

# Then, Then and Now: The evolution of Canada's National Park System

## Then #1

National Parks were initially a North American institution. Yellowstone National Park in the USA was the first: 1872; Banff National Park was Canada's first, a 26 square kilometre parcel surrounding a hot spring, established in 1885. Other countries have subsequently created their own National Parks or equivalents.

As an aside, Canada can lay claim to the first Migratory Bird Sanctuary in North America: Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan in 1887.

For the first several decades following the establishment of Banff Park, there was no notion of a system of parks; in fact, the term National Park wasn't used until after the passage of the National Parks Act in 1930. Previously, the terms Dominion Park, Forest Park or simply Park were applied.

Prior to 1930, The Federal Government created Parks, primarily in Western Canada, where it controlled the natural resources. But with the passage of the Natural Resources Act of 1930, which gave the ownership and management of natural resources to the western Provinces, the task of establishing additional National Parks in these Provinces became more complicated.

The rationale for creating parks then was considerably different than it is today. Take Banff for example. An excerpt from the Order in Council creating it reads "There have been discovered several hot mineral springs which promise to be of great sanitary advantage to the public, and in order that proper control of the lands surrounding these springs remain vested in the Crown, the said lands in the territory including said springs and in their immediate neighbourhood, be and they are hereby reserved from sale or settlement or squatting."

The justification for the establishment of Kootenay National Park was “to permit the construction of the Dominion section of the Banff-Windermere Highway”.

In 1909, legislation established for the management of Banff and other parks provided a public safety element regarding the advent of the automobile. The legislation stated “the use of automobiles of every kind is prohibited on any road or elsewhere within the limits of the parks”. Other legislation passed that year took a different direction: “...permitted the Minister to issue Licences of Occupation for the working of mines and for the development of mining interests within the limits of the park, subject to the approval by the Governor – in- Council, as to the terms, conditions, and duration of such Licences of Occupation.”

It took the passage of the National Parks Act in 1930 to firmly establish the purpose of National Parks. The dedication clause of the Act stated “The Parks are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, subject to the provisions of this Act and the Regulations, and such Parks shall be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Up until 1967, nineteen National Parks had been created, covering some 30,000 square miles, with Wood Buffalo alone covering 17,300 square miles.

Throughout this period, particularly after the Second World War, public interest in the out-of-doors was steadily growing. Studies in the USA called the ORRRC reports [Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission] captured the variables in this development that included driving for pleasure, camping, fishing, hiking, wildlife photography, skiing, etc, thus providing guidance to US agencies on what and where to provide for visitors. The results, unsurprisingly, had almost equal application to Canadian park agencies; the focus on park development and management became increasingly service-oriented: bigger and better campgrounds, roads, ski hills and, on

more than one occasion, golf courses. But...change was coming.

## Then #2

Prior to the creation of the Planning Division in the National Parks Branch, studies were undertaken by one or two senior officers who offered their advice on the merits of a particular site. Political “suggestions” were also entertained. The notion of a “system” of Parks meeting some form of minimum standards was still absent.

The Planning Division, created in 1957, was assigned the role [among other things] of examining and reporting on potential new candidate sites. It continued the field assessments, with 20 or so site reviews from 1962, leading to one additional Park by 1967.

I joined the Planning Division in 1965, after a summer in Fundy, Cape Breton Highlands and Terre Nova National Parks. Joining a crew from HQ and the Halifax office, I had my first opportunity to participate in a new park study: Gros Morne. My assignment: to produce a report from this survey. By Christmas, the report had made its way through the Branch and was sent off to Newfoundland for their review and reaction. Premier Smallwood invited us down to discuss the proposal and, by the end of the meeting, he'd instructed us to proceed to proceed. All of this, in less than five months! As I would later learn, other proposals would take five, ten, twenty or even fifty years to reach the same point.

The Master's thesis I would complete over the following three years confirmed that no current methodology would be of any value to the new park selection process. With instructions to develop something better, another colleague and I modified and expanded a US Park Service approach to resource assessments, resulting in a natural history themes and regions approach that became the basis for a Park Systems Planning Manual that is still in use today. Representative samples of each of the thirty nine natural regions of Canada became the target, albeit by no means an

easy one to achieve. The politics of new park establishment began to change, with new players and new considerations as the pace of interest in protected areas and outdoor activities picked up.

Natural resource industries such as mining, oil and gas, and forestry had long had the bulk of the Canadian landscape to themselves. Indeed, the dominant pieces of federal legislation related to the oil and gas and mining sectors, thus requiring challenges to the application of the National Parks Act. Further complicating the process was a provision under that Act [which the Opposition slipped into the

Act while open to amendments] which limited new parks to the status of “Reserves” until any outstanding indigenous land claims were settled in the affected areas. Provincial Governments were also becoming increasingly sensitive to the requirement under the National Parks Act to transfer land title “free of all encumbrances”, thus reducing their provincial land-base. Non-government organizations were forming with mandates to push for more protected areas, setting targets and deadlines that would conflict with the realities of government-to-government negotiations, study schedules, etc. These and other factors that were emerging that would add to the complexity of completing the National Parks System.

Notwithstanding, not only did the System grow, additional initiatives including marine conservation areas, wild rivers and landmarks were now being studied for new forms of protected areas. Provinces and Territories were separately building their own protected areas networks. And indigenous groups, recognizing the protection-from-development aspect of National Parks, began including National Park status in their land claim negotiations.

## Now

To conclude, despite the difficulties and complexities that evolved over time, Canada’s National Parks System and National Marine Conservation Area System have continued to grow and are well on their way to completion. As of

December, 2019 Canada has 47 National Parks representing 31 natural regions, and four existing and three proposed National Marine Conservation Areas. The Wild Rivers study program initiated in the early 70's morphed into the Heritage Rivers Program which now includes rivers from all parts of Canada. And.....the work continues.