

Connecting Urban Populations to Protected Areas

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Introduction

CREATING THIS CANADIAN FIRST, a national urban park in Toronto's Rouge River Valley, is an exciting initiative. In keeping with Parks Canada's mandate, this project is well aligned with Parks Canada's goal to reach Canada's increasingly diverse urban population. Success of this initiative would not be possible without the dedication and foresight of those in the community and in government who have worked nearly thirty years to protect and care for this special place.

The challenge

As policy makers and managers of protected places, we face a number of common challenges. Our countries are becoming increasingly urban, and our traditional visitor base is eroding. In Canada, 80 percent of our citizens live in cities (Statistics Canada). Not surprisingly, the numbers are even greater for new Canadians. In the greater Toronto area, the pace of growth is staggering. In 2011 the population of this area was 6.3 million; by 2036 it is expected to grow to 9.2 million (Ontario Ministry of Finance 2013). Until now, Parks Canada has had no on-going presence in the greater Toronto area, where 20 percent of the Canadian population lives.

One in five Canadians is born outside of Canada, and this ratio is expected to increase to one in three within the next few years. Unlike many of us who grew up camping and hiking, many new Canadians did not start out with these same connections to landscape. This changing relationship to nature is also seen among youth, particularly urban youth, who spend more time indoors than out, and who are especially disconnected from nature and agricultural areas.

The competition for Canadian's leisure time is fierce, and our protected area messages, if and when we send them, are often lost in the clutter. Parks Canada depends on only 18 percent of the Canadian population for its visitation, and draws more visitors from town and rural areas than from urban and suburban areas. Our protected places are mostly located far from urban areas. It's no wonder that, despite some increasing awareness, our visitation continues to decrease.

The case for change

"Until we create the case for change and for people to understand why [connecting Canadians

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to nature] is critical, we will not achieve what we want to achieve in terms of societal change and political support long term” (Alan Latourelle, CEO, Parks Canada). As expressed by our CEO, connecting Canadians to nature is a critical and urgent societal issue. Are we prepared to tackle the challenge?

A call to action

At Parks Canada we believe the time to act is now. We’ve aligned our agency vision, our formal commitment to performance (known as our strategic outcome), and one of our corporate priorities to this end. Our agency vision is that Canada’s treasured natural and historic places will be a living legacy, connecting hearts and minds to a stronger, deeper understanding of the very essence of Canada. Our strategic outcome is that Canadians have a strong sense of connection, through meaningful experiences, to their national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas, and that these protected places are enjoyed in ways that leave them unimpaired for present and future generations. A corporate priority is that Parks Canada will undertake activities to connect and interact with new Canadians, youth, and young adults in Canada’s largest cities by working with partners and supporters, and by employing channels such as mass media and social media. A number of actions will focus on raising awareness and increasing connection with audiences in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.

The opportunity

We have many things working in our favor. Torontonians are craving green space, and while they make use of their neighborhood parks, they want access to larger natural areas. New Canadians want to understand and know their new country, especially after they’ve satisfied more basic needs of housing, employment, and schooling.

Fast growing municipalities need natural areas to address social challenges, and to enrich the lives and improve the health of their residents. Young people need and want leisure alternatives. Agencies and associations realize they can’t succeed alone, and are open to the possibilities of partnering. And if there’s one common thread seen throughout the country: families, no matter their cultural background, want to recreate, gather, and spend time together.

Canada’s first national urban park

Enter Canada’s first national urban park, a new entity for Parks Canada that will take its place alongside national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas. The local stakeholders in the greater Toronto area and the provincial and municipal governments recognized they had taken their conservation efforts to protect and manage the Rouge as far as they could, under the now disbanded Rouge Park Alliance. They asked the federal government to join and lead the effort to create a larger park, reflective of its urban setting, worthy of national profile, and protected by national designation and legislation. The government of Canada responded positively, and announced funding on 25 May 2012. Parks Canada will eventually become the landholder and manager of the Rouge National Urban Park. The agency sees an unparalleled opportunity to achieve its objectives to connect with Canadians, and to combine its expertise with communities, stakeholders, First Nations and other levels of government.

Location and size

Where exactly is the Rouge? It’s in the Province of Ontario, in the eastern portion of the greater Toronto area. The future national urban park will occupy an area of approximately 60 square kilometers, representing an increase of 20 percent above the current size of the provincially and municipally-run park.

The Rouge and its features—lower river habitats, lakeshore marshes, Carolinian forest, ravines, agricultural farmland, and adjacent uplands—combine to form the largest system of connected areas along any of the river valleys draining into Lake Ontario. The park has a diverse natural landscape, which is home to 760 plant species, 225 bird species, 55 species of fish, 27 mammal species, and 9 species of reptiles and amphibians. Humans have been living in and using this area for over 10,000 years.

Vision

A people's park: Rouge National Urban Park celebrates and protects, for current and future generations, a diverse landscape in Canada's largest metropolitan area. Linking Lake Ontario with the Oak Ridges Moraine, the park offers engaging and varied experiences, inspires personal connections to its natural beauty and rich history, promotes a vibrant farming community, and encourages visitors to discover Canada's treasured places.

The existing Rouge Park was born out of a history of community activism, and there exists today a wealth of visionaries, stewards, and story tellers. The concept of a 'People's Park' is the underlying idea in the park vision. Building and maintaining a meaningful relationship with First Nations, stakeholders, and community residents are key to realizing the vision. Natural and cultural resources will be protected, the wonderful stories of conservation and stewardship will be told, and visitors will share their own experiences and stories. Rouge National Urban Park will also be a place to discover other treasured places in our country.

Figure 1. Rouge Park has many historic structures. Photo courtesy of Rouge Park.





Figure 2. Lake Ontario's beaches draw families to the park. Photo courtesy of Rouge Park.

An integrated approach

We could not have the possibility of a protected area such as Rouge National Urban Park anywhere else. As such, we need an innovative concept and approach which reflects the park's urban setting. In all of Parks Canada's protected places, Parks Canada seeks to integrate delivery of the three elements of its mandate: protection, education, and visitor experience.

In Rouge National Urban Park four main goals will be integrated:

- Conserving natural heritage;
- Celebrating cultural heritage character;
- Supporting a vibrant farming community; and
- Connecting people to nature and history.

Conserving natural heritage

Our approach to conservation will be tailored to the needs of the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. We will work to enhance diversity, and improve habitat quality and connectivity. These are several species at risk, and these will be protected. We will be effective, efficient, and engaging in our efforts. We will combine our expertise with best practices from around the world.

Celebrating cultural heritage character

For thousands of years, First Nations travelled through and used this area. There are the archaeological remains of a seventeenth century Seneca Village, recognized today as a national histor-

Figure 3. The park's nature trails provide outdoor opportunities to residents of the greater Toronto area. Photo courtesy of Rouge Park.

ic site. Settlers from the United States of America came here 200 years ago and still farm the land today.

We have established a dialogue with ten First Nations who will come together as an advisory circle for the future national urban park. Discovering and learning about the rich heritage of the Rouge Valley is essential to understanding the importance of the landscape. Celebrating this heritage is therefore one of our four main goals.

Supporting farming heritage

There are 75 farms currently in the Rouge, and many of these are working farms. The farms here grow and supply food for the greater Toronto area. There is a mix of private and leased farms. Parks Canada will eventually become a landlord here, and will encourage sustainable farming practices. We will also work with farmers to provide a stable environment so they can make a living, and the farmers will work to support educational programs and park conservation efforts.

Connecting people to nature and history

As a 'People's Park' we will provide varied opportunities for people to enjoy and experience the park. Programs will be designed to inspire, engage, and build stewardship. Facilities will be clustered, and a connected trail network will form the backbone of the park. Rouge National Urban Park will be a gateway to nature and protected places, and a window on Parks Canada and the other members of our family. Entry will be free, and the park will be accessible by public transit.

Park planning and public engagement

Public engagement is integral to the process of moving from announcing the creation of Rouge National Urban Park, to the park's first strategic management plan. The process involves three phases of ongoing public engagement. Input during the various phases contributes to the development of two documents: first, the park concept; then, the park strategic management plan.

The first phase of engagement occurred between June 2011 and May 2012, and involved more than 100 national, provincial, and municipal organizations, Aboriginal partners, youth, and individuals and organizations with expertise related to conservation, farming, tourism, recreation, youth, and education. In autumn 2011, Parks Canada initiated a distinct engagement process with interested First Nations to share information and begin dialogue about their future engagement in the planning, establishment, and presentation of the national urban park.

From June 25 to October 8, 2012, a variety of methods were employed to engage diverse audiences, and seek input on the park concept. The Parks Canada website featured information on the proposed Rouge National Urban Park concept, as well as an online survey that served as the primary means for people to submit their views. The survey was promoted through periodic newsletters, Twitter, community events, meetings, email, and print distribution.

Postcards containing the survey website address and a QR code, enabling smart phone users to complete the survey, were distributed to more than 8,500 people. Several organizations and



local groups requested postcards, newsletters, and factsheets for distribution to their respective members. A Rouge Park email address was also established to solicit comments. A one-page factsheet was mailed to more than 26,000 households, apartments, and farms in and around the proposed park boundary in an effort to solicit input.

Other means of engagement included three public information sessions, three stakeholder meetings, attendance at 15 community events, and three weeks on Yonge Street during the Toronto Film Festival. A Parks Canada engagement kiosk was set up at each event to provide an opportunity for people to interact with Parks Canada staff, and to fill out the survey on site. Informational materials in the kiosk included factsheets, the Rouge National Urban Park Concept, and postcards. Event participants included seniors, youth, new Canadians, urban residents, farmers, and other communities of interest.

The feedback received during the summer 2012 engagement program will help shape the development of the strategic management plan, which is the next step in the planning process for Rouge National Urban Park. Once in draft form, the strategic management plan will be shared for public comment, in a third phase of public engagement. The strategic management plan will provide the overarching guidance for the management of Canada's first national urban park. Premised on accountability, inclusiveness, and collaboration, the strategic management plan will outline an integrated delivery of Parks Canada's mandate for protection, education, and visitor experience. It will also provide a framework for decision making and tactical implementation, thus ensuring the effective use of public funds.

The strategic management plan will describe the park's approach to area management, visitor arrival and orientation, and the park's trail system. The plan will include strategies for natural and cultural resource conservation, visitor experience, external relations, education, sustainable agriculture, and collaboration with partners. The strategic management plan will also identify an inclusive governance structure that ensures a diversity of input into park management decisions, including continued First Nation involvement. The plan will describe desired ten-year outcomes for the park, and how goal achievement will be measured.

Early thinking

The strategic management plan's ten-year horizon requires an adaptive management approach to deal with a rapidly changing external environment. Access to and within the park is critical, particularly the location of arrival areas and their connection to neighboring communities and public transit. A broad approach to conservation and restoration is required; watershed objectives and aquatic ecosystem needs must be addressed. All park areas must demonstrate an integrated approach to conservation, learning, agriculture, and visitor experience. Actions to improve agricultural sustainability require careful phasing. Partners will play a significant role in terms of programming, and traditional and non-traditional delivery of services.

Sample strategies

The strategic management plan for Rouge National Urban Park will contain key strategies and actions. Some being considered include the following:

- Reach greater Toronto area residents in their neighborhoods, especially Chinese and South Asian communities living near the park.
- Target Canada's "young metro" and "family traditions" neighborhood segments (PrizmC2).
- Engage youth through creative programming and social media.
- Work collaboratively with intermediaries and academic institutions.
- Invest in park access, arrival, and connectivity.

- Have First Nations, farmers, and artists tell their own stories of connection to the park.
- Continue to foster the area's long tradition of volunteering.
- Deliver visitor services predominantly through partnerships, alliances, and non-traditional means.

Closing

Once established, Rouge National Urban Park will achieve the following:

- Take its place as the fourth member of the Parks Canada family (along with national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas).
- Inspire, inform, enrich, and engage the urban spirit in a celebration of protected nature, culture, recreation, and discovery.
- Be a window on Parks Canada, and a place to showcase protected places through the respected Parks Canada system.

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