

Special Session on Ontario Parks Monitoring Framework: Closing Remarks

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Before I begin, let me thank all of the presenters, commentators and rapporteurs for making this a very interesting and informative session. I would especially like to thank the audience. It has been a long day, and I am pleased to see that almost everybody is still here. This is a tribute to your dedication to our topic and to the hard work of the PRFO Steering Team, Jim Porter and all those folks that have helped this day unfold.

I will start my remarks by recounting why we are here today.

We are at a critical point in the park system's history. Ontario's parks and protected areas have greatly expanded in the past 25 years. Monitoring ecosystem health has taken a "back seat" to building this system, and it is Ontario Parks' responsibility to ensure that this new and improved heritage estate is protected and used in an ecologically sustainable manner.

While monitoring the health of park ecosystems is fundamental to Ontario Parks' business, we have really only "dabbled" with a variety of monitoring initiatives in the past. We need to do better! We need to be more strategic in our thinking. We need to increase our knowledge and understanding of ecosystems. We need to be more effective and cost efficient in our activities and more openly involve others in our monitoring initiatives.

We are all here today to share information. We came to inform you about our mandate and recent efforts to establish a framework for a comprehensive monitoring program, and to ask for your help to develop a sustainable monitoring program for Ontario's newly expanded system of provincial parks and conservation reserves. You have shared your thoughts and offered your critical review.

So what have we heard today?

Bob Davidson started out by telling us about Ontario's Living Legacy. About, how the protected area system has expanded to include 12% of the OLL Planning Area and close to 9% of Ontario's total area. He told us about the Round Table Recommendations and the results of recent polling stressing the need for monitoring the health of our natural resources and protected spaces.

We also were reminded of Government's four year \$100 million commitment to implement Ontario Living Legacy and how close to \$20 million of the \$100 mil-

lion will be spent on park planning, regulation, inventory and monitoring initiatives. We have also been told that a small portion of these funds have already been well spent on contracting North-South Environmental Inc. and its associates to develop an approach (framework) for monitoring in Ontario's provincial parks and conservation reserves.

Mirek Sharpe and Brent Tegler presented their preliminary findings. They suggested a comprehensive monitoring framework that considers healthy ecosystems, social well being, economic health and the need for accountability. They proposed a goal, objectives and a hierarchy of monitoring questions, and stressed the need to tailor monitoring to ecosystem integrity, environmental stresses and compliance with rules and regulations.

Mirek and Brent also put 27 recommendations on the table. We are considering these recommendations seriously and are committed to prioritizing and following-up on the most pressing recommendations in this year's work plan. We want your reaction to these recommendations and your thoughts on priority actions. We also want to know whether you think that the framework tabled today is sound and whether the recommendations are well founded.

The comments of reviewers Dawn Bazely and Catherine Dowling, have already given us something to contemplate.

Professor Bazely provided some important thoughts on keeping things in perspective. She cautioned us that monitoring cannot be done in isolation of larger national and global problems. Her words on monitoring organisms as a fundamental activity of ecology also support our notion that monitoring needs to be a fundamental component of Ontario Parks' day-to-day business.

This presents us with two challenges. First, we must work as part of a larger global community to acquire the knowledge needed to understand the nature and scale of the problems we face. Second, as an organization we need to build a monitoring system that emphasizes the importance of the park, its staff and our clients.

I thought that Dawn's comment about openly sharing existing long-term data sets was significant. There is a substantial volume of historical data sitting in peoples file cabinets and computers. The success of any monitoring program will be directly related to our ability to integrate this data into a comprehensive information management system and making this information available to all practitioners.

I also wholeheartedly support Dawn's contention that monitoring must be driven by well-developed research questions. Too often, initiatives have faltered because data collected and analysis undertaken cannot be linked to clear management or sustainability questions. If monitoring cannot answer such questions, its value to

managers and access to funding is greatly diminished or lost.

Catherine's comments added a second important dimension, a human dimension, to the discussion. She asked, are we meeting the needs of the public? She stressed social and economic perspectives in addition to ecological health. I acknowledge these perspectives and note that there is a place for them in the proposed monitoring framework. I also note that these are areas where we need some help.

The Lands for Life consultations and subsequent polls on the environment have given us some interesting and sometimes mixed messages. While it is quite clear that Ontario's public-at-large is concerned about parks and the environment, many local communities do not fully appreciate--and even dismiss--the social and economic values of local parks. A successful monitoring program must help demonstrate how the public values parks and how parks contribute to local economies. Catherine's notion of "Baseline Reference Sites" for socioeconomic characteristics could be used as an effective tool to help measure a park's worth to surrounding communities.

Catherine pointed out that the process by which we choose indicators will be crucial to the success of a monitoring program. I am not sure how we will proceed on this point, but I agree that the process is very important. Based on the experiences of others, however, I do believe that we need to gain some consensus on the fundamental monitoring and research questions before we start selecting indicators.

Catherine also cautioned us about placing too much emphasis on stress monitoring, at the expense of the other component parts of a well-rounded program. Achieving a balance will be the key. There will be pressing needs for short-term results, but we need to be into monitoring for a long time!

I will now focus on some of the comments from the floor and from those made by rapporteurs Graham Whitelaw and Darlene Upton. To begin, I thought many good suggestions have been made and ideas shared. I also can assure you that my staff here today and I have been listening and your comments have been noted.

- We heard about your desire for a framework that has a clear vision and which is adaptive in its approach.

I think we have started down this road. I am hearing agreement around the room that the approach proposed by North-South and its Associates has some merit. We will continue to work within this context to refine our approach. We will also come back to this group at a later date to discuss progress.

- We heard your concerns around the involvement of the First Nations in designing a monitoring system.

I accept this criticism, and note that we'll need to examine ways to engage First Nations in further designing the monitoring framework and local monitoring initiatives. Traditional knowledge is a very important part of our heritage and should be integral part of any initiative.

- We heard about the desire to integrate environmental, social and economic factors into the monitoring framework.

Again, we are already heading down this road. In fact, we have already initiated work to assess the social economic impacts of the signature park sites identified through Lands for Life. It is our hope to build on the North-South work in this area.

- We heard about the need to optimize the use existing data sets and the need to openly "share" information with others.

The value of sharing information became most obvious during the Lands for Life process. An open dialogue and sharing of information benefited everyone. Without this sharing, there would be neither an OLL enlarged protected area system, nor would we be here discussing and pursuing a monitoring initiative today! Partners and sharing of information is crucial.

- We heard cautions about placing too much emphasis on short-term stress monitoring and losing sight of monitoring long-term ecological, social and economic factors.

I believe that a balanced approach is needed. Stress monitoring is a necessary first step towards determining fundamental monitoring questions and developing indicators. We will be following up with a stress questionnaire this coming season. At the same time, we recognize that we need to be in the monitoring game over the long haul!

- We also heard your concerns about long-term funding commitments.

Considerable concern has been expressed about financial and human resources. Indeed, this will be one of our greatest challenges. Modest funding is in place for the next three years to develop a monitoring program. This presents us with an opportunity. We have a window to develop, cost-out and sell the long-term benefits of monitoring program to both government and non-government organizations. Realistically, resources must come from a variety of sources. This does not relieve Ontario Parks of its responsibilities. Rather it recognizes that a successful monitoring program must be build with the input and support of a variety of partners.

In closing, I would like to thank the presenters, commentators and rapporteurs for

their presentations and critical reviews. I would especially like to thank all of you for your thoughts and for hanging in! Your thoughts and ideas have been valuable.