

Science, Information and Research: Ontario's Parks and Protected Areas in South Eastern Ontario

John Immerseel

Ontario Parks, Southeast Zone

Beechgrove Complex, 51 Heakes Lane, Kingston, Ontario K7M 9B1

Ontario's park system is among the largest in the world. With over 272 parks covering more than seven million hectares, Ontario Parks objectives are to provide protection to significant environments and to provide visitors with opportunities to explore and enjoy the province's natural, historical and recreational resources. With the recent expansion of the province's parks and protected areas through *Ontario's Living Legacy*, Ontario Parks has a monumental task ahead to ensure that these areas are protected for future generations. These new parks and protected areas will also create baseline opportunities for research and monitoring of environmental conditions.

Ontario Parks' Southeast Zone extends from Oshawa to the Quebec border and north to Algonquin Provincial Park. In total there are 34 parks in the Zone including: nine Nature Reserves; three Historical; ten Natural Environment; and 12 Recreational. Their total area is over 28 000 ha.

Many parks in southeastern Ontario are small. In comparison, Kawartha Highlands, recently identified in the *Lands for Life* process as a candidate provincial park, has an area of approximately 35 000 ha. Its inclusion will more than double the amount of parkland in southeastern Ontario. In the context of ecological sustainability, Killarney, which is considerably larger than Kawartha Highlands, is generally considered to be too small to sustain the resources of the landscape it represents. This example demonstrates the challenge of maintaining ecological integrity in the remaining parks in southeastern Ontario.

If all the parks in southeastern Ontario were large nature reserves it would be easier to maintain their ecological integrity. However, many of these areas are popular natural environment and recreation class parks that experience heavy visitation and recreational use. Population levels in southeastern Ontario are growing rapidly and buffers of green space that once extended around parks are slowly disappearing. Presqu'île Provincial Park near the community of Brighton is one such example. Parks are increasingly expected to be all things to all people including everyone's personal backyard.

What is becoming more disturbing is that despite our best educational efforts, local understanding of the significance of parks and their resources remains weak. Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question: "Do we need to change the emphasis of some of our educational programs especially with respect to local audiences?" Heated debates and polarization often occur during management planning projects. Are present public consultation methods with local interest groups effective? Perhaps more research is required in this area to help structure public education programs and consultation strategies to be more effective and less controversial. In this context, we need to re-examine how we can develop better consensus building

processes that will lead to a shared community custodial commitment to manage these protected environments.

Research will be key to our success in the long term. We need to be strategic in identifying the types of research we require. Perhaps a centre or centres of excellence in the science of protected area management should be considered. Perhaps success here will depend upon a multi-agency partnership. The University of Waterloo's Heritage Resource Centre and Trent University's Frost Centre for Canadian Heritage and Development Studies are two research institutes that have been established to encourage and facilitate heritage resources research and education. Possibly they have the potential to play an increasingly more effective role in addressing some of the concerns discussed here this morning.

I believe each of the three presentations this morning raises questions and issues which are common to all agencies involved in protected area management and I would like to thank the authors for their shared insights.

The following is a brief overview of how Ontario Parks is responding to the many challenges that it faces.

Protection of Additional Areas of Natural Significance

Ontario's Living Legacy will add 2.4 million ha and 378 new parks and protected areas to Ontario's provincial park system. The additions increase the system of parks and protected areas by one third. The new protected areas will add 60 new parks, 44 additions to existing parks and 273 conservation reserves. Additional ecologically significant areas have also been acquired through the Ontario Parks and Natural Conservancy of Canada *Legacy 2000* partnership. This program has created new nature reserve class parks including Menzel Centennial, DuPont (Hoasic Creek), Burnt Lands Alvar, Morris Tract and Beattie Pinery.

Park Management Planning

The creation of assistant park planner positions in Ontario Park's six administrative zones has provided much needed help in catching up with management planning and research.

Research

Ontario Parks is continuing to work with partners to encourage and strengthen research relevant to provincial parks and protected areas. Agreements with "Friends of ..." associations, universities and the establishment of research consortiums have all been beneficial in advancing research in parks. For example: Black Rat Snake monitoring has been assisted through funding by the Friends of Charleston Lake Provincial Park; the University of Waterloo has been active with deer herbivory research at Presqu'île and Rondeau Provincial Parks in the past few years; and, FASTLINE (Frontenac Axis St. Lawrence Islands Information Network on the Environment) has been established as a multi-partner group dedicated to developing and applying an ecological approach to natural and cultural heritage conservation in the St. Lawrence-Frontenac Axis area.

Natural Heritage Education

The Ontario Parks Natural Heritage Education (NHE) program is one of the key links between the visitor and park resources. There are three components in the NHE program including information, interpretation and outdoor recreation skills. NHE leaders provide a range of services to park visitors some of which include: guided hikes; children's interpretive programming (*Kids in the Park*); canoe and wilderness survival instruction; and, extension programs with local communities. The addition of permanent NHE leader positions will ensure that park resources will be more fully appreciated and understood by park users and receive the protection they deserve.

Ecological Restoration

Increased visitation and greater demands for recreational opportunities have created a challenge for park managers. Restoration projects that have been initiated in southeastern Ontario parks include the planting of native species, such as marram grass on the sand dunes at Presqu'île and Sandbanks Provincial Parks. Suppression of invasive species such as garlic mustard and purple loosestrife has also taken place in several parks.

In summary, there have been many advances in the protection of parks and protected areas in the province. Scientific research and the sharing and dissemination of findings among agencies have had a positive impact on park resources. One sector of investigation that requires greater emphasis is social research. Applied research is required to assist in decision-making for parks, particularly how people value our parks and protected areas. How effective is public consultation in management planning for parks? What can be improved? What strategies are most effective in achieving consensus among multiple stakeholders? Answers to these questions will undoubtedly provide a better understanding of the human dimension of parks and protected areas.