Is Climate Change the Achilles Heel of Protected Area Planning in Canada?

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At the fourth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature concluded, "Climatic change represents a critical and urgent threat to all ecosystems ... (and) Existing ... protected areas may not provide adequate future safeguards for the continued survival of existing ecosystems and species in a changing world." Like protected area planning around the world, most federal and provincial-territorial conservation agencies in Canada have adopted some type of ecoregion or biogeoclimatic land classification framework as the main system-planning tool for their terrestrial protected area systems. These steady-state protected area system plans were developed with the assumptions of climatic and biogeographic stability; assumptions that the accumulating body of research related to observed and projected biophysical impacts of climate change indicates are no longer tenable. Consequently, climate change highlights fundamental questions regarding the future role of protected areas and whether completing existing protected area system plans represents the optimal use of limited conservation resources. Individual park objective statements, wildfire management strategies, non-native species management programs, and species reintroduction programs are also vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This presentation will use Canada's national park system to examine the implications of climate change for conservation policy and planning in Canada and explore some of the institutional barriers to climate change adaptation.