recent promotion of certain places on the Instagram platform, the interviews and on-site observations show that these protected mountain areas are quickly overrun during the summer season and face the same economic, spatial and environmental issues as certain “urbanized” places.
- 38 For example, the town of Banff (part of Banff National Park), has seen continuous demographic growth over the past 30 years. While it had almost 200 inhabitants in 1901, its population grew to nearly 3,500 by 1961, and currently, the population has reached 7,847 permanent residents. In various interviews with locals, merchants and officials, the demographic pressure on the town of Banff was a major concern. One shopkeeper explained that:
- Recently, rental and real estate prices have become way too expensive for my husband and me, so we had to move. We had lived here for a long time, but eventually, we decided we couldn’t afford it, so we moved to Canmore. It’s only a 20-minute drive away. However, if you leave in the morning, you can be stuck in a traffic jam. Many locals have made the same decision to leave Banff and find a new place in Canmore. (Gayle, Canada)
- 39 The town of Banff is subject to the same economic rhythms and pressures as any other urbanized tourist centre. However, since the 1990s, town planning has become increasingly restrictive in both commercial and residential areas. For example, Parks Canada has restricted sporting activities and imposed a moratorium on construction in areas of the city used as wildlife corridors, and growth in the city is currently governed by draconian regulations. As the interviews reveal, demographic pressure and popularity in terms of economic opportunity and quality of life make it extremely difficult to find housing:
- It’s hard to live here; it’s very expensive. But when you’ve been here for a few years, you find informal places to live that aren’t in the newspapers. You have to stay here for a while, get to know people, and when something comes up, people will come to you. You start at the bottom and then, little by little, you find places that are a little better and cheaper. Well, you certainly know better than me how expensive it is. (Kahli, Canada, 30 years old)
- 40 It is not uncommon to find a large number of seasonal workers without accommodation during the summer season staying at campsites or illegally renting flats. These issues are a clear reminder of the challenges found in large urban areas (Bourdeau, Mao & Corneloup, 2011)
- 41 Furthermore, the exceptional situation in this city involves managing possible conflicts between humans and wildlife. Occasionally, bears, wolves and other predators cross and live near inhabited areas, which can create a tense atmosphere for both parties:
- Wildlife viewing is one of the most exciting experiences you can have in the mountain national parks. It is important to treat wildlife with respect. By getting too close, you threaten their survival. Animals that become accustomed to human presence risk losing what makes them such fascinating creatures — their wildness. (Parks Canada Agency, 2017b)
- 42 As a result, one of the main issues for the town of Banff, as well as the national park, is managing urbanity within wilderness spaces. For the past 30 years, there have been strict efforts in terms of planning and managing land parcels, primarily concerning the permanent residents of Banff. However, the current issues, which officials rarely



discuss but are frequently highlighted by locals and the local press, mainly involve tourist pressures on protected areas. Over the past five years, the popularity of Banff and its “must-see” areas—Moraine Lake, Lake Louise, Peyto Lake and Johnston Canyon—have attracted crowds of tourists seeking natural and aesthetically pleasing landscapes, causing unprecedented pressures on the park. 2017, which marked Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, saw a record number of visitors. In response to this growing influx during the summer season, Parks Canada is now attempting to encourage visitors to come to the park in May and September, thus extending the summer season into the “shoulder seasons” (Interview, Parks Canada intern, 2018). Local authorities have also taken steps to direct tourists to lesser-known sites in Banff to reduce crowds at certain sites (Interview, official authorities, 2018). Parks Canada now faces new challenges related to the growing interest in the park’s nature.

- 43 The international influence of Banff National Park’s tourism causes surges that can be difficult or even impossible to reconcile with sustainable wildlife management principles, which highlights the incompatibility of the Canadian parks model that prioritizes entertainment. The measures introduced in 2018 included closing access to sites when car parks are full (in some cases, this ban generated even greater interest in the site) and providing shuttles to encourage visitors to use public transport instead of personal vehicles. However, changing the mentality of nature tourists has proved difficult as buses are often empty, and the car parks around the tourist sites are still overcrowded. Furthermore, Parks Canada has implemented developments that contradict the discourse favouring nature conservation, such as the creation of a 400-space car park near a site already weakened by constant (summer and winter) traffic, indicating the hold of tourist entertainment on park managers.
- 44 These pressures from the development of the tourist economy and the park’s promotion on social media sometimes leave park managers speechless (Interview, Parks Canada intern, 2018). Owing to the speed of trending places and photographic performances, Parks Canada is struggling to react and make decisions, mainly because park management decisions are made at the national rather than the local level. These issues highlight the challenges of tourism: One could speak of an “overtourism” situation in most of the tourist sites promoted by the park. It is difficult for the tourist actors of Banff National Park to handle this delicate situation as the sites are still promoted internationally, and visitors expect them to be accessible to all those who want to experience the wilderness in Banff.

## Conclusion

- 45 In summary, the interviews and field observations reveal a strong imaginary of the wilderness in Banff that exists in both the common discourse and the mentalities of tourists visiting the Canadian Rockies. “Contemplative” practices of nature and the search for a confrontation with wilderness allow individuals to reach a state of “recreation” and break away from their everyday lives. The appreciation of the aesthetics of nature, its immensity and therapeutic and mystical values is omnipresent in the interviews and field observations. Going to Banff National Park, a natural space, allows people to “reconnect” with nature, which is essential for our well-being in a world of digital technologies and urbanization that have caused a break in this link (Louv, 2008). Therefore, some people are seeking the practice of nature to create positive effects on

their mental and spiritual health. In this research, travellers may experience a fusion between themselves and the wilderness, allowing them to discover their place in the world and achieving self-realization or existential authenticity (Laing and Frost in Chen & Prebensen, 2017). Additionally, this research has shown that this mountain nature is presented as fragile, sensitive to climate disruption and worthy of protection (Reynard, 2020). However, despite this ideology, the tourist development of mountain areas often coincides with the prospect of economic growth. It would be worthwhile to investigate this further. While the mountain often constitutes economic support for certain territories, with tourism having been a pillar of this sector of activity since the beginning of the 20th century (Bourdeau et al., 2011; Reynard, 2020), it continues to be presented as a virginal and “natural” space. Visitors to Banff may experience it as the antithesis of wilderness because of its urban features, but this does not prevent them from taking advantage of these same urban infrastructures during their tourism practices.

- 46 Finally, this research highlights that current ways of dealing with nature play a non-negligible role in nature conservation, creating new tourist practices that sometimes have negative impacts on local fauna and flora. The authorities maintain “an official politicised discourse” of these natural spaces, and the Canadian national parks represent economic support for Canada, above all else. Tourism and entertainment for the Canadian people have always been the founding principle of Canada’s national parks.

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## NOTES

1. Translated by the author: “l’ensemble d’images mentales’ reliées entre elles qui confèrent une signification et une cohérence à des espaces et des spatialités. L’imaginaire contribue à organiser les conceptions, les perceptions et les pratiques spatiales”.
2. Translated by the author: “L’expérience personnelle ne compte pas uniquement ; les pratiques des autres informent aussi notre imaginaire et font évoluer nos pratiques touristiques”.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper strives to demonstrate the strong link between current discourses on nature and the tourist imaginaries of nature practices. Indeed, there is a dominant common discourse on nature which affirms that being in nature and its practice would be beneficial for the body and the mind. Currently, national parks seem to offer the ideal space for people to “get away from it all”, because nature—and the wilderness more particularly—is becoming more and more important within tourist imaginaries as it symbolize a break with the stress of everyday life. This study, carried out in Banff National Park, in Canada, tries in particular to illustrate these new ways of

dealing with nature. These tourist practices are not without effects on the environment: as we will see through field observations that these protected territories are quickly taken over and are now overwhelmed by their success. The mountain regions and certain natural areas then suddenly undergo strong anthropogenic pressures, leaving certain managers “stunned” by this influx of visitors in search of connections with nature.

Cet article s’applique à démontrer le lien fort entre les discours actuels sur la nature et les imaginaires touristiques des pratiques de la nature. En effet, il existerait un discours commun dominant sur la nature qui affirme qu’être dans la nature et sa pratique serait bénéfique pour le corps et l’esprit. Actuellement, les parcs nationaux semblent offrir l’espace idéal pour que les gens « s’éloignent de tout », car la nature — et la *wilderness* plus particulièrement — devient de plus en plus importante au sein des imaginaires touristiques car elle symboliserait une rupture avec le stress de la vie quotidienne. Cette étude réalisée au sein du Parc national de Banff, au Canada tâche notamment d’illustrer ces nouvelles manières de faire avec la nature. Ces pratiques touristiques ne sont pas sans effets sur le milieu investi, nous verrons à travers les observations de terrain que ces territoires protégés se retrouvent rapidement pris d’assaut et sont désormais victimes de leur succès. Les régions de montagnes et certains espaces naturels subissent alors soudainement de fortes pressions anthropiques laissant certains gestionnaires « pantois » face à cet afflux de visiteurs et de visiteuses en quête de contacts/connexions avec la nature.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** wilderness, Banff National Park, imaginaries, tourism practices

**Mots-clés:** wilderness, Parc national de Banff, imaginaires, pratiques touristiques

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