

Managing for Results: Parks Canada's Approach to Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting

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Parks Canada is the Canadian government's federal agency responsible for a network of protected heritage places, consisting of 42 national parks, 167 national historic sites, 4 national marine conservation areas, and a suite of other heritage-designated places. On behalf of the people of Canada, Parks Canada protects and presents nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage, and fosters public understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations.

Towards results-based management

Global trends in management include a shift towards results-based management,¹ where increasingly, programs are designed and expenditures justified by defining specific, measurable results to be achieved. Being able to attribute results to specific programs also enables a results-based approach to program manager performance evaluation, and enhances accountability for results delivered against expenditures made.²

The Canadian federal government has recently implemented legislation and policy designed to enhance accountability, and to shift towards results-based management. In particular, a federal Treasury Board policy³ requires that every federal department and agency put in place specific frameworks to enable planning for, and reporting against, specific measurable results.

Results-based management at Parks Canada

In accordance with federal policy, Parks Canada developed a program activity architecture, showing the suite of program areas in the agency and their relationship to each other, and to Parks Canada's strategic outcome, which is "Canadians have a strong sense of connection, through meaningful experiences, to their national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas and these protected places are enjoyed in ways that leave them unimpaired for future generations." Broadly, these program areas represent distinct areas of policy and programming to which funding allocations are made, and against which investments are monitored. Parks Canada's program activities are Heritage Places Establishment, Heritage Resources Conserva-

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tion, Public Appreciation and Understanding, Visitor Experience, and Townsite and Throughway Infrastructure.

The policy also dictates that each government department or agency must develop a “performance management framework.” The framework builds on the program activity architecture by outlining, for each program activity, expected outputs and results for which performance expectations are set. The expected results are defined as high-level outcomes related to each activity area, whereas performance expectations are specific, measurable targets with dates used to measure the extent to which results were achieved. Performance of the agency against these performance expectations is reported annually to the Canadian Parliament. Each report is subject to an independent audit in order to assess the fairness and reliability of the reported results.

Primary outcomes. The management of Parks Canada’s protected areas is directed by several pieces of legislation and associated policies. In the “Canada National Parks Act,”⁴ the maintenance or restoration of *ecological integrity* is the first priority of the minister, when considering all aspects of park management. National marine conservation areas are established under law⁵ “for the purpose of protecting and conserving representative marine areas,” and to provide for *ecologically sustainable use*. For national historic sites, the concept of *commemorative integrity* is the principle management objective. In all of the protected heritage places administered by Parks Canada, its mandate includes not only protection, but also providing opportunities for quality *visitor experiences*, and promoting *public appreciation and understanding*.

These concepts form the basis of monitoring programs in the agency, and are also the primary outcomes from which performance expectations are derived. For example, some of the expected results for Parks Canada’s performance management framework are in Figure 1.

Some of these expected results are corporate in nature, and are delivered through the national policy function. Most, however, require results to be delivered in the field, that is, in each of the protected heritage places. Corporate-level results can only be achieved through a collective effort across the agency.

The management planning cycle

Each protected heritage place is required by legislation to have a management plan in place within five years following its establishment, and every five years thereafter, to review the plan and

Figure 1. Expected results for Parks Canada’s performance management framework.

| Expected Result of Program Activity: Management actions result in improvements to ecological integrity indicators in national parks, and the state of cultural resources in national historic sites is improved. | |
|---|--|
| Performance Indicators: | Targets: |
| Percentage of national parks with at least one improved ecological integrity indicator | Outside of national parks in the far north with an already acceptable ecological integrity status, 80% of national parks have at least one improved ecological integrity indicator from March 2008 to March 2013 |
| Percentage of the condition of cultural resources and management practices elements of commemorative integrity rated as poor are improved | 70% of the condition of cultural resources and management practices elements of commemorative integrity rated as poor are improved within five years |

table in Parliament any required amendments. The mechanism driving results-based planning is the Parks Canada five-year management planning cycle.

In Figure 2, each element has a role to play in ensuring results-based management and planning.

Monitoring. Monitoring of the basic condition, or state, of each protected heritage place is an ongoing activity. Protocols have been developed to monitor and assess the condition of a suite of measures related to ecological integrity, commemorative integrity, visitor experience, and public appreciation and understanding. In addition to tracking these measures to understand the state of each place, Parks Canada tracks the effectiveness of management actions designed to improve different aspects of the state. It is this information that, through adaptive management, plays a key role in determining future management actions.

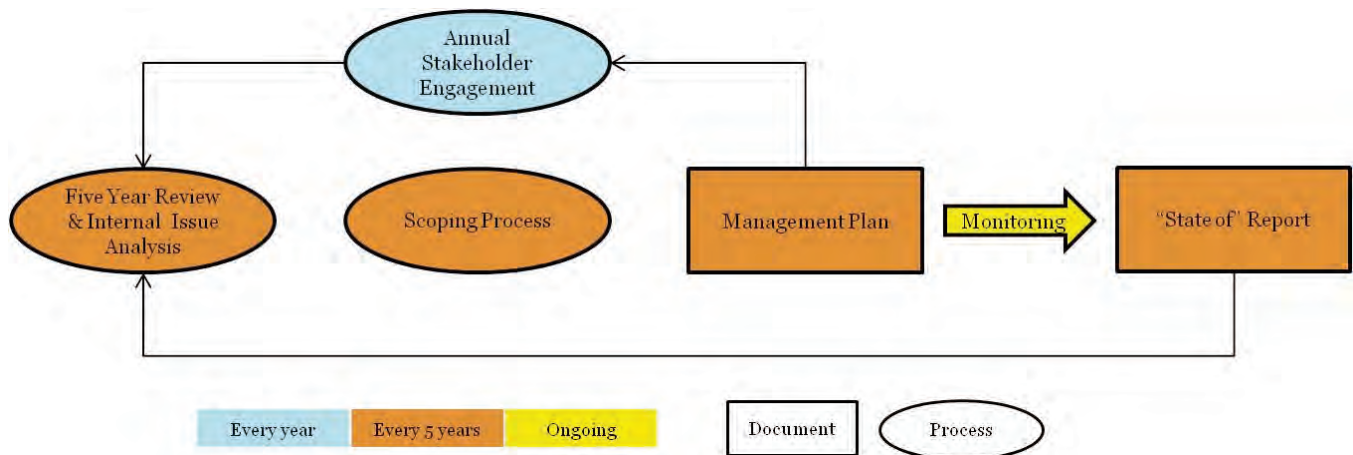
“State of the Park/Site” reporting. On a five-year cycle, each national park or national historic site must produce a report on the state of the protected place. The report summarizes the analysis of all monitoring data, and provides an evaluation of the condition of each aspect being monitored. Though some information is qualitative, criteria and thresholds are defined to indicate whether the state of various elements is “good,” “fair,” or “poor,” and whether there are observable trends in condition, that is, “improving,” “stable,” or “declining” (Figure 3).

Based on this assessment of the condition of indicators, analysis leads to the identification of key issues facing the protected heritage place. The report also summarizes whether active management targets have been met. Examples of “State of the Park/Site” reports and the national report on the “State of Protected Heritage Areas” can be found at www.pc.gc.ca/eng/docs/biblib/index.aspx.







Scoping process. Prior to consulting the public on management plan development or review, Parks Canada officials have an internal dialogue about opportunities, issues, and challenges for the protected heritage place, and how the management planning process can be used to address them. Key intended results are identified, and the scope and scale of the planning process is agreed to. Important inputs to this discussion include the condition of the place, and the effectiveness of actions implemented in the previous management plan, as well as other factors that influence management planning, such as regional developments, and partners’ expectations.

Management plan. The management plan is a strategic-level document that outlines a 15-year vision for the protected heritage place, and a series of strategies to achieve specific results. These are expressed as results-based objectives, which are defined along with 5-year measurable targets, and the large-scale actions that will be implemented in order to meet them. These targets

Figure 2. Elements of results-based management and planning.



Evaluation of indicators

| INDICATOR | STATE |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Forest |  |
| Lakes |  |
| Cultural Resource Condition |  |
| Visits |  |
| Satisfaction |  |
| Support |  |





| CONDITION | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |
| Good | Fair | Poor | Not rated |

Figure 3. Evaluation of indicators.

in turn support adaptive management, as results are tracked on an ongoing basis and reported prior to the next plan review. Many targets will relate to improving condition, so success is measured through the ongoing long-term monitoring efforts.

Progress to date

It is still early days for Parks Canada in terms of linking condition monitoring to planning and performance evaluation through its planning and reporting cycle. Each element of the Parks Canada mandate is at different stages of developing monitoring and assessment protocols and programs. “State of the Park/Site” information plays an important role in management plan scoping, but there is a lag in reporting the successes of previous management plans, since results-based targets are only included in the most recent generation of management plans. It will likely be another full five-year cycle before most national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas have monitoring programs that are fully implemented, and are generating monitoring data that can be meaningfully analyzed to determine changes in trends and conditions.

Early challenges and lessons learned

As with the development of any new framework, there are challenges and lessons to be learned.

Defining the information needs. Ideally, at the outset of implementing such a framework,

Linking condition to planning and reporting

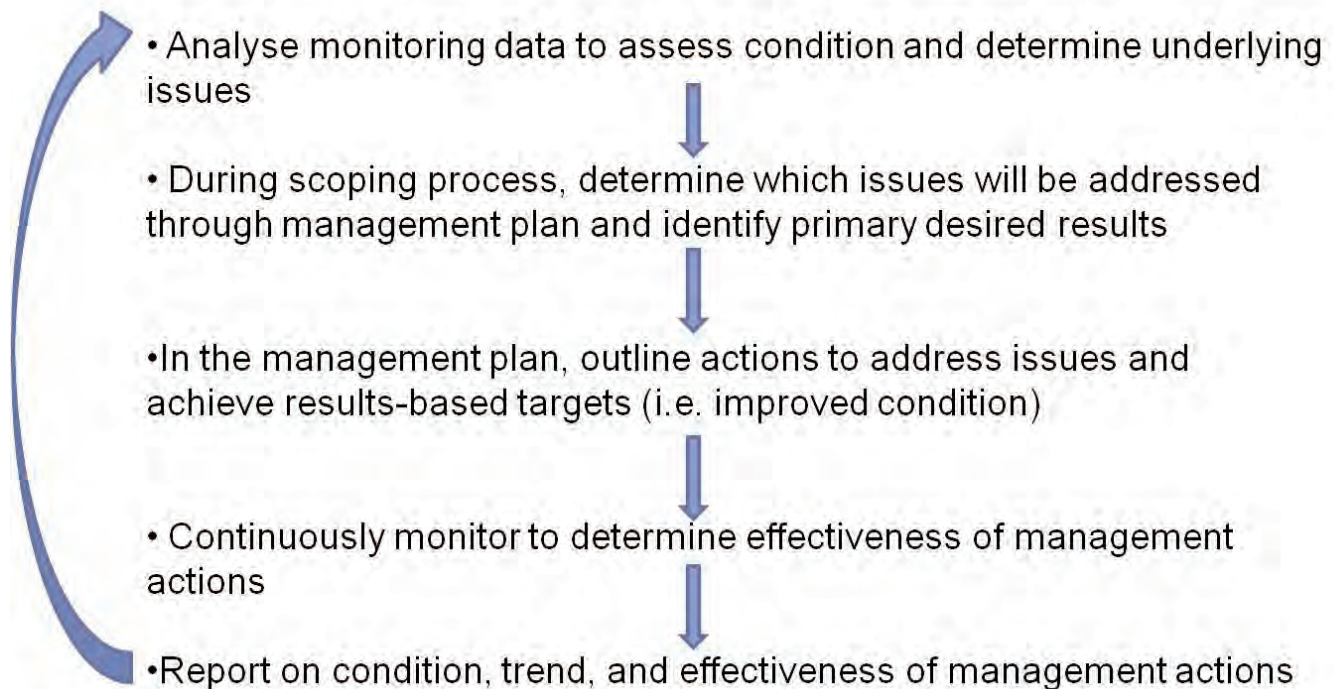


Figure 4. Linking condition to planning and reporting.

there would be a process to identify and clearly define key information required to answer the relevant management questions. For Parks Canada, there is a legal requirement to report on the “state” of its protected heritage places, in addition to reporting on performance. Parks Canada’s efforts to report on state were fairly well established when the need to report on performance came into effect. As a result, some of the monitoring effort must be realigned, and some indicators re-examined, to identify the critical information required to support decision making, in addition to meeting “state of” reporting requirements.

Setting appropriate performance targets. If performance is to be tied to results, and desired results are based on the condition of a protected heritage place, then it is critical to ensure that performance expectations are clearly defined, readily measurable, and logistically, financially, and politically feasible. Many of the indicators in Parks Canada’s monitoring programs can be influenced to a certain degree by concerted management actions, but are primarily determined by large-scale factors beyond the agency’s control. For example, visitation levels can be influenced by concerted management action, but are affected by many other factors, such as the global economy, regional tourism trends, the strength of the Canadian dollar, the weather, etc. It is important to set targets that can be met through management actions and for which results can be attributed to those actions. Specificity and scale are important considerations.

While it is important to define longer term outcomes, it is also necessary to identify key outputs and intermediate outcomes that can be expected as a result of management actions. Parks

Canada's performance management framework is populated with results-based targets ranging from 1–5 years, but is just beginning to identify short term outputs that help to track progress on an annual basis.

Distinguishing “state” from performance. Parks Canada is obligated to report on the “state” of its places. Especially for ecological integrity of national parks and the ecological condition of our marine conservation areas, but also for other indicators, there will be measures that must be reported over which Parks Canada has little to no control. For example, measures of tundra ecosystem health, such as permafrost depth, are tied to global climatic change, and cannot reasonably be influenced through local management actions. Nonetheless, reporting on the health of the tundra ecosystem is important in order to be able to report to Parliament and Canadians on the overall state of our northern national parks.

It is important to clearly distinguish information related to state from that related to performance evaluation. Often performance will be related to certain aspects of state, but performance targets should be focused only on those specific aspects that can, and will be the focus of management actions, with a high probability of success. When is there no clear distinction made between performance and state, there is a danger of being wary of reporting “poor” condition ratings, based on the assumption that poor performance is somehow implied. Given the regional or global scale of the drivers and stressors acting on protected areas, there will only be certain aspects of their condition that can reasonably be maintained or improved through management actions. This is not, however, a reason to avoid objective, knowledge-based reporting on condition.

Reconciling reporting timeframes with longer-term outcomes. Managing complex systems is a challenge. Achieving outcomes such as improving aspects of ecological integrity, or increasing public awareness and understanding of Parks Canada's mandate, takes time. The timeframes associated with achieving meaningful results are not always compatible with reporting needs, and so results are difficult to demonstrate from one annual report to the next. The identification of intermediate outputs can help to bridge the gap.

Seeking efficiencies in monitoring. There are ever-increasing information needs in order to manage protected areas in a rapidly changing environment. For each area of management at every scale in Parks Canada, reliable information is required to inform decision-making. Yet resources are finite and increasingly scarce, and monitoring and reporting are only a few of the many demands on operational budgets. In designing performance targets, every effort should be made to use existing monitoring metrics to evaluate performance. There are challenges related to scale, where actions have local impact but condition is reported on a larger scale. Nonetheless, the results of management actions should be detectable through existing monitoring programs. If this is not the case, then a parallel monitoring effort needs to be made to measure the effectiveness of management actions, or else it is impossible to determine whether results have been achieved as a result of efforts undertaken. This latter scenario is problematic for evaluating success and demonstrating value for investments made.

Seeking efficiencies is also important in terms of cost-effectiveness. Long-term monitoring programs have been typically vulnerable to budget cuts, and so it is wise to design them to be able to withstand budget constrictions.

Information management and availability. Monitoring information has little or no value if it is not analyzed and made available to those who require it for decision making. Following the implementation of monitoring programs and integrating them into the management planning cycle, Parks Canada is now focused on ensuring that data gathered is regularly analyzed, entered into central databases, and made available to decision makers as useful information. Another area for improvement is to align monitoring and reporting protocols with the timing dictated by the five-year management plan cycles for each protected heritage place, in order to ensure that decision-making is informed by the most current information available.

Conclusion

The move to a results-based management approach presents numerous challenges and opportunities.⁶ Parks Canada, per the requirement for all Canada government departments and agencies, has identified a measurable strategic outcome that unites collective efforts towards a singular vision. As programs evolve, and a clearer understanding is gained of the state of the protected heritage places, and the effects of the efforts to achieve targeted outcomes, Parks Canada will be better positioned to serve Canadians through protecting, presenting, and providing opportunities to experience Canada's natural and cultural treasures in a manner that leaves them unimpaired for future generations.

Endnotes

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *In Search of Results: Performance Management Practices* (Paris: OECD Publications, 1997).
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6. J. Mayne, "Challenges and Lessons in Results-Based Management," *Evaluation* 13, no. 1 (2007): 87–109.