

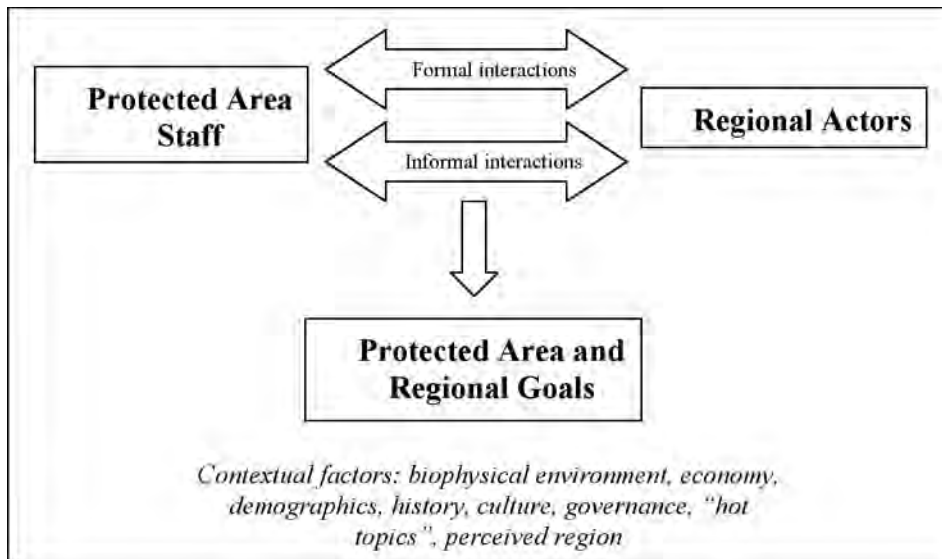
The Regional Integration of Protected Areas: A Study of Canada’s National Parks

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Protected areas are connected to their regions through relationships: ecological relationships, such as the movement of air, water, wildlife, and fire across boundaries; social relationships, such as human interactions between protected area agency staff and local people (Zube 1995); and economic relationships, such as the development of on-site and off-site goods and services for protected area visitors (Lockwood 2006). Because of these interactions, protected areas cannot be managed as “islands,” in isolation of their surrounding regions.

The concept of regional integration emphasizes an approach to protected area management and planning that is regional in scope (Saunier and Meganck 1995) and acknowledges that building regional support for protected areas is crucial for their sustainability (McNeely, Lockwood, and Chapman 2006). The premise of regional integration is that protected area staff and regional actors engage in informal and formal interactions in order to fulfill short and long-term goals that are directly or indirectly related to the protected area (Figure 1). Formal mechanisms can include meetings, information sharing, open houses, or joint projects. Informal mechanisms can include phone calls, casual gatherings, or park staff getting involved in non-park related community activities. Regional integration is influenced by a number of contextual factors including the region’s biophysical environment and economy, the history of park establishment, and “hot topics” in the region. Regional actors and park staff have varied goals for engaging in regional integration; for example, they may want to

Figure 1. Protected area interactions with regional actors.



address specific management problems, improve or restore ecological integrity, or move toward economic or ecological sustainability in the protected area region.

Research method

The goal of this research was to develop the theory and improve the practice of the regional integration of protected areas (for details, see McCleave 2008). This research aimed to answer the following four primary research questions:

- What are the critical interactions between national parks and their surrounding regions, and what management challenges do they raise?
- How have the interactions between national parks and their surrounding regions been addressed by protected area managers and other actors?
- How is the concept of regional integration currently defined and practiced within the context of national parks in Canada?
- How can the regional integration of Canada's national parks be improved?

Five national parks and their regions were used as case studies: Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site, Nova Scotia; Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland; Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta; Mount Revelstoke National Park, British Columbia; and Glacier National Park, British Columbia. Data to construct the case studies were collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews, the collection of relevant documents, and field observations. A broad spectrum of people participated, including park staff, provincial government employees, First Nations, industry representatives, and local residents.

What is regional integration?

A revised definition of regional integration can be produced by incorporating the broad definition that was used to shape the study, participants' conceptualizations of regional integration (see McCleave 2008), and policies and documents that refer to regional integration at the national and park level. The following characteristics of the process of protected area regional integration have emerged:

- Regional integration is a process, not a goal. Regional integration is never fully reached *per se*, but a protected area may exhibit strong regional integration.
- Regional integration can be carried out both formally and informally.
- Regional integration is a complex process. There are multiple, constant interactions occurring between park staff and regional actors. Interactions can occur between park staff and one regional actor or between park staff and multiple regional actors.
- Regional integration is affected by contextual factors such as the economy, demographics, history, and culture.
- Regional integration occurs at the initiative of both park staff and regional actors.
- Regional integration focuses on human interactions and relationships, as opposed to biophysical interactions.

- Regional integration occurs at the regional scale but there is not a strictly defined physical boundary.
- Different regional actors have different goals for regional integration, although there are often some goals shared by all regional actors, such as sustainability.
- Regional actors can be individuals, organizations, businesses, or governments.

Based on the above characteristics, the following is offered as a slightly narrower definition of regional integration:

Regional integration is a complex process by which protected area staff and regional actors engage in formal and informal social interactions in order to reach independent and shared goals related to the protected area. Regional integration is strongly influenced by contextual factors such as the region’s economy, biophysical environment, governance, and history, as well as the culture of park staff and regional actors.

Characteristics of strong regional integration

Study participants recognized that regional integration for a particular park can range from weak to strong, and that the relative strength of regional integration can change over time. Table 1 lists some characteristics of strong regional integration. The characteristics of strong

Table 1. Characteristics of strong regional integration.

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| <p>Awareness, understanding, and perceptions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goals, mandate, and interests of the park are understood and accepted by regional actors • Park staff are aware of the park’s effects on the park region • Regional actors understand the tangible and intangible benefits that the park brings to the community • Regional actors perceive that they are adequately involved in park management and planning • Regional actors perceive that they can communicate effectively with park staff • Park staff perceive that they can communicate effectively with regional actors • Park staff are perceived as important contributors to the community |
| <p>Direction and policy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are principles in place for park involvement in regional issues • Park staff have the flexibility to adjust national policies that may not be appropriate within the regional context • There are some common priorities and objectives established between the park and regional actors |
| <p>Actions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park staff are represented on and play an active role in community boards and other regional processes • There are staff within the park dedicated to working on regional issues, but other park staff understand that regional issues are not solely the responsibility of these staff members • Personal relationships are developed between key park staff and regional actors • There are regular informal interactions occurring between park staff and regional actors • There are regular formal mechanisms in place for interactions between park staff and regional actors |

regional integration are divided into three categories: (1) awareness, understanding, and perceptions, (2) direction and policy, and (3) actions.

Challenges to regional integration

Certain general challenges to effective regional integration emerged from the case studies. First, engaging in mechanisms for interacting with regional actors is time-consuming and laborious. Many park staff are very busy and, in most cases, engaging with regional actors is not a specific part of their job description. Furthermore, informal interactions with regional actors may be discouraged as “unproductive” depending on the culture of the park office.

Second, effective regional integration is not possible unless there is a willingness to engage on the part of both the park staff and regional actors. In some cases, a difficult historical context may lead to an unwillingness of some actors to engage with park staff for an extended period of time.

Third, some park staff may not feel comfortable with a high level of regional integration, even though the concept of regional integration can be connected to Parks Canada’s mandate and future direction. Mechanisms that require local people to be intimately involved in the resource management of the park can be threatening to some park staff because they mean relinquishing some control in order to gain the trust and support of regional actors.

Finally, improving regional integration means accepting that regional actors often have goals and objectives that differ from those of park staff. This may be difficult for some park staff to accept and understand, as it is a different way of thinking than concepts, such as a “greater ecosystem approach,” that often emphasizes a singular goal of protecting and enhancing the ecological integrity of the protected area.

Assessment of the case studies’ regional integration

A general assessment of the strength of regional integration of the four case studies can be made based on the results of this study. It should be noted again that this study has not measured regional integration per se, and that the conclusions should not be interpreted without examining the regional context of the case studies (see McCleave 2008).

Gros Morne National Park seems to have the strongest regional integration of the case studies. This assessment is based on the overwhelmingly positive tone of the interviews for this case study, the articulation from staff of the importance of regional integration, and the number of informal and formal mechanisms in place for interaction with regional actors.

Both Waterton Lakes National Park and Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site have strong regional integration in certain areas. For example, Kejimikujik has very strong integration with academics as well as regional actors connected with several regional associations and networks. There is a medium level of integration with other government agencies and perceived weak links with local communities. Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site is the only case study with formal mechanisms in place for interaction with First Nations, and this is a hopeful sign that this relationship will strengthen over time.

The regional integration of Waterton Lakes National Park is highly influenced by its regional context. There is strong integration with some regional actors, particularly Glacier National Park, USA, and the Province of Alberta. Several regional networks, regular events,

and formal mechanisms provide opportunities for interaction between park staff and regional actors. However, participants perceived weaker integration with First Nations, some Waterton townsite residents, and some ranchers.

Generally speaking, the regional integration of Mount Revelstoke and Glacier National Parks was perceived by some participants as strong and others as weak. The parks seem to be more disconnected from their region than the other case studies, particularly in terms of the overall visibility of the parks and park activities in the region. While some participants were very positive about the parks and the interaction between park staff and regional actors, other participants perceived the regional integration of the parks to be weak.

Improving regional integration

This section provides recommendations for how national parks in Canada could improve their regional integration. The following suggestions are not specific to any one case study and may be generalizable to other national parks with similar contextual factors and regional issues.

The implementation of park entrance fees in the mid 1990's was a "sticking point" for many regional actors in the four case studies, and had a significant effect on the parks' relationships with local communities. The implementation of entrance fees made some local people not feel welcome in "their parks." A tangible and effective way to move toward improving relationships with local residents would be to offer a reduced rate or no charge for local residents to use the parks. This would send a clear message to local people that they are indeed welcome in the parks, and would have an immediate impact on local peoples' perception of how the parks are integrated into their regions.

The next suggestion involves modifying the park culture and policies with regard to park staff interactions with regional actors by accommodating requests from regional actors as much as possible. The case study of Gros Morne National Park showed that this approach can go a long way toward building regional support and trust.

Another tangible way to improve regional integration would be to ensure that the turnover of park superintendents and other key staff is decreased. Staff continuity is important; some regional actors in this study noted that they did not attempt to interact with superintendents and other senior managers who were not perceived to be at the park "for the long haul."

A high number of participants articulated that they did not know what the mandate or policies of Parks Canada were. Therefore, to improve regional integration, park policies and the park mandate should be communicated more effectively so that regional actors can better understand Parks Canada's perspective.

Improving regional integration would mean improving the relationship between parks and First Nations. This is a complex and long-term endeavor that was found to be at the beginning stages, if at any stage at all, in the four case studies. Specific suggestions for starting this effort include: hiring more First Nations staff, officially recognizing and interpreting First Nations cultural heritage, formally incorporating the federal government's "duty to consult" First Nations, "being nimble" and ready to interact when First Nations are ready, and providing free entrance to national parks for First Nations people.

Political and managerial “buy in” of regional integration is important. This buy in can lead to increased funding for regional integration initiatives, the recognition that these initiatives are a vital component of work activities, and the promotion of the importance of improving regional integration to all park staff. Another important way to obtain buy in of regional integration would be to create specific strategies and policies for park staff’s interaction with regional actors, such as Gros Morne National Park’s “Engaging with Communities” strategy (Parks Canada).

National parks could improve their regional integration by increasing the frequency of informal and social interactions with regional actors. Informal interactions help to build trust, improve understanding of regional actors’ goals and viewpoints, and create the personal relationships that are fundamental to continuity and organizational communication. In this study, the one park that made a point of engaging in social mechanisms with regional actors, Gros Morne National Park, also enjoyed the highest degree of support.

Finally, more information sharing among parks about regional integration is needed. There appears to be little communication among parks about regional integration, particularly between the eastern and western national parks. It would be very beneficial for national parks to share approaches to regional integration, details about mechanisms for regional integration, and experiences of regional integration.

Conclusion

The relationship between protected areas and their regions is complex, dynamic, and based on social interactions. This study has emphasized the inextricable link between people and protected areas. The ultimate goal of this research was to improve the understanding of the way that protected areas staff interact with regional actors, so that the goals of regional actors and protected area staff, whether they are building trust and awareness or protecting ecological integrity, can be realized.

The conceptual framework for regional integration offered here provides a broader perspective for examining the relationship between parks and people, and can hopefully be used as a model to gain insight from real parks and people in order to develop ways to improve interactions. It is grounded in multiple bodies of knowledge, and the move toward a new paradigm of protected areas management and planning. The true value of this study will only be realized if it informs future research and if lessons are applied in order to improve the regional integration of protected areas, and ultimately the sustainability of protected areas themselves.

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