

THE PARKS CANADA AGENCY: MEETING THE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF CANADIANS

John Waithaka, guest editor

Parks Canada: Building on Our Strengths to Achieve New Heights

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CANADA'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER, SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD, created Canada's first national park 125 year ago "for the benefit, advantage and pleasure of the Canadian people." On November 25, 1885, the government of Canada began the process to create, at Banff, what became the third national park in the world—and Canada's first. Today, nearly 125 years later, Canada has one of the most extensive systems of protected national heritage places in the world, including 42 national parks, close to 1,000 national historic sites, and three national marine conservation areas.

In 1911, the government of Canada recognized that a national park designation alone could not deliver the full potential benefits of a national heritage places system. In order to support the places with programs and services, the government created the Dominion Parks Service—the first national park service in the world.

Now, a century later, these two significant anniversaries are an opportunity to recognize the Canadians who had the foresight to provide a great gift to future generations and embark our nation on the national dream of having Canada's nature protected and celebrated.

Parks Canada is building on this tradition of leadership by providing protection, education, and visitor experience programs that are admired around the world. Our network of national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas is recognized internationally as a leading example and has become symbolic of our national identity.

Although our core *raison-d'être* has not changed, we have evolved to include historic places in our stewardship role. Canada's natural and historic places are unique and irreplaceable. They are both equally vital in helping future generations understand their roots to better plan their own future.

The George Wright Forum, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 138–141 (2010).

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Our way of operating has evolved over the past 100 years from one where we believed we could do everything ourselves. Through its history, Parks Canada has consistently had passionate Canadians as employees, and today, has also equipped itself to partner with equally passionate Canadians outside our agency. Partnerships are now considered a key element in all of our programs and activities.

Our places represent a legacy of inestimable value, a living legacy that reflects who we are. To ensure this irreplaceable legacy is passed on to our grandchildren, our agency builds partnerships with citizens across Canada, works at harmonizing our work with public expectations, and implements sustainable approaches and methods.

As I have already mentioned, we have come a long way since the establishment of Banff National Park. Back in 1885 and for decades, the park's residents, the Stoney First Nation, was excluded from the park's boundaries. Today, no park establishment would be conceivable without the support, collaboration, and involvement of First Nations. In fact, it is the First Nations themselves who are the driving force behind the creation of many of the protected spaces, including Nahanni National Park Reserve and Saoyú-?ehdacho National Historic Site.

It is also increasingly clear that public appreciation and understanding, together with meaningful visitor experiences, contribute to the agency's establishment and conservation objectives, and vice-versa. For many years, Parks Canada has offered services so that Canadians and visitors could enjoy the cultural history and natural beauty of heritage places. Parks Canada's audiences are changing, and to remain relevant, the agency must provide opportunities for Canadians to use and enjoy their parks and sites in ways that engage them, and allow them to create their own unique connections with these national treasures.

Canada abounds with natural and historic sites that are inspiring, evocative and, above all, irreplaceable. Parks Canada protects a selection of these sites because they help us explore the history of our vast country and understand what it means to be Canadian. It is as important to protect these invaluable sites as it is to present them to Canadians and tourists from around the world, who, year after year, visit our national parks, historic sites, and marine conservation areas, bringing home a host of cherished memories. The protection of these sites is linked closely to our ability to help the public connect with these places of discovery and help them enjoy countless opportunities to experience them, whether alone or with family and friends. By inviting visitors to experience the inspiring sites we protect on their behalf, we hope they will develop strong personal connections and a lasting desire to protect these powerful historic and natural symbols of our nation. We also ensure that each new generation will be nourished by unique personal experiences that help them learn what it means to truly be one with this place we call our "home and native land."

At Parks Canada, we are guardians, we are guides, we are storytellers, and we are partners in Canada's nationally significant places.

Each of Canada's protected heritage areas is part of Canada's collective soul, and a part of our nation's promise to its future. The work we do at Parks Canada is far more than keeping facilities in good repair, welcoming visitors, protecting a piece of nature from poachers or vandals, or making a government bureaucracy run smoothly. Our work—when you go right to the heart of it—is at the very core of what used to be called "nation-building."

Our team is a national institution that represents the love and commitment all Canadians have for their living heritage. We help Canadians celebrate the best of themselves—the places, stories, and experiences that make us who we are.

Our country faces a challenging future. There are many more of us today than ever before. The most abundant and easily obtained natural resources are already fully committed. The climate is changing and the financial world around us seems sometimes troublingly insecure.

Never has it been more important to find hope and inspiration for the future. And it is in our national parks where we at Parks Canada offer Canada the best kinds of hope and inspiration.

As we embark on our second century of service, what lies at the core of our success is not unlike what drove the individuals responsible for our creation. We need the courage to dream, the courage to trust others, and the courage to work hand in hand. Today, we also need to make decisions based on solid science, both economic and conservation related.

In my mind, a practical example that illustrates this philosophy is the recent six-fold expansion of Nahanni National Park Reserve—one of the crown jewels of Canada's national park system and a UNESCO World Heritage site located in the Northwest Territories.

To make this dream a reality, the elders of the Dehcho First Nation had the courage to dream to protect the entire watershed of the South Nahanni River and engrain that dream in the hearts and minds of Canadians with the assistance of many different groups including the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, a river tour operator and Parks Canada team members.

Collectively, we had the courage to trust one another and share the leadership. Although the relationship between the government of Canada and the Dehcho people has been strained historically and we were in the middle of difficult land claim negotiations, successive leaders of the Dehcho and Parks Canada put these differences aside for the benefit of our common dream. This act required real courage and, to a certain extent, blind hope and trust. Successive Dehcho grand chiefs and also Parks Canada leaders shepherded the project to fruition.

As I look back at this great conservation success and think about the future of wilderness worldwide, I believe there are several critical success factors to build on our strengths to achieve new heights.

First, we need to recognize that when establishing protected areas, we are not only protecting an important piece of land for biodiversity purposes, but we are also often protecting a spiritual place that has been cared for by Aboriginal peoples for millennia, a very special place that is part and parcel of the survival of their culture.

Secondly, Aboriginal peoples need to have a clear voice and involvement in the management of these wilderness treasures.

Thirdly, we all need to recognize in our day-to-day activities that what we are also protecting is the opportunity for future generations to experience these very special places.

Fourthly, we need to recognize that local communities must benefit financially from these protected areas to ensure their survival.

Finally, we need to challenge ourselves to find creative ways to engrain a passion for wilderness in the hearts and minds of the global community.

It is my hope that, together, we develop and share a new paradigm where each of these five key elements becomes the way we measure success for wilderness areas.

On the eve of Parks Canada's 100th birthday, it is key that together with our partners, we maintain *what* we do, but that we go about updating *how* we do our work and about sharing and discovering new and better ways to meet the needs and expectations of Canadians.

Our objective and common goal is summarized in our vision statement. This statement expresses in a single sentence what we are trying to achieve, and what inspires our employees across the country to go above and beyond expectations day after day.

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.

With the Parks Canada team's know-how, passion, and team spirit, with the invaluable help of our partners and stakeholders, and with the several science-based activities and programs put in place, we are now more than ever equipped to care for Canada's treasured places in ways that ensure their presence into the future for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

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