

Human and Social Aspects of Protected Area Networks

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to help stimulate research to further the establishment, protection and management of parks and protected areas in southern Ontario. With an emphasis on the human and social dimensions of parks and protected areas, it: highlights the benefits that accrue from protected areas to underscore their importance to society; identifies some challenges for science, information and research associated with this domain; and, concludes with ideas on the ways that government and the private sector could address the challenges.

Introduction

Key to the human and social dimension of protected areas is the notion of 'islands of hope' or places that help inspire us to save more natural areas, to protect the ones we have, and to act beyond their boundaries to ensure a more sustainable landscape. But is this happening? We are so focused on creating new parks, on raising revenue, on producing product lines, and on doing good science that perhaps we have lost touch with how these protected areas do, in fact, benefit people. How can we facilitate that understanding?

Creating and maintaining a protected area is a human and social issue. The science enables us to make the right 'ecological' decisions based on the information we have at the time. However, we need to understand the 'social' side of the equation in order to move the ecological agenda forward, and sustain the victories we have achieved. We have learned that to ignore local concerns ensures either no new protected area, or a long protracted history of conflict, with no cooperation on land use planning or local decisions on lands immediately adjacent, upstream, or upwind from the park.

The Protected Areas Agenda

I was asked to make some of my comments on this topic in the context of a report for which I served as principal researcher and author. The report—*A Protected Areas Vision for Canada*—was produced by the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council (CEAC) in 1991 for the Honourable Jean Charest, then federal minister of the environment. The Council's vision was:

that by the year 2000, Canada will have established a comprehensive network of protected wilderness areas and natural landscapes. And that by the year 2010, Canada will have completed a national marine and freshwater protected areas system that preserves representative and unique natural seascapes and aquatic ecosystems. The protected areas network will be managed on an ecosystem basis, meeting compatible social and economic needs while maintaining protected areas in a wild state. Moreover, protected areas will provide enhanced educational and

interpretive opportunities so that Canadian cultural and heritage values can become part of a unifying environmental ethic.

Many elements of this vision have been repeated at a global scale. For example, the 1992 World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas endorsed these themes. The 1992 Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity called on governments planet-wide to complete and sustain their protected area systems. The Canadian Biodiversity Strategy builds on this general principle through a document endorsed by all senior governments along with a range of other stakeholders. Their strategic directions for protected areas included the following points and could read as a vision or strategic directions statement for southern Ontario:

- Make every effort to complete Canada's networks of protected areas representative of land-based natural regions.
- Use open and meaningful public and stakeholder participation processes and sound scientific information and traditional knowledge to ensure that social, economic, cultural and ecological factors are considered in the establishment of protected areas.
- Prepare and implement, in consultation with interested stakeholders, legislation and policies, inventories, plans, guidelines, monitoring programs and other measures to support the establishment and management of protected areas.
- Manage, in consultation with landowners, regional and urban governments, local and indigenous communities, and interested stakeholders, human activities in and around protected areas to minimize adverse impacts on protected area biodiversity and to maintain connectivity among protected areas.
- Support and promote the development of agreements between governments and local and indigenous communities, property-owners and/or private corporations for the voluntary allocation of land for conservation purposes.
- Use a variety of mechanisms, including easements and covenants, to secure relatively intact ecosystems within intensively developed areas, and restore or rehabilitate them if necessary and practical.

I would suggest the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy establishes a very clear direction for a southern Ontario protected areas initiative. It would be useful to find where we are in southern Ontario with respect to the above points, and identify the gaps that could be filled through research.

So, through the CEAC vision, the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy and other strategic documents, we can see that the protected areas agenda remains:

- Securing and protecting new areas that lead to the complete representation of different landscapes across the province. The social aspects of this challenge are: how to work with people to achieve this goal; and, how to incorporate this with the Aboriginal agenda—an area not given a lot of service.
- Managing the places we have so that the natural and cultural values are sustained and not isolated from the surrounding landscape. The question from the social perspective is how do we work with adjacent landowners to develop an ecosystem approach, one that is not just seen as a *de facto* expansion of park boundaries or some ill-defined buffer zone.
- Ensuring visitors gain a high quality experience and that these places increasingly serve as catalysts for a broader environmental vision and action.

The social question here is how to shape people's expectations of their experience, as opposed to simply catering to every whim and trying to make parks all things to all people.

Protected areas have been called the 'islands of hope'. In *A Protected Areas Vision for Canada*, the CEAC felt that protected areas could act as catalysts for the improved management of surrounding lands. They stated:

Because the protection of a small fraction of land and sea cannot guarantee our common future, protected areas must do more; they must stimulate personal commitments to environmental protection. The whole of the Canadian landscape must be sustained, both within and outside protected areas; therefore, if protected areas do not inform and inspire society to apply a land ethic, they fail in their essential mission (CEAC 1991).

May I suggest that one worthwhile thing might be to take a look at each of the existing parks and ask how do they help achieve the vision? How do these parks benefit local communities, regions and the broader Ontario population? We need a comprehensive statement of values coupled with an assessment of how human activities are impacting on these values, and what actions need to be taken.

It may be interesting to look at several protected areas in southern Ontario to see how they address the vision and the strategic directions in the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy. One could look at one or two of the national parks in Ontario and several provincial parks such as Pinery, Presqu'ille, Frontenac and Algonquin to see how they address the agenda and what could be done. Such an examination would also be a way of seeing if these protected area visions are developed with a sense of reality based on experience from the field.

The Benefits of the Agenda

In the dedication clause of protected areas legislation such as the *National Parks Act* and Ontario's *Provincial Parks Act*, governments have dedicated national and provincial parks to the people, for their use, benefit, education and enjoyment. Landscapes are to be maintained for future generations and in national parks they are to be maintained unimpaired. However, we have spent little time examining whether or not we are living up to these statutory obligations. Research should evaluate how well we are defining and communicating the benefits of protected areas to southern Ontario with respect to these basic obligations.

The benefits that accrue to society from parks and protected areas have been well documented within several general categories, notably:

- the ecological benefits of protected areas and their supporting systems;
- the economic benefits that accrue from protected areas;
- the scientific benefits such as ecological benchmarks;
- the educational benefits from interpretation and outdoor classrooms; and,
- the spiritual benefits for many people and especially Native people.

It would help to identify specific examples of the benefits of specific protected areas to Ontario. For example, as a scientific benchmark, it was within Kilarney Provincial Park that the existence and impact of acid rain was first substantiated. This culminated in years of lobbying by the Canadian Coalition on Acid Rain to get

Canadian and American governments to adopt emission standards. Bird banding in Presquille Provincial Park, as well as the strong emphasis on outdoor education in wilderness canoeing and hiking in Frontenac Provincial Park has also brought benefits to Ontario.

We need more examples. We need to define clearly how the benefits of protected areas accrue to people in order to help underscore their tremendous importance to society. Perhaps we need a comprehensive evaluation of how existing protected areas in southern Ontario have social and human benefits that extend beyond their total economic value. For example: how does Pinery Provincial Park benefit society?; what are its ecological services?; what are its educational benefits?; and, why should the people care if this park exists?

We seem to be forever measuring the value of provincial parks and protected areas by two means: 1) public opinion polls on whether people support completion of protected areas and the prohibition of logging, mining and sport hunting; and, 2) studies that try to substantiate what these parks contribute to the local and regional economy. Do we even know if these studies, particularly the economic ones, have influenced decisions and public perceptions of protected areas? On the surface, they seem to be a means of establishing a communications dynamic between protected area proponents and decision-makers, not the public.

For decades, people have lobbied against more development in Banff National Park because it contravenes National Parks Policy. Townsites are not acceptable in parks, and they are impacting on the wilderness quality of Banff. In more recent years, there has been an effort to inform people that Banff protects the headwaters of the Bow River which is the source of drinking water for the people of Calgary. Continued tourism development is having an impact on the water quality of the Bow River. Similarly, the escarpment protected in Riding Mountain National Park provides a source of clean drinking water to 13 communities outside the park.

Creating New Protected Areas

Governments have no legal obligation to create new protected areas: it is public opinion and advocacy that creates the context for political action to create new protected areas. Research is needed to evaluate the various methods used across Canada that have resulted in more than doubling the amount of land protected from industrial development over the past decade.

The two great years of park expansion in Ontario were: 1983 when 155 new provincial parks were created, including five wilderness parks; and, 1999 when over 300 new provincial parks and protected areas were announced. A different form of public consultation was used in these years.

The public consultation process used to reach the 1983 decision was less than satisfying in that all it consisted of was people making presentations and filling out forms, but with no feedback nor indication of how the material was used to reach the final land use decisions. An examination of this process by Cook (1985) concluded: "The District open house consultation...was charged by the Minister with an import far exceeding its capacity and completely inconsistent with the kind of information encouraged at these forums." Furthermore, "when 10,000+ Ontarians

told [the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources] what they thought, the Ministry was ill-prepared to deal with the response and the process appears to have done little to aid the Ministry in reaching decisions.”

Fifteen years later, the government used four Round Tables to help develop the future of the Boreal Forest in Ontario. This process produced a final document and maps of proposed protected areas after many public and round table meetings. But the product crashed on the shores of sunken expectations. It was left to a negotiating process between government, the forest industry and environmentalists to produce the final protected areas plan. While some may think it navel gazing, it is important that we understand how these public processes failed to produce a protected areas agenda that was to meet government commitments.

Some research should focus on the history behind the establishment of these areas and, in particular, how well these processes worked with respect to the involvement of people. There should also be a focus on political decision-making. Despite the fact that Liberal and New Democratic governments were thought to be the ones who would support new protected areas, it is, in fact, Conservative governments that created almost 500 new protected areas in 1983 and 1999. What does this suggest in terms of securing future political decisions in support of new parks? Do Conservative governments ignore other environmental reforms because parks are a safe way to establish an environmental record?

Just what is the agenda for new protected areas? A key document is the 1998/1999 *Endangered Spaces Report Card for Ontario*, which assessed progress by the Ontario government in completing a terrestrial protected areas network. Prepared by World Wildlife Fund Canada and the Wildlands League, it indicates that 12 of the 14 natural regions with little or no representation (Figure 1) are located in southern Ontario. Most other regions are only partially represented. The only natural region considered to be represented adequately is the Georgian Bay shoreline. This figure clearly identifies priority regions for action.

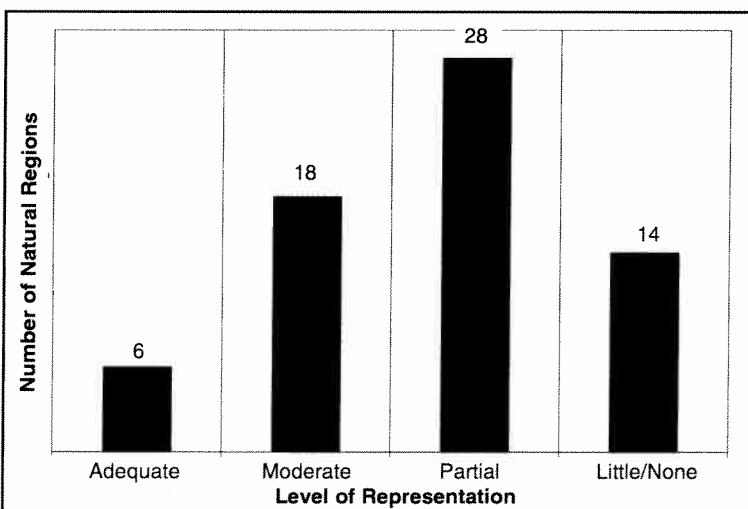


Figure 1: Representation of natural regions in Ontario Provincial Parks

No matter what the values are, to establish new protected areas we need to know their location. In 1995, the Wildlands League published its *Southern Ontario Endangered Spaces (First Edition)*. It identified natural areas where public attention and effort should be focused to ensure the survival of important natural habitats in southern Ontario. As they stated: "The message is simply that efforts to protect wildlife and habitat values through cooperative means should be concentrated in these sites."

The Wildlands League map could be a focus for a group to examine what the social and economic challenges are for establishing such a network in southern Ontario. A list of candidate sites will surely allow for an examination of the real challenges to completing a network in southern Ontario. It also will help us to understand how we can better engage people in supporting new protected areas. In addition to the map of areas of concern, the Wildlands League and World Wildlife Fund produced a gap analysis for southern Ontario that should be consulted to determine which natural regions need attention in terms of protecting new areas.

Maintaining Protected Areas

The *Provincial Parks Act of Ontario* states:

All Provincial Parks are dedicated to the people of the Province of Ontario and others who may use them for their healthful enjoyment and education, and the provincial parks shall be maintained for the benefit of future generations.

While Provincial Parks policy establishes some further direction, has there been any attempt to establish what the words—'healthful enjoyment', 'education', 'maintained', and 'benefit'—mean in terms of a contemporary provincial protected areas network? How do park managers interpret this mandate? And is it not time for Ontario's *Provincial Parks Act* to be updated to provide finally for a strong legal conservation framework to this network? This idea has been examined on a number of occasions, but nothing has been done to date.

Given the extent to which southern Ontario is a working landscape, the existing protected areas network is threatened by a range of human activities on surrounding lands. However, unlike the national park system, Ontario is not compelled to produce a regular state of the parks report. Attempts should be made, preferably through an independent mechanism, to develop regular ecological audits of Ontario's protected areas network. This in turn could help to identify approaches to mitigating the impact of human activities on Ontario's protected areas.

Focusing on the benefits described earlier, such a report could help define the human and social challenges to maintaining a provincial parks and protected areas network. Relevant questions might include:

- What are the key internal and external threats to protected areas in southern Ontario?
- What are the sources of these threats?
- What is the impact of these internal and external threats on the parks?
- What human forces are driving the loss of natural areas?

The only system-wide measure we have of how protected areas are faring in southern Ontario is the 1997 *State of the National Parks Report* tabled in the House of Commons by Parks Canada. Tables 1 and 2 clearly indicate the level of impairment to the four national parks in Ontario. For example, the four national parks in southern Ontario—Bruce Peninsula, Georgian Bay Islands, Point Pelee and St. Lawrence Islands—have more species on the Committee on the State of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) list and more exotic plants and animals than all the other 35 national parks in Canada.

These tables suggest that internal pressures are greater than external pressures from an impairment point of view. This forces us to ask: Are the parks not as isolated as we thought? Are park programs more damaging than we thought? Here we have four small parks that theory would suggest should be severely impacted because of size, configuration and location. Yet only Point Pelee reports that the impact from external sources is severe. While we must acknowledge that the state of the parks report is only meant to provide an overview of the national trends, it does suggest that the impacts from internal stressors are causing more impairment of southern Ontario national parks than external stressors. However, we cannot draw a final conclusion because the report does not provide any information on the extent to which each stressor is damaging the parks.

National Park	Number of COSEWIC Species	Extirpated Species from Park	Exotic Plants and Animals
Bruce Peninsula	23	2	165
Georgian Bay	24	2	199
Point Pelee	55	22	247
St. Lawrence Islands	25	5	203
National Parks with Closest Numbers	23 in Waterton 13 in Grasslands	10 in PEI 8 in Kekimikujik	149 in Kouckibougouac 137 in Fundy

Table 1: Indicators of Biodiversity Health in Southern Ontario National Parks

National Park	Cumulative Impact of all Stressors*	Impacts from Internal Sources	Impacts from External Sources	Trend Compared to Previous State of Park Report
Bruce Peninsula	4	4	3	Increase
Georgian Bay	4	4	2	Increase
Point Pelee	5	5	5	Same
St. Lawrence Island	5	5	2	Increase

* Level of impairment 1 = none, 2 = minor, 3 = significant, 4 = major, 5 = severe

Table 2: Impairment of Ecological Integrity in Southern Ontario National Parks

I think some regular updates on regional initiatives would be helpful. For example, I found it very interesting to attend a workshop around Georgian Bay Islands National Park. The superintendent had commissioned a study by University of Waterloo. They mapped many important values. The research did not jump to any conclusions, but worked to identify the location of various places of value. This put the protected areas and its associated values into a much broader regional context and got people to think in a greater ecosystem context. And the response was extremely positive. Instead of using the workshop to direct discussion towards some specific conservation strategy and designations, Parks Canada used its resources to try and pull together information and people to understand the situation, and hopefully to produce a locally driven conservation strategy.

Conclusion

Protected areas are a manifestation of human concern over the loss of natural areas to development. They are a means to an end, the end being the protection of natural habitats so that all the creatures that inhabit these areas can survive. They are also a means to ensure that people can continue to connect with some form of "wild nature." From the moment that a protected area is suggested, to the day it is established, and on through the endless cycle of management, planning and confrontations over developments inside and outside the park, humans direct this play. Thus, it is important that we bring social and political science and research to bear to better understand the human and social side of the protected areas vision.

Selected References

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