

## TRENDS IN PROVINCIAL PARK USE

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### ABSTRACT

*Each year, Ontario's provincial parks attract millions of visitors from around the world. Monitoring public use of provincial parks is an important and fundamental responsibility of Ontario Parks. Quality visitation data supports the development of environmental monitoring programs to report on the health of and benefits provided by provincial parks. Over the past 15 years, visitation to provincial parks has increased dramatically. Sustained high levels of visitation have ecological, social and economic implications for Ontario Parks. This paper presents trends in total visitation, day-use visitation, camper nights, interior camper nights and average length of stay.*

### WHY COLLECT VISITATION DATA?

Monitoring and tracking visitor use at provincial parks are fundamental functions for Ontario Parks. Visitation information is widely used in the planning and management of provincial parks. The success on many projects such as built capital, staffing levels and the development of programs and services depends on reliable visitation information. Knowing how many people visit a protected area is also critical to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) and Ontario Parks' mission of sustainability. Visitation information can help park managers assess the negative ecological impacts of use. Ontario Parks has good information regarding the number of visitors to operating parks, however, little is known about how many visitors go to non-operating parks.

### PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The purpose of the presentation and paper is to characterize recent trends in overall visitation at operating parks. This purpose is supported by the following three objectives:

- 1) analysis of trends in developed campground use;
- 2) analysis of trends in day visitor use; and,
- 3) analysis of trends in interior or backcountry use.

A simple method was used to undertake the analysis. Using the *Park Statistics* publications

(Government of Ontario, 1988 and 2002), total visitation and some individual park visitation data were recorded in a spreadsheet. The 15-year period (1988-2002) was selected for analysis. The percentage change between the base years 1988 and 2002 was calculated for each visitation variable. Both demand and supply side variables were assessed to determine overall trends. The demand and supply side variables are noted in Table 1.

*Table 1. Demand and Supply Side Variables Assessed.*

DEMAND SIDE VARIABLE	SUPPLY SIDE VARIABLE
Total visitors	Developed sites
Day use visitors	Day use visitor space provided
Camper nights	Interior sites
Interior camper nights	Algonquin developed sites
Interior camper nights per site	Algonquin interior sites
Camper nights per developed campsite	
Average length of stay	
Algonquin total visitation	
Algonquin day use visitation	
Algonquin camper nights	
Algonquin camper nights per developed campsite	
Algonquin interior camper nights per site	
Algonquin average length of stay	

## DEMAND SIDE TRENDS

Total park visitation increased from 7,774,409 in 1988 to 10,491,820 in 2002. This represents an increase of 35%. For the same period, park day-use visitors increased from 3,968,156 to 5,454,839 or an increase of 37.5%. Camper nights were also up, increasing from 3,806,253 to 5,036,981. For the 15-year period, camper nights increased by 33.7%. Interior camper nights increased a total of 43.9% (340,128 to 489,425). Finally, the average length of stay increased by 42.3% from 2.6 days to 3.7 days.

Dramatic increases were also evident at Algonquin Provincial Park. Total visitation at Algonquin increased 66.4%, from 559,365 to 930,521. Day use was up by 147.1%. Day-use increased from 96,914 to 239,433 day-use visitors. Based on discussions with Algonquin park staff, several hundred thousands day-use visitors may have always been present. The more recent difference is that through better public awareness and enforcement, more daily permits are being sold along the Highway 60 corridor. Algonquin camper nights increased from 258,092 to 420,102 representing an increase of 62.8%. As might be expected, interior camper nights were up at Algonquin as well. Interior camper nights

grew from 204,359 in 1988 to 270,986 in 2002. Algonquin's interior camper nights grew by 32.6%.

## **SUPPLY SIDE TRENDS**

The supplies of camping and day-use opportunities for the same 15-year period was also analysed. Developed campsites which service car campers, declined from 19,840 in 1988 to 18,809 in 2002. There are several reasons for this decline in supply. The first and most important reason is the loss of a number of operating provincial parks from the supply system. For example, the campgrounds at Lake of the Woods and Lake Nipigon Provincial Parks were deregulated with a resulting loss in developed campsite supply. As well, over time, poor campsites at a number of parks that tend to flood or are not in suitable locations are taken out of service. Finally, with the implementation of the Ontario Parks today there is a better accounting of developed campsites than in previous years.

Available day-use visitor space grew from 3,146,558 in 1989 (data from 1988 not available) to 5,307,561 in 2002. This increase is largely due a new business model for Ontario Parks which saw a number of major parks in southern Ontario going to year round operations and extended operation seasons for many other parks across the system.

The supply of interior campsites increased from 3,705 to 6,500 for the 15-year period. This represents an increase of 75.4% in interior campsite supply. During the 15-year period more parks are offering interior sites and once again since the implementation of the reservation service there is now a better accounting of the supply of interior sites.

During the 15-year period the supply of developed campsites at Algonquin declined from 1,385 to 1,315 (-5.1%). This is also thought to be an adjustment in the quality of sites offered and better accounting. The supply of interior campsites in Algonquin grew by 28.2% (1,518 to 1,946).

## **VISITOR PRESSURE**

A rough measure of visitor pressure on park resources can be obtained from the ratio of camper nights per campsite. For the entire park system, camper nights per developed campsite have increased by 41.1% (174.7 camper nights to 246.4 camper nights). At Algonquin, camper nights per developed campsite have increased even more greatly (186.3 to 319.4). Visitor pressure on developed campsites in Algonquin has increased by 71.4%. Due to the additional supply and a lag in demand, interior campsite nights per interior campsite declined 18% (from 91.8 camper nights to 75.2 camper nights). However, the Algonquin camper nights per interior campsite has only increased from 134.6 camper nights to 139.2 camper nights. This represents a slight increase of 3.4%.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There has been a huge increase in visitation to Ontario Parks for the 15-year period 1988-2002. It should be noted that 2002 was an all time record year for visitation (10,491,820). The second highest recorded visitation was in 2001. Both years were noted for hot summers. Weather is an important determinant of overall visitation levels. Hot, dry weather, especially on summer weekends, seems to

drive an ever-increasing number of people to Ontario Parks. Parks such as Algonquin have also experienced great increases in visitation. Increased visitation has a host of benefits and costs. More visitors mean greater revenues for Ontario Parks. Residents of Ontario and tourists from other provinces and countries spend money while camping. Expenditures made by visitors while experiencing provincial parks supports businesses and communities throughout Ontario. More people than ever may be improving their state of health through visiting a park. However, increased visitation also has costs. More visitors place additional demands on park infrastructure such as roads and washrooms. Sensitive features such as sand dunes and beach grass may be more heavily trampled. Developed and interior campsites have a greater number of days in use, thereby reducing the amount of time for site regeneration. While visitation rises, the huge task for Ontario Parks still remains: the protection of Ontario's outstanding features and landscapes and the provision of sustainable levels of outdoor recreational opportunities.

#### REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Government of Ontario. *OMNR, Park Statistics 2002*. Ontario Parks, Operations and Development Section: Peterborough, Ontario.
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