Laureen Harper  
Royal Canadian Geographical Society’s (RCGS) Awards Ceremony  
Gatineau, Wednesday, November 13, 2013

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Stephen and I are delighted to be here and we are especially thrilled to officially join The Royal Canadian Geographical Society as honorary fellows. Please accept our sincere thanks for this great honor and also for the invitation to join you this evening.

We really love this country of ours and so this means a great deal to us both. My love for the Canadian outdoors began when I was young girl. Turner Valley, the town where I was born and raised, is nestled right up to the Rocky Mountains. And I must say we also have a little bit... We don't have the big flaming pit but we have a little hillside that has always been on fire as long as I've been alive. So, I guess it's just natural gas just being burned off in the air.

Anyway, every day we had a view of the beautiful mountains and I looked at them every single day growing up. To this day, when driving west of Calgary as you head west on the Number 1 Highway and I see the mountains, I know that I’m home. Growing up when I had free time I didn't turn on the TV, there weren't any... Well because we only had a black and white TV. It was no good and we only had two channels. There weren't any smart phones or computer games to distract me. There were just the rivers and the creeks of the foothills and the mountains that were my classroom and my playground.

My father and I would often go hiking together. In fact some of my happiest childhood memories came from being on the trails with my dad. My father grew up in and around those mountains as my grandfather ran the Bighorn Lumber Company on Dyson Creek, which is now part of Kananaskis Country. He passed his love of being alone in the wilderness on to me.

The avid hikers in this room — and I know there's a few — know that hiking is all about navigating valley to valley through the mountain passes. And so my dad and I would work our way up a valley, over a pass, and then on to the next valley.
A few years ago I was with a group of people. We were stuck on a rock face on Macphail Mountain in Kananaskis Country heading up to the Lake of the Horns. I always picked the route and my friends, again, were grumbling at the route I picked. We couldn't find the trail and somebody yelled out, when was the last time you were on this trail? And I said, when I was 12. That was, sort of, 38 years ago, not that we're counting. 38 years ago. That's a long time. But lo and behold, after a couple of minutes of trying we did find the mountain and we ended up on the top at this beautiful lake and a beautiful place where not very many people get to go. So it's amazing how, as a child, you remember where you want to go.

We would feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment and also anticipation because we never knew what would meet us on the other side of the pass. Before completely losing the view of a conquered valley behind us we would always stop and take one more look, drinking in the beauty one last time. Higher and higher you go, very slowly I must add, as you're climbing with a 40-pound pack. The thrill of those last few steps, breathing hard, knowing you're about to see the next valley, and it could be totally different than the one you're in. I'm talking about geography and wildlife. And I'm talking about grizzly bears. The thrill of seeing a grizzly in the wild is indescribable.

Western Canada is full of these famous passes — the Rogers Pass, the Kicking Horse Pass, the High Wood Pass where I'm from. They are the history of the west. They are as much of the history as the north... The fabled Northwest Passage is for northern explorers.

Ladies and gentlemen, The Royal Canadian Geographical Society's mission, your mission, and now our mission, is to make Canada better known to Canadians and the world. It's a big undertaking and it's an important one. So often Canadians get on a plane and fly across an ocean to have their adventure. They go south to the US or even further south to Mexico for their vacations. My wish is for the people of Canada to take at least one trip locally every year.

I wish that Canadians would choose to hike and camp in Gros Morne National Park instead of Yosemite, Algonquin Park instead of Central Park, and Auyuittuq National Park instead of Hyde Park. I wish more Canadians would search for clues about the fate of the
lost Franklin expedition in Nunavut rather than scuba dive in the Caribbean — actually I think John wrote that paragraph.

Now full disclosure here ladies and gentlemen. Stephen and I have done a fair bit of traveling over the years. International travel is, after all, part of the job description. But for all the traveling we've done, all the wonders we have visited, and all the fun we've had, I can truthfully say there is nowhere that I would rather be than in the Rockies, standing on the Palliser Pass, the boundary between Alberta and B.C., the boundary between Banff National Park and the Height of the Rockies Park in B.C.

You folks have spent many, many years learning about Canada. Some of you have dedicated your lives to exploring the untouched places and discovering unknown species above the land and below the water. But instead of sitting on that knowledge, hoarding it, or keeping your pictures stuffed in dusty closed albums you have chosen to share what you've learned with your fellow Canadians young and old, and people across the world. In doing so each one of you is serving your country in a profound and a special way. I want to thank you for that, and I encourage you to keep it up. And I would make a request to maybe make some donations to this great society here also.

Once again, let me thank you for this great honour and for the opportunity to share a bit of my love for Canada with you. Thank you very much.