

Research In Parks and Protected Areas In Ontario: The Role of Universities

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This paper reviews the need for research on protected areas and the commitment of universities to undertake research. It then focuses on means to link protected areas and universities to ensure relevant research is undertaken. Finally some cautionary comments are offered in the light of past experience with protected area - university research linkages and the current changes in government commitments, especially financial, to protected areas and universities.

Protected area agencies, such as Parks Canada and Parks Ontario, generally, though not always explicitly, recognize the need for various types of research to plan and manage parks. Some protected area agencies have occasionally published lists of research needs. However, most protected area agencies have limited internal capacity, in terms of staff, time and funding, to undertake all the research deemed desirable. Accordingly, they have sought assistance from consultants, academic institutions, and volunteers.

Universities are committed to undertaking research, as are some faculty and departments at colleges. The commitment may be to more or less academic or applied research. Some research may be funded by academic research funds, such as the National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), some through contracts, while some is undertaken with very little financial support.

It has proved feasible therefore to link protected area agencies and Universities/Colleges to undertake research of mutual interest. However, many more, and more effective linkages, might be developed. The following are some suggestions for some prerequisites for linkages and ideas for more:

1. Inventory of protected area research needs.
2. Inventory of University/College protected area research capabilities.
3. Regular publication on protected area research by Universities/Colleges.
4. Annual forum and workshops on protected area research by Universities/Colleges and protected area staff.
5. Internet site to discuss protected area research.
6. A protected area research publication series,
7. Recognition of some Universities/Colleges as protected area research centres.
8. Identification of the research section/staff of each protected area agency,
9. Exchanges of protected area staff and University/College faculty,
10. Student internships, and voluntary placements in research sections of protected area agencies.
11. A travelling research seminar for protected area staff and University/College faculty.
12. Involvement of protected area staff on graduate student research committees.
13. Memoranda of Agreement between protected area agencies and Universities/Colleges regarding research.

Although much research has been accomplished on protected areas by the agencies responsible for them, and by Universities/Colleges, probably much more can be done, if some of the above suggestions are implemented. Some cautionary remarks on this topic seem essential.

Research costs money whoever does it. Accordingly, protected area agencies may be looking to Universities/Colleges to get research done less expensively, while these institutions may be looking to agencies to supplement their limited academic research budgets. These possibly conflicting perspectives need to be considered when establishing linkages.

The research needs of protected area agencies and the research capabilities and interests of Universities/Colleges may be mismatched. Protected area agencies need to ensure they can respond when Universities/Colleges offer to do relevant research, and the Universities/Colleges need to be able to do the research as and when needed. The ownership of research results and rights to publication need to be clarified when protected area agencies and academic institutions collaborate on research.

The turn-over of protected area staff and University/College researchers, notably students, inhibits sustained and effective research. The current changes in government commitments, especially reduced financial commitments to protected area agencies and academic institutions, are causing both agencies and institutions to focus on activities, other than research, that are deemed more important and urgent.

Nevertheless, protected areas and Universities/Colleges will doubtless continue to exist, and co-operate to ensure the research essential for planning and managing protected areas is undertaken. Our task, is to consider how this can be accomplished more effectively, in new ways, in challenging times.