
Conserving the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Niagara River

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Abstract

The Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) is an agency of Ontario Ministry of Tourism. Since 1885, NPC has served as guardian over Canadian parklands extending along Niagara River from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario (1,720ha). Our mission then, as now, is to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Falls and Niagara River corridor for the enjoyment of visitors, while maintaining financial self-sufficiency. Historically, glaciation left its mark on the area in a major and magnificent manner. These include Niagara Falls and adjacent moraine as well as Queenston portion of Niagara Escarpment (part of World Biosphere) and Niagara Glen (Area of Natural and Scientific Interest). Whether through public nature interpretation and conservation or infrastructure projects (e.g. roads, buildings, attractions) our proximity to these unique and diverse features forms a necessary part of NPC policy and decision-making. Recently, a Natural Heritage Program was developed at NPC which addresses flora and fauna on an eco-system basis. For example, local landscape and other planning must not only be undertaken as a horticultural phenomenon tied to biological constraints such as plants and animals, but also as a physical component of the landscape having height, volume, texture, color and functional ties with soil, water, air and land use practices. NPC has recently undertaken a number of successful “greening” initiatives, together with a number of partners, which reflect this approach. A parallel commitment to Cultural Heritage has been undertaken to guide present and future actions. These cultural resources (including many important sites from the War of 1812), like the natural heritage of the Niagara River, are held in trust and protected so that present and future generations may enjoy, experience and benefit from them. Beyond these NPC activities, cooperative region-based mechanisms are emerging for Canada/US celebration of 200 years of peace following the War of 1812, addressing cross-border issues, conservation and more.

Conserving the Natural and Cultural Heritage of Niagara River

When first established in 1885, by an Act of the Ontario Provincial Legislature, The Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) was comprised of the immediate area surrounding the Falls (on the Canadian side) totaling 62.2 hectares (154 acres). The Commission now maintains approximately 1,720 hectares (4,250 acres) of parkland stretching the length of Niagara River from Fort Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake, with no cost to the taxpayer.

The Chairman of the NCP reports to the Ontario Minister of Tourism. Commissioners are appointed by the Province and area municipalities to determine policy and direction for the Commission. Because NPC receives no government financing, revenues to support the park resources are acquired through the operation of gift shops, golf courses, restaurants, attractions, parking lots and rentals. In this, we operate in a manner similar to a private business. The resources, including many important sites from the War of 1812, are held in trust and protected so that present and future generations may enjoy, experience and benefit from them.

Beyond NPC activities, cooperative region-based meetings have begun with respect to the coordination and planning of Canada/US celebration of 200 years of peace and prosperity following the War of 1812, addressing cross-border issues, conservation and more.

Economics

In 2005, NPC had an operational profit of approximately \$3.1 million, slightly less than that earned in 2004, \$3.7 million. Despite some of the best weather conditions in several years, NPC's 2005 tourism season was one of unrealized expectations. This can be partly explained by a large decrease in American visitors. Increased security concerns, the misunderstood need for a passport, a weakened U.S. economy, a strong Canadian dollar, rising fuel costs, and lowered consumer confidence have all had an influence. One bright spot is increased international visitation, from Europe and Japan.

In 2005, NPC spent over \$10 million on infrastructure renewal. Projects included updating restaurant and retail areas, a bridge reconstruction, as well as significant Parkway road resurfacing. Locally, consultations continue on what is known as the People Mover Project: a tourist district transportation system. The project is co-chaired by the City of Niagara Falls and The Niagara Parks Commission and is to address traffic and parking concerns in the tourist district in and around the Falls.

Niagara Parks historically has a relationship with power generation, granting franchise for power plants in return for revenue to support the parks. As older stations have been or are soon to be decommissioned and transferred, there is an urgent need to address their future from cultural, environmental and

economic perspectives. Discussions and planning has begun on the pending transfer of these decommissioned facilities to NPC.

Nature

Niagara Parks' environmental commitment includes a comprehensive program of stewardship and environmental accountability founded on the principles of conservation, restoration, preservation, education, innovation and environmental management. Our goal is to improve environmental quality and sustainable development throughout our park system for the benefit of our visitors, employees and our associates. In pursuit of this environmental goal, alliances and partnerships continue to be undertaken as appropriate. It was through such an alliance – with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment – that our environmental mission statement was developed.

Environmental Mission Statement

Niagara Parks has committed to incorporating environmental sensitivity into operations and practices by:

- Partnering with the public and private sector to undertake specific projects that sustain and improve the environmental quality of our lands.
- Implementing plans aimed at greening the park, fostering projects such as *Project Green Initiative*, focused on the preservation and enhancement of existing important natural features
- Complying with applicable environmental laws and regulations
- Developing, implementing and maintaining policies, procedures and systems which assist in managing our operations with a view to protecting the environment and achieving improvements.
- Using, wherever practically and economically viable, best available technology and practices to benefit the environment.
- Actively participating in an integrated waste management system which reuses, reduces and recycles materials.
- Fostering education throughout our parks about our commitment to the environment and sound environmental practices.
- Educating, training and motivating employees to conduct activities in an environmentally responsible manner.
- Ensuring water conservation is a vital component of planning
- Actively participating in the *Green Links* program at our golf facilities (a comprehensive program aimed at improving environmental management practices)
- Providing and promoting leadership in the areas of environmental protection, management and sustainability.

Landscape, preservation and restoration

Glaciation and geology play a major role in the local topography. Elevation differences between the River and surrounding riparian habitats range from a

few metres or feet to more than 100 metres (300 feet) at Queenston on the brink of the Niagara Escarpment. NPC is responsible for 56 kilometres (35 miles) of riparian (shoreline) habitat along the Canadian side of the Niagara River, and other riparian lands along both sides of many smaller rivers, creeks and man-made watercourses that flow into the Niagara River. With over 600 individual properties making up the whole of the Park, it is a challenging responsibility to manage all of these habitats. Our activities must promote clean water, mitigate stream-side soil or bank erosion, and enhance biodiversity of native plant and animal populations, all while trying to maintain the historic cultural integrity co-existing with a large human population and millions of tourists visiting each year. Examples of these activities are described below, illustrating some of the partnership approaches that are applied.

Pilot Programs and Projects

Sometimes the use of pesticides is involved to ensure plants at NPC are kept healthy. For many years, NPC has had a plant health care program using least toxic products and non-chemical alternatives as part of an integrated pest management program (IPM). Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens has also undertaken a trial program of EBPM, Ecological Based Pest Management, which involves balances in systems and no use of pesticides. More research is needed in this area.

Ecological preservation and restoration through multiple community partnerships are aligned with Niagara Parks' Natural Heritage Resources Management Policy. Pilot projects to restore riparian (shoreline) habitat along the entire length of the Niagara River are being undertaken, such as at Paradise Grove in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ussher's Creek along the Legends Golf Complex, and most recently Memorial Grove in Fort Erie.

Niagara Glen is a spectacular natural landscape and an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest. Increasing human impacts on Niagara Glen have outpaced what information and education can counteract. It suffers further from invasive species and vandals. Additional data, research and resources are needed. However, a trail management program, and partnerships with Species at Risk recovery teams are making positive impacts.

Frenchman's Creek enters the River near a lane where residents have little appreciation for *Branta canadensis*, Canada Geese. Through a creative partnering, a pilot program with Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, a goose deterrent was created, otherwise known as a riparian buffer. Consultation was done home by home and has served as a model for other areas of our river shoreline.

Paradise Grove is a vestige of old growth forest which, in certain areas, has been plagued by invasive exotic species and is now subject of another ongoing program of rehabilitation.

These pilot programs and projects form a platform for the next work to be undertaken. Research and development of a comprehensive land management plan that includes and addresses Niagara Parks' extensive riparian holdings has begun.

Steeply sloped lands immediately adjacent to Niagara Falls at Queen Victoria Park are under increasing pressures from adjacent development. Looking for solutions to the dilemma through a major study and consultation exercise, a management plan and policy were developed and adopted. The priorities include aesthetics and ecological character, slope stability, development setback zones and adjacent development assessment based on land management goals.

Development assessment is based on primary goal satisfaction of ecological diversity, aesthetics and slope stability prior to review of secondary factors of view management, access management, groundwater seepage control and education/interpretation. Given that Niagara Parks does not own nor control the entire slope, it has been through a process of negotiation that such non-NPC lands are being rehabilitated and land management goals being realized.

In 2001, Niagara Parks partnered with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment to launch *Spare the Air* Emissions Reduction Program. This initiative is a positive, voluntary program to reduce idling by encouraging motor coach and truck drivers to turn off their engines when parked. It has resulted in measurable reductions in hazardous air emissions and has been adopted by a number of partners as well as used as a model for other areas.

Using the slogan "*Working in Partnership for a Healthier Environment*", partners now include: Natural Resources Canada, the City of Niagara Falls, Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Town of Fort Erie, The Niagara Falls Bridge Commission, Ontario Power Generation and the Peace Bridge Authority. Endorsed by the Canadian Motor Coach Association, each partner distributes educational flyers and posts signs to remind drivers to "Turn off your engine when parked" rather than implementing by-laws and ticketing.

Growing awareness and participation, combined with support from the Natural Resources Canada - Fleet Smart Program, have resulted in dramatic and positive changes to air quality. In 2004 for example, there were reductions in emissions including less nitrogen oxide, volatile organic compounds and fine particulate matter. The greatest success was achievement of 12,860 less tonnes (14,176 tons) of carbon dioxide. These reductions in emissions were the result of idling periods near the Falls being reduced to less than 5 minutes from an average of 36 minutes for buses and to less than 7 minutes from an average of 19 minutes for trucks.

The recycling and composting programs in our Parks began in the mid-1980's and short-term composting has taken place for even longer. One key initiative is the use of biodegradable plastic and recycling of raincoats at

Journey Behind The Falls, a popular attraction visited by millions of visitors each year. In 2005, 135 metric tonnes (149 tons) of material was recycled. It is believed that further visitor education will be key to expanding our program. Our challenge is to undertake such education with the large number of international and domestic visitors who come to our attractions annually.

At our newest facility, Legends Golf Complex, an environmental plan was developed in keeping with NPC's stewardship mandate. Legends has been certified in environmental planning from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System and our golf staff are now working towards the next level of certification from Audubon.

Pilot projects have been instrumental in showcasing the need for comprehensive land management plans within Niagara Parks. With Brock University's Department of Tourism and Environment just completing a review of these projects, programs and policies, the next step to be completed is a comprehensive land management and riparian habitat plan. Given the level of further support and cooperation with agencies such as Parks Canada and Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, next steps will be to meet and consider what exists elsewhere in policy and planning that can be applied to our properties. From there we will identify additional gaps and need for research/documentation.

Cultural Heritage

In NPC's Heritage Division, inventory, collections management and policy matters are being given priority along with public operations and programming. Much work has been accomplished in the area of policy and in 2005, a needs analysis was undertaken to identify and prioritize requisite maintenance and collections management issues. NPC recognizes that cultural heritage resources are held as a legacy for present and future generations. NPC is committed to protect these cultural resources by law, and endeavours to do so in accordance with the principles of value, public interest, understanding, respect and integrity. NPC properties contain a variety of resources which include such things as buildings, structures, landscapes, monuments and archeological remains associated with history. Interestingly, a major portion of NPC's Heritage Resources is found within its Cultural Landscapes. These landscapes are intimately tied into the public perception of the history and value of NPC's efforts.

In the important area of historic preservation, Niagara Parks has been officially responsible for heritage sites and properties since 1890. It was in that year that NPC's historic stewardship role was initiated, when NPC purchased and agreed to maintain Queenston Heights Park. Queenston is the site where British Commander, General Brock lost his life in battle during the War of 1812. General Brock's Monument (which in 1967 was entrusted to Parks Canada) remains as a testimony to his heroism and marks the site of his interment.

In 1901, Old Fort Erie was the second site added to the heritage inventory and since then several more historic sites and attractions have been obtained, developed and/or maintained by Niagara Parks.

The most recent historical preservation initiative was in 1995, when Niagara Parks assumed control of a War of 1812 battlefield site at Chippawa and its adjoining properties. This was the scene of an historic battle that took place on July 5th, 1814, between about 4000 American, British and Canadian soldiers and their aboriginal allies. By the time the battle was over, more than 800 men lay dead or were wounded in the field now preserved and protected by Niagara Parks. Legends Golf Complex, which is immediately adjacent to the battlefield, provides revenue for this important heritage preservation initiative. The site was otherwise destined for residential development.

Additionally, a number of individuals, organizations, and many levels of government from numerous jurisdictions across Canada and United States have begun planning in preparation for the anniversary of 200 years of peace and prosperity between our two nations. This special War of 1812 Anniversary is truly an opportunity to tell an important North American story through commemoration, celebration and lasting legacies for generations of Canadians, Americans and global visitors for years to come.

With such an opportunity and because so many organizations will be involved from so many jurisdictions, collaborative efforts are being undertaken. The idea is to cooperate in regional efforts, capitalizing on opportunities for coordination, communication and liaison for “a thousand days” of Niagara-based commemoration, celebration and legacy activities within a broader bi-national framework.

There is an old adage, *one step at a time*. Presently Niagara Parks is involved with concurrent development of comprehensive, ongoing planning processes in addition to daily operational matters. Priorities include: ongoing inventories and collections management, as well as refinement of policies, finalization of natural and cultural management plans and additional research to ensure that best practices are employed in all these efforts.

References

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- McDougall, N. 2006. Personal communication (NPC Executive Director of Corporate Services) regarding financial data.

