The Role of Point Pelee National Park in Greater Ecosystem Protection

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Abstract

This paper is a short summary of an oral presentation given as part of a Carolinian Canada Workshop on The Role of Parks and Protected Areas in the Carolinian Woodland Recovery Strategy, May 6, 2005 at the 9th annual Park Research Forum of Ontario General Meeting and Conference. The talk was intended to provide background or context and identify topics for the Workshop's breakout discussion sessions. Topics discussed include a brief history of ecosystem management at Parks Canada, some ideas on the role of protected areas in Canada today, and the ecosystem-management vision that has been laid out for Point Pelee National Park. Much more was said than is summarized here, particularly about the Point Pelee examples used throughout the talk. A source of additional information is offered at the end of the text.

Keywords: *ecosystem management, Parks Canada, Point Pelee National Park, protected area roles.*

Parks Canada and Ecosystem Management

Prior to 1972 Parks Canada had no science policy or sense of ecosystem-scale management. In fact the ecosystem as a definable unit of conservation was barely a decade old. Formal policy at that time was based on traditional natural sciences, inventory oriented to major taxa, and geology which was used to divide Canada into natural regions. An undefined balance between protection and use was espoused. The obsolete natural regions are still in effect, but the rest is now very different.

By the time Parks Canada revised its policy in the late 1980s, entire new ecosystem related sciences such as conservation biology and landscape ecology had developed. These as well as limited acceptance of visitor-related social

sciences were embraced in policy. Protection was the primary mandate (on paper, at least) and tools such as a stress questionnaires, ecological integrity statements, environmental assessments, and focused monitoring programs were called for as a matter of course.

By the year 2000 it was evident that despite a well-written policy (possibly the best in the world), not all was well with regard to implementation or with the condition of nature found in national parks. A group known as the 'Ecological Integrity Panel' was established to identify problems and propose courses of action. The reasons for Parks Canada's difficulties to date are numerous and the Panel's report listed them along with many remedial recommendations. These recognised the implications of the new ecological sciences and the fact that protected areas are part of the surrounding landscape thus changing the context of ecological integrity. In the few years since the Panel report, specific directions on integrity measurement, monitoring science, and the contents of ecological integrity statements, state of the park reports, and park management plans have been promulgated. More importantly considerable new funds (none were committed previously) have come on stream to both improve staff science capabilities and to implement this work. This funding has been significantly supplemented by federal and provincial species at risk programs in the last couple of years.

Fitting In Protected Areas

I defined the Modern Protected Area Paradigm as:

> *Secure, high quality, viable protected areas as the core of a hierarchically connected, representative network including satellite areas, linkages, and compatible surrounding land and water uses. This network would be designed as part of a planned land-use mosaic and, along with contributions from agricultural, forestry, and human settlement lands, would ensure* in situ *biodiversity conservation* (Stephenson, 1994).

This definition reflects Grumbine's (1994) widely distributed iconic ten themes of ecosystem management:

- hierarchical context,
- within ecological boundaries,
- maintains ecological integrity,
- requires data collection,
- needs monitoring,

- based on interagency cooperation,
- accepts humans as part of nature,
- uses adaptive management,
- requires continuous organizational change, and
- understands human values.

Future Protected Areas

Society must shift its reality paradigm to one of sustainability for a successful future. Going from a dysfunctional human-biosphere relationship to one that is mutually supportive calls for a broad, sweeping, values-changing style of ecosystem management that includes concerns like population control, total lifecycle production, and a satisfactory quality of life as well as biodiversity conservation. Central to this relationship is how humans use the earth's natural capital. Readers are encouraged to consult an ecological economics text book. Protected areas as per the modern protected area paradigm are the *in situ* way of conserving biodiversity. They define the land-use mosaic; they are not merely a side issue. The work we do on protected areas is critical work.

A more people-oriented look at the implications of modern protected areas was offered by Phillips (2003) at the World Parks Conference. He lists the following factors:

- with or by local communities,
- multipartner participation,
- local social and economic objectives,
- not all government funded,
- requires strong people related skills,
- part of a regional to international protected area system,
- core areas with compatible surrounding land uses,
- restoration as well as protection,
- community asset value balances national heritage value, and
- decision making is essentially political.

More practically this approach means protected area practitioners should consider the economic impact of conservation, alternative governance mechanisms, development of modelling, potential demographic changes, community and individual values and attitudes, and other such factors within the greater ecosystem as fundamental parts of their work (Stephenson, 2002).

Point Pelee's Ecological Integrity Statement

The ecological integrity statement is an essential requirement for each national park according to Park's Canada policy. It is prepared on the basis of the state of the park report and becomes a critical part of each park's management plan.

The ecological integrity statement is part of a national park's communication to users and the community. It begins with a land-use history and biodiversity status report including identification of major stressors and predictions for the future. It then proposes a more sustainable future that stems from ecosystem management particularly as it relates to biodiversity conservation and quality of life including goals and objectives as well as targets and indicators. Its purpose is to seek a consensus on the condition of the park and its greater ecosystem and on the role of the protected area. The national park's ecosystem management program cannot be initiated with hopes for success without this consensus and the cooperation that it implies.

Point Pelee National Park presents a vision of its role…..Protection within the park, reconnection (including restoration) to other natural lands outside the park, and conservation education targeted at a variety of audiences (not just visitors as is traditional). It also offers a spatial vision. The national park wishes to be active in its greater ecosystem, specifically all of Essex county (and more broadly the Carolinian Zone) and the western basin of Lake Erie (Figure 1). A few of the potential opportunities identified are: investigating the potential for a federal marine conservation areas in the Western basin, an international approach via close cooperation with American initiatives in and around the basin, locally focused watershed restoration, and, importantly, expansion of the effective conservation lands of the park by reconnecting it to the Hillman Marsh Conservation area to the North.

Protected Areas and Species at Risk

Species at risk programs federally and provincially promise to be major funding sources for conservation in Canada's Carolinian Zone for the foreseeable future. Much of this funding may be targeted to national or provincial park populations of designated species and their minimum habitat needs for viability in the surrounding primarily privately owned land. We should remember that these types of core protected areas are meant to ensure that representative natural communities are retained and not to protect rare species as such. However, in Southern Ontario many such species are found in protected areas, their last refuge. In protected areas employing ecosystem management, certain limited contributions can be made.

Ecologically these protected areas can harbor viable populations that act as sources for reintroduction elsewhere, as parts of metapopulations and as a way of enhancing overall species security. Even when the protected area populations are not viable in themselves, they can still be part of metapopulation networks or be priority reintroduction sites if the species previously occurred and representation is not otherwise compromised.

Socially these protected areas can potentially be co- or lead partners for specific projects, act as long-term multi-project cooperators, be sources of

Figure 1. Point Pelee National Park within its greater ecosystem.

expertise, and take the lead using their capabilities to conduct research and foster education within the community on behalf of all the partners. Federal and provincial protected areas in the Carolinian Zone are only a small but important part of the equation for successful biodiversity conservation.

Wrap Up

As this paper is based on an informal oral presentation, length constraints do not allow me to include the extensive references to Point Pelee National Park's database or to Parks Canada's policy documents used verbally. Readers with more specific interests are asked to contact the national park directly as it has an up-to-date computerized listing of all its information holdings and makes all documents easily available upon request.

The author also invites readers to contact him electronically if they wish to discuss aspects of protected area philosophy and practice.

References

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