

Setting the Stage for Visitor Experiences in Canada's National Heritage Places

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Introduction

WITH INCREASED URBANIZATION, IMMIGRATION, AND AN AGING POPULATION, Canada is undergoing significant demographic changes. As a result, the lifestyles and values of Canadians are changing, as are their attitudes towards travel and leisure. The Parks Canada Agency is faced with the challenge of remaining relevant to Canadians in this dynamic context. High-quality visitor experiences are a key means by which Parks Canada can become relevant to Canadians and nurture their appreciation and support.

The changing social context in which it operates means that Parks Canada must increase and continually update its understanding of the needs and expectations of Canadians. Building on quality social science data and a solid understanding of visitors, Parks Canada looks at the entire visitor experience cycle and works to ensure it is facilitating experiences that are relevant to Canadians. This work recognizes that the visitor experience is a shared outcome, involving the visitor, the heritage place being visited, Parks Canada, and its partners. It is important to understand that each visitor brings his or her personal perspective to the experience. This work must be done in a continually evolving fashion integrating the protection, education, and visitor experience elements of Parks Canada's mandate.

Following an explanation of the context of the visitor experience concept in Parks Canada, this article discusses Canada's changing social context, how Parks Canada understands the concept of visitor experience, and what the agency is doing to ensure that visitors have opportunities for high-quality experiences in Canada's national heritage places.

The context for Parks Canada's visitor experience concept

On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations.

— *Parks Canada mandate (Parks Canada 2002)*

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Parks Canada's mandate is fundamental to the work of the agency and is the source of its three objectives: conserving heritage resources (protection), fostering public understanding and appreciation (education), and fostering enjoyment (visitor experience). These three core elements of the mandate permeate the agency's policies, plans, and regulations, and are the basis for the organization's management framework.

Parks Canada has developed a new perspective, one that differs from the dual mandate of preservation versus human use that has traditionally been associated with protected areas. This shift is not merely semantic. Rather the shift is one of approach. Instead of viewing the issue as a dichotomy of people versus parks, this cohesive management approach integrates the three elements listed above. This view has been expressed by Parks Canada in recent communications where the organization has stated that our objective is to protect our national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas with and for Canadians, not from Canadians (Latourelle 2010). This concept has also been outlined by Rick Potts of the U.S. National Park Service. Reference is often made to parks being "loved to death," but, as he states, "You cannot love a park or wilderness to death. Although love cannot kill a wild area, apathy and irrelevance certainly can" (Potts 2007) (Figure 1).

Over the past two years Parks Canada has taken major steps in reorienting the agency and focusing its work on connecting Canadians to their natural and cultural heritage. Parks Canada's new vision statement is:

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 (Parks Canada, 2010a).

The focus on connecting Canadians to their heritage is reiterated in Parks Canada's strategic outcome:

Figure 1. Setting the stage for yet another outstanding visitor experience at Carleton Martello Tower National Historic Site, Saint John, New Brunswick.



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 present and future generations (Parks Canada 2010a).

Both corporate directions will guide Parks Canada's work, decision-making, and reporting to the Canadian Parliament over the coming years.

A changing social context

Parks Canada wants Canadians to see themselves, their stories, and their experiences reflected in their national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas and help all Canadians develop a sense of connection to these special places. To achieve this objective Canadians must have opportunities for outstanding visitor experiences when they visit their national heritage places (Figure 2). For these experiences to be relevant to Canadians, Parks Canada must adapt to a changing social context.

Parks Canada considers four current key trends when striving to remain relevant to Canadians. First, the Canadian population is aging and has more time, resources, and desire to travel (Statistics Canada 2003b; Foot and Stoffman 2000). The challenge for Parks Canada is to evaluate the opportunities currently available in national parks and national historic sites in light of these evolving interests. For example, an aging population will typically be more interested in soft adventure activities, more luxurious accommodations, and better amenities.

Second, Canada is increasingly urbanized: almost half of Canadians now live in the four areas centered around Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, and Calgary/Edmonton, and future growth is expected to be concentrated in these areas (Statistics Canada 2006). This trend

Figure 2. Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Nova Scotia.



poses a challenge for Parks Canada as urbanization increases the distance—both physical and psychological—between Canadians and their natural heritage. This disconnect between people and nature, referred to as nature-deficit disorder, has gained increasing profile in recent years and has started international movements like the Children and Nature Network (inspired by Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods*). In some ways urbanization does not pose the same challenge for national historic sites, since many are located in or near major urban centers; however they lack the profile of national parks and their visitation has been declining at an even faster rate than that of national parks. The continued rapid acceleration of technological change and declining interest in history may see the growth of the concept of a history-deficit disorder.

Third, the Canadian mosaic is becoming increasingly complex as a result of immigration (Statistics Canada 2003a). At the same time, new Canadians are significantly under-represented in visits to national parks and national historic sites (Environics International 2002). Recent immigrants tend to settle in urban areas, have limited available leisure time and income, and hold different cultural perspectives regarding natural and cultural heritage (Chartier 2004). With an increasing proportion of new Canadians, Parks Canada must better understand and respond to their needs if it hopes to be relevant to these audiences.

Fourth, a variety of societal factors are changing the tourism industry. Travelers want unique, authentic, interactive, personalized, and diverse experiences. This trend is linked to the idea of the experience economy: the shift in the source of economic value from commodities to goods to services to experiences is seen in the evolution of the tourism sector (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Linked to this shift is the division of travelers into more distinct market segments that need to be better understood (needs, interests, expectations), specifically identified and targeted with specialized products, promotions, and communications (Arsenault and Gale 2004). At the same time there is increased competition for the potential visitor's time and attention. Travelers have more choice, are better informed, and want a bigger role in choosing and creating their travel experiences. Time pressures are resulting in changes in the way people visit national heritage places; for example, the traditional two-week trip is being replaced by several extended weekend trips, more travelers are combining business and pleasure to extend business trips into mini-vacations, and single activities act less and less as trip-motivators as travelers are seeking a variety of activities when traveling. Parks Canada is being challenged to respond to these changes in the way Canadians want to discover their national heritage places.

The potential negative impacts of these trends can already be seen in recent visitation statistics to Canada's national parks and national historic sites. From 2001 to 2009 visitation to national parks dropped by 5.3% while visitation to national historic sites decreased by 13.6% (Parks Canada 2010b) (Figure 3). It is important to recognize that these downward visitation trends occurred at the same time the overall Canadian population grew by almost 5% between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2006).

The question for Parks Canada, as it strives to be more relevant to Canadians, is how to integrate the core elements of its mandate into decisions that allow Canadians to see themselves in these special places. A growing body of scientific research is suggesting that there is a clear link between experiencing nature and reconnecting with it. By segmenting the results



Figure 3. Fort Battleford National Historic Site, Saskatchewan.

of its 2009 National Survey of Canadians, Parks Canada found that visitation to national parks is critical to helping Canadians connect their hearts and minds to these national treasures. Nine out of ten Canadians who visited one of Canada’s 42 national parks during the period 2006–2008 expressed having a “sense of connection” to them. By comparison, only two out of ten Canadians who have not visited a national park are able to say the same (Parks Canada 2010c).

Parks Canada’s role is to set the stage for the visitor to create the personal experiences and memories that lead them to having a “sense of connection” to the heritage place, but not to impose a rigid offer (Sheedy 2006). These experiences create personal connections to the cultural and natural areas in which they occur. The visit helps visitors understand and connect to the place, which makes it relevant to them and builds their support of these places and the preservation of their ecological and commemorative integrity, leading to their long-term sustainability.

What does Parks Canada mean by “visitor experience”?

The visitor experience concept has grown out of a desire for increased relevance to Canadians at a time of significant social change. Thinking back to the three core mandate elements and looking at the 1990–2005 period, the protection and education elements of the mandate were well expressed in corporate documents and the agency’s orientation; however, visitor experience had received significantly less attention. Resource reductions in the early 1990s left social science and visitor-related functions with little national-level technical or professional support and limited local capacity. Decisions fell to the local level, which meant that approaches were inconsistent across the agency and often lacked resources. Faced with the societal changes noted above, the agency has since renewed its focus on visitors and their experiences to build the support of Canadians for their national heritage places.

Parks Canada’s renewed focus on the visitor experience starts, as one might expect, with

the visitor: Agency decision-making must be based on solid knowledge of visitor needs and expectations. The agency has increased its social science research capacity to understand both current and potential visitors. This information is used to make decisions that better reflect a changing Canadian society, to create more opportunities for experiences that are relevant to Canadians. This does not imply that the agency simply offers visitors whatever they desire, but rather that visitors are a key part of the equation when decisions are made.

Understanding and responding to the diversity of visitors' needs and expectations is a challenge and calls on the creative energy of Parks Canada staff and their partners. Each person arriving at a park or site brings with them his or her unique story and own set of expectations. For one visitor, a drive along the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Nova Scotia, may be an event she will never forget. For a different visitor, the Cabot Trail may only be the means to an end, as he embarks on a weekend backpacking trip; his experience is focused on the backcountry. As the visitor experience concept evolves and becomes part of the agency's culture, considering this immense variety in visitors' needs and expectations is one of the key challenges. This leads to a critical part of Parks Canada's thinking around visitor experiences: the experience is a shared outcome between the visitor, the specific heritage place being visited, Parks Canada, and its partners. The agency is not solely in control of the experience and cannot ensure that the visitor will have the experience that Parks Canada desires. It is quite possible that a visitor's experience may not be what is expected. Parks Canada has developed a comprehensive and flexible approach, so that all the elements contributing to the experience are considered and that a significant effort is made to personalize opportunities for experiences.

Guiding this approach is the Explorer Quotient (EQ) Program (Canadian Tourism Commission 2010). EQ is a way to understand and segment travelers based on their social values and travel motivations. Developed by the Canadian Tourism Commission with Envisonics, the model recognizes that two people can be standing in the exact same spot, participating in the same activity, yet have two completely different experiences. Parks Canada is one of the first organizations to match the nine EQ types ("authentic experienter," "cultural explorer," "cultural history buff," "free spirit," "personal history explorer," "rejuvenator," "gentle explorer," "no-hassle traveler," and "virtual traveler") with opportunities that meet their values, interests, and expectations. Combined with other social science market intelligence, EQ helps Parks Canada make sound decisions on how to effectively facilitate experience opportunities.

Parks Canada's approach to the visitor's experience is built around the visitor experience cycle. Key to the cycle is the focus on the visitor. The various stages of the experience are consciously evaluated to maximize their potential to positively impact the visit. The visitor's experience is divided into stages of the cycle (Figure 4).

- **Wishing.** The potential visitor is aware of and wants to experience national heritage places, the opportunities available at those places, and the resulting experiences he may enjoy. Parks Canada strives to understand the potential visitor and promote awareness of opportunities for the visitor experience.
- **Planning.** The potential visitor is deciding on the destination that best meets her inter-

ests, needs, and expectations. The visitor must have access to full details surrounding the potential visit, which can include information on weather, accommodations, fees, and directions.

- **Traveling.** The potential visitor is on his way to a destination. His way there, or “wayfinding,” needs to be straightforward and clear.
- **Arriving.** The visitor enters the protected heritage place. She is welcomed and receives orientation information and details regarding the opportunities available.
- **Visiting.** The visitor participates in, enjoys, and learns from the products, programs, services, and facilities offered. When these are designed, delivered, and maintained with the visitor in mind, they create the potential for a positive experience. An important part of the on-site visit is the opportunity for discovery: the hike with friends to an incredible vista, the walk guided by a hand-held device that showcases the story of the special place one is visiting, or dressing up in a period costume. When they truly meet the visitor’s needs on a personal level, guided programs, special events, activities, or interpretation can facilitate outstanding, memorable experiences.
- **Leaving.** The visitor had an enjoyable, meaningful, satisfying, safe, and fun visit. There is a distinct sense of departure and an opportunity to obtain souvenirs as reminders of their experience.
- **Remembering.** The visitor recalls and shares the details of his or her visit through pictures, stories, and souvenirs with friends and family, in person and through social media. The visitor’s memories are filled with positive recollections of the heritage place. These memories can be enhanced by follow-up communications and lead to a return visit.

Every element in every part of the cycle can contribute positively or negatively to a visitor’s experience. The key consideration in this approach is the individual person as a potential visitor. Visitors are unique and expect a menu of opportunities from which they can create the personal experience they are seeking. Parks Canada’s role is one of catalyst and facilitator of the desired experience.

Parks Canada’s efforts to facilitate outstanding visitor experiences requires the contri-

Figure 4. The visitor experience cycle.



butions of staff from across the organization and its partners. The work of maintenance and cleaning staff helps ensure visitors are not disappointed with the level of service they receive. The work of resource conservation staff ensures the protection of the reason visitors are coming to the park or site. Often, these staff members know a park or site's best-kept secrets and stories, and are facilitators and storytellers. Partners are involved in all stages of the experience: providing pre-trip information and core services such as accommodations, welcoming visitors, and helping them discover these special places.

Parks Canada has received high marks for the quality of service for its programs, facilities, and staff. Compared with other federal government services, Parks Canada continues to be rated at or near the top (Phase 5 Consulting Group Inc. 2005). All aspects of a visit to a national park or national historic site—including staff courtesy, provision of services in visitors' language of choice (French or English), and overall visit—surpass established satisfaction targets (Parks Canada 2008).

Parks Canada is moving beyond considering satisfaction as the only measure related to visitors. The new performance measurement framework analyzes a broader vision of the visitors' experiences and includes their sense of connection (Figure 5), visitation, enjoyment, and sense of learning as well as satisfaction. Parks Canada has also set increased visitation as a clear target for the organization, aiming for an increase of 10% by 2015 (Parks Canada 2010a). These performance measures will help Parks Canada continue to build on and improve its focus on the visitor experience.

Making the visitor experience concept a reality

Parks Canada has taken a number of steps to advance the visitor experience concept, both at the national and field level. In October 2005, the agency created the External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate, which includes a Social Science Branch and a Visitor Experience Branch. In 2008, Parks Canada initiated a functional realignment of its external relations and visitor experience expertise to better equip the field with the capacity to help Canadians create relevance and connection to places.

A key step toward operationalizing the visitor experience concept is the Visitor Experience Assessment. Adopted in 2005, this exercise has been undertaken at 92 Parks Canada locations. The assessment looks at the current state of opportunities offered, from the perspective of the visitor, to help managers, staff, and partners work collaboratively to assess, understand, and enhance the visitor experience. Staff assess a broad range of themes related to the visitor experience cycle, including visitor research, pre-trip planning services, on-site reception, interpretation programs, working with partners, management and business planning, staff training, infrastructure, performance measurement, and visitor feedback. Based on social science information, areas where the performance of the park or site could be improved are identified and specific actions are developed. Once completed, the assessment provides guidance for the management of the national park or national historic site in areas related to the visitor experience. The Visitor Experience Assessment and related tools continue to evolve with thinking related to the visitor experience.

Work to improve the opportunities for a memorable visitor experience is underway in a number of areas. These include:



Figure 5. Terra Nova National Park, Newfoundland.

- Increasing our knowledge and understanding of current and potential markets with audience research initiatives (e.g., the Visitor Information Program, Explorer Quotient, and Prizm C2, an audience segmentation system from the firm Environic Analytics that combines data on demographics, lifestyles and values);
- Enhancing the assessment process for recreational activities and special events;
- Improving the Parks Canada Service Program (quality service standards for our visitors and prevention guidelines);
- Consistently and comprehensively including visitor experience considerations into infrastructure investment decisions;
- Enhancing the agency’s interpretive products through professional development and interpretive planning tools;
- Developing diversified accommodation guidelines; the revitalization of the national trail guidelines; improvements to the visitor trip planning tools, including the campground reservation service and national information service;
- Increasing Parks Canada’s presence in social media; and
- Offering comprehensive training for staff to professionalize the delivery of services, programs, and activities for the visitor and to address the spectrum of visitor experience-related functions.

The integration of the visitor experience concept into the organization’s management framework, and the development of policies and guidance that consider the visitor, are key to provide support and guidance to managers and their teams. Parks Canada has developed a suite of performance indicators and measures related to understanding visitors, providing opportunities, delivering high-quality services, and connecting visitors to these special places. The measures flow from the agency’s strategic outcome and are part of the planning and reporting framework (Parks Canada 2010a). The measurements include number of vis-

itors, visitor satisfaction, enjoyment, sense of connection, and learning. On-going measurement to assess the impact of investments and the achievement of goals will be key to improving the facilitation of visitor experience opportunities.

Conclusion

Parks Canada has embraced the concept of the visitor experience as key to the success and sustainability of the national park, national historic site, and national marine conservation area treasures with which it is entrusted. Integrated with the protection and education elements of the mandate, the focus on the visitor experience is how the agency will ensure national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas are relevant to Canadians now and in the future.

To continue to be relevant to Canadians, Parks Canada strives to continuously take into consideration their needs and expectations in a rapidly changing social context. The agency looks comprehensively at the visitor experience and works to ensure it is facilitating opportunities that are relevant to visitors. Parks Canada recognizes that the visitor experience is a shared outcome between the visitor, Parks Canada and its partners, and that each visitor brings his or her personal perspective to the experience. Accordingly, the visitors themselves and their needs, interests, and expectations are at the core of the visitor experience perspective. Success will be achieved when Canadians see their national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas as special places they want to protect, learn about, and experience, and when these treasured places are a living legacy connecting visitors to a stronger, deeper understanding of the very essence of Canada.

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