

Parks and Protected Areas in Southern Ontario: Rapporteur's Remarks on the Special Session of the 1999 Parks Research Forum of Ontario

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I want to thank the organizers of the forum this year for the opportunity to observe and reflect on the presentations at this special session. My lens, however, is coloured by my experience over the last few months as a member of the Parks Canada *Panel on Ecological Integrity*. Our job is to report to the federal Minister responsible for national parks on progress with integrating the concept of 'ecological integrity' into the management of the parks system and to advise where and how improvements might be made. It is clear that the challenges and solutions at the national level are paralleled in Ontario.

I was simultaneously struck by the enormity and simplicity of one observation today which I intend to take back to the national group and that is that this forum exists. As all of the morning speakers and panellists pointed out, and as the national panel has heard again and again, protected areas management requires the cooperation of many jurisdictions and the coordinated efforts of individuals with expertise in a variety of disciplines. The Panel has heard about various models to encourage greater regional integration, coordination and cooperation for managing protected areas, but nothing on a spatial scale nor as inclusive as the PRFO. It is important, too, that Parks Canada, with the Heritage Resources Centre at the University of Waterloo, Ontario Parks, and the Frost Centre at Trent University, played a significant role in getting PRFO off the ground in 1996, so there is precedent for the federal government to invest in similar fora across the country that should pay huge dividends in the future. It is a recommendation that I hope to see in our final report to Minister Copps. I congratulate the founders of PRFO for their foresight.

Progress on multi-jurisdictional communication notwithstanding, many comments during the day reminded me about how far we have yet to go before the necessary "jaw-wagging" that PRFO encourages might lead to concrete results. These collectively lead to three broad observations.

First, it is astonishing that a premise so old and simple as "no park is an island", now axiomatic for attendees to fora like this, should still be news for politicians and others with interests in the competing uses to which we put land. This suggests to me that much more has yet to be done on public awareness about issues affecting protected areas and I suggest that a future PRFO might dedicate a session to strategies — proven or otherwise — for "getting the word out". At the same time, we "park-o-philes" need to ask less what the surrounding landscape can do for protected areas and say more what protected areas can do for the surrounding landscape. I think that the value of protected areas as benchmarks for measuring progress to sustainable resource economies is being undersold, perhaps because it sounds too "utilitarian" and doesn't ring with those who have other values for protected areas.

Second, though the attendees today came from a wide range of backgrounds and organizations, one group was obvious by their absence. If we look at any landcover map of southern and central Ontario for some of the biggest tracts of reasonably intact natural areas, we find Reserve Lands. The Panel has learned that First Nations communities can be key allies in protected areas planning and management, and more must be done to ensure future participation in PRFO.

Third, we still seem to take a 'piecemeal approach' to planning and assembling protected areas into a broader network. Only part of this can be explained (excused?) by the manner in which politics and opportunity create the frenzied environment where a methodical approach to achieving the grander vision of a coherent network seems remote. More importantly, protected area advocates have still to articulate the bigger vision of a protected areas network that addresses more than the criterion of mere *representation* of species and ecosystems within boundaries of protected areas. We need to put as much emphasis on species' and ecosystem *persistence*—through adequate attention to design criteria of minimum size, boundary delineation and connectedness—as we do on representation.

I sensed that the "mood" of this year's PRFO was less gloomy than last—and rightly so, opinions of editors at the Toronto Star aside—given that, in the interim, 378 protected areas totalling 2.4 million hectares were added to the Ontario provincial parks system. This is a good start in the right direction and was in no small way due to the kind of networking and cooperation that a forum like PRFO facilitates. The analyses used as a basis for the discussion by the *Partnership for Public Lands* in the *Lands for Life* negotiations were by far the most advanced to date (necessity is the mother of invention, they say). Nevertheless, to a great extent, the exercise came down to saving bits where we could get them and more work at future PRFO meetings should concentrate on furthering the grand vision of a protected areas network.

The philosopher Thomas Hurka once offered that democratic institutions might substitute for Adam Smith's ideal observer, that is, a hypothetical all-knowing individual, equally sympathetic to all affected parties, who knew the "right" thing to do. In the absence of such an individual, we hope to gain through the collective wisdom of the group what none of us as individuals could know or accomplish alone. It strikes me that the PRFO is a kind of ideal observer that brings together planners, designers, ecologists, naturalists, geographers and many others to focus our collective wisdom and energy to the task of creating a network of integrated protected areas, whatever the many and varied reasons to have them.

Editor's Note: Since this was written, the report of the *Panel on the Ecological Integrity of Canada's National Parks* was released. The Parks Research Forum of Ontario is featured in a sidebar on page 4-14 in the chapter about *Building Capacity for Learning and Education*. The report can be found at the Panel's website (<http://ecolog.org>). A report and discussion on the work of the *Ecological Integrity Panel* has also been built into the SAMPAA (Science and Management of Protected Areas Association) and PRFO collaborative conference to be held at the University of Waterloo, May 14-19, 2000.