

# **Panel Commentary: An Approach for Monitoring in Ontario's Provincial parks and Protected Areas**

Catherine Dowling  
Gartner Lee Limited

As an environmental economist and social scientist, I have been involved in public policy development throughout my career. I have also worked with the public and more specifically, community based environmental organizations, on a wide range of issues. I have tried to bring this experience to my review of the draft "Approach For Monitoring Ontario's Parks and Protected Areas" and to provide you with some comments from a socio-economic perspective.

The proposed framework develops logically from a set of principles and goals to a discussion of the ecological, social and economic components of sustainability. As such, it provides a sound and comprehensive background for developing specific monitoring objectives and tools.

The real challenge in this exercise is to apply the conceptual framework in a way that has some hope of being implemented within the Government's current fiscal climate.

## **State of the Parks**

The monitoring program is intended to improve our understanding of the state of the Parks and Protected Spaces from social and economic perspectives as well as their ecological health. With respect to parks spaces and communities, there are a wide range of relevant questions to be asked, including,

- Are the parks meeting the program needs of the public?
- Are people's attitudes regarding the parks being revealed through the monitoring measures? How are attitudes changing over time?
- Is the public willing to make commitments, financial and in-kind commitments, to the protection and enhancement of protected spaces and features?
- What is the nature and strength of the relationships between park spaces and the surrounding communities?
- How well are the goals being supported by financial resources? Is lack of funding a limiting factor in reaching specific targets or the overall goals?
- Are parks making a significant contribution to the economic health of the province or specific communities? What are communities' expectations for economic return?
- Can the results of monitoring measures tell us something significant about the health of local economies and dependencies of communities on the parks and spaces?

## **Benefits of a Monitoring Program**

A well designed and implemented monitoring program has the potential to influence several areas of public policy decision making. Overall, the MNR will benefit as the information should contribute to better integration of programs and the fulfillment of overall Ministry objectives.

Social science and economic data and insights from analysis of this data may also be valuable to other Ministries. For example, activity monitoring could help to determine if these spaces are making contributions to the educational/academic mandate of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities by providing unique and supported opportunities for study. Similarly, economic data could reveal if local economic development objectives being served by park management policies and practice.

## **Parks Specific Measures**

The park network is diverse geographically and functionally. Just as each space contributes differently to the ecological objects of the network, social and economic contributions and needs will be highly variable across the network.

The monitoring program will benefit from some consistency where this is appropriate but the framework will have to recognize the unique features and socio-economic role of each space. This need has been recognized in the draft framework, but again the challenge is in implementation and development of appropriate measurement tools.

## **Implementation Challenge**

The opportunity monitoring creates for increased understanding of the network's contribution to sustainability is, in a theoretical sense, unlimited. In order to implement a practical monitoring program, however, priorities must be set.

The ecological integrity of the network is paramount - permanent loss of a resource base or specific features cannot be rectified by financial resources or social will. The prioritization of monitoring effort should therefore reflect the fundamental need to understand the ecological state of the park system.

A case can be made as well, however, to include key socio-economic indicators from the outset of the program to ensure that the concept of integrating these components of sustainability into management will be supported.

The *process* of choosing the appropriate indicators will be key to a useful monitoring program. The socio-economic measures must speak to the public communities and various regulators, with an interest in the information. The process of consultation initiated in developing the draft framework should continue through the development of specific tools. Consultation should include feedback to contribu-

tors once data begin to be collected and used. Ongoing consultation with interest groups at later stages reinforces the notion that the information is considered important to decision making and may help to refine monitoring tools if necessary.

### **Other Comments**

I would like to offer some questions and comments in 2 other areas

In the selection and use of “Baseline Reference Sites” has any consideration been given to socio-economic characteristics of the parks and protected spaces? Perhaps a suite of different parks types, each with different relationships and management approaches or recreational/active use objectives could be selected for comparative monitoring.

Reference was made to “Stress Monitoring” being one of the components of the program. Although necessary as one approach, there is a risk that this component of the program could quickly dominate. By definition, this approach is shorter term and responds to limited data, which can be gathered more readily. Too much reliance on this component could lead to resources being consumed on the hot topics of interest rather than being committed to more difficult issues, those which require longer term data collection and interpretation and possibly involve complex policy trade offs to address.