

Filling in the Gaps: Establishing New National Parks

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Introduction

PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREATEST ACTS OF CONSERVATION is when a country takes deliberate action to set aside for the benefit of future generations some of its most impressive land and seascapes. The reasons may vary over time—the protection of spectacular scenery, the conservation of habitat and wildlife, or simply the preservation of a nation’s spectacular wilderness areas. For the past century, Parks Canada has been at the forefront of expanding Canada’s national park system. And as the agency prepares to celebrate its centennial as the world’s first national park administration, it is worth reflecting and celebrating on its impressive achievements over the past century. These include building a system that is increasingly representative of Canada, one that is increasingly managed in collaboration with Aboriginal people, and one that totals over 301,000 square kilometers, or 3% of the Canadian landscape. Just as important is to reflect on the lessons learned and the challenges that await as the system expands into the 21st century.

The early days of national park establishment

The rationale for creating Canada’s first national parks was driven more by a focus on economic development, and less by the need to preserve wilderness. In the late 19th and early 20th century, government, industry, and local communities placed an emphasis on the value of national parks as places of recreation and as tourism destinations.

The discovery of the Cave and Basin mineral hot springs during the construction of the railway through the mountains, and the decision of the federal government to establish Canada’s first national park at Banff in 1885, marked the modest beginning of the work to create new national parks. While the initial park was small—a 26-square-kilometer reservation around the Banff hot springs on the slopes of Sulphur Mountain—its impact in prompting the protection of lands was immediate. The Rocky Mountain Park Act was passed in 1887, expanding the Banff reserve to 673 square kilometers to capture “a large tract of country lying outside of the original reservation” with “features of the greatest beauty” that “were admirably adapted for a national park.” The act declared that the area was “a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada.”

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In 1888, Glacier and Yoho parks joined Banff in making the mountainous section of the railway as “popular as possible” and “to preserve the timber and natural beauty of the district” (Foster 1978, 31). In southwestern Alberta, a local rancher promoted the creation of Waterton Lakes National Park.

By 1911, five areas had been protected by the federal government for posterity: Rocky Mountain Park, the Yoho and Glacier park reserves, and the Waterton Lakes and Jasper forest parks. Designated as multiple-use parks, they were created to protect spectacular scenery for its tourism value. It was through these first parks that the federal government demonstrated that it had a role in conserving lands for the public benefit, that it was responsible for creating such parks, and that it must act to conserve natural resources.

The birth of the Dominion Parks Branch

The park system in 1911 was composed of parks, park reserves, and forest reserves, under the authority of the minister of the interior, with no real policy direction. They were popular and a national asset and it was recognized that it was time to bring some organization to this loose collection of parks. And so, when Parliament passed the Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act in 1911, it placed the parks under the administration of the world’s first national parks branch, known over the years as the Dominion Parks Branch, the National Parks Branch, Canadian Parks Service, and now the Parks Canada Agency.

James B. Harkin was appointed as the first commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch, a post he held until 1936. He believed that Canadians had a responsibility to safeguard our nation’s wildlands by establishing more parks. Under his leadership the national parks system expanded to eastern Canada, increasing the number of parks from five to sixteen. A precedent was set when Nova Scotia became the first province to agree to transfer provincial land to the federal Crown to create Cape Breton Highlands National Park in 1936. Until then, national parks were formed from lands under federal ownership. During Harkin’s term, members of Parliament championed the creation of the Riding Mountain Park in Manitoba and a park on Prince Edward Island.

But this period of expansion came with a price. Local populations were expropriated. MacEachern (2001, 19) observed that the approach was simple: the “Parks Branch chose land it thought appropriate for a park, the provinces expropriated the land, and the landowners settled.” In the case of Cape Breton Highlands (1936), Prince Edward Island (1937), Fundy (1948), and Terra Nova (1957) national parks, landowners felt they had no choice but to accept the government’s financial offers, and to relocate to nearby communities. These decisions fostered negative relationships between the parks and the communities for years, sometimes generations.

New national parks and societal changes

In the 1960s, public concern over the environment resulted in calls for environmental initiatives, including the creation of new national parks. Leading the public charge were newly formed conservation groups, in particular the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada, now the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. Among their early successes were campaigns for the creation of Kluane and Nahanni national park reserves in 1976, with the

latter campaign aimed at stopping the development of a hydroelectric dam on the South Nahanni River that would have seen the loss of the spectacular Virginia Falls, now a World Heritage Site.

Another conservation group, the Canadian Audubon Society, now Nature Canada, challenged the federal and provincial governments in 1962 to mark the nation's 1967 centennial year by expanding the national park system. Citing the lack of a west coast, prairie grassland, or Great Lakes national park, the Society called for 12 new national parks to represent the various landscapes of the nation (Anonymous 1962). Little resulted from this initial call for a representative national park system because of the lack of support of provincial governments who owned the areas targeted by the Society.

When he became minister responsible for Parks Canada in 1968, Jean Chrétien called for the creation of 40 to 60 new national parks by 1985, the centennial of the creation of Banff. He brought a sense of urgency; warning that the cost of new parkland was becoming "prohibitive" and such lands would soon be lost to development (Chrétien 1969, 10). In response to the challenge, Parks Canada adopted in 1971 a natural regions system plan to guide the selection of new parks. The goal was, and continues to be, to represent the physical, biological, and geographic features of each of Canada's 39 natural regions within the national parks system (Figure 1). By the end of his term, Chrétien had overseen the establishment of ten new national parks totaling 52,870 square kilometers, including the first in Quebec and the north, and the first in British Columbia in almost four decades, that elusive West Coast park now known as Pacific Rim.

But the work was becoming more challenging as opposition from local communities and Aboriginal people killed or delayed new proposals. Opposition from the Association for the Preservation of the Eastern Shore ended the proposal for a Ship River National Park in Nova Scotia. Two proposed national parks in Labrador—the Torngat Mountains and the Mealy Mountains—were put on the backburner for several decades because of the opposition of the Labrador Inuit and Innu (Bill 1982). And the proposed national park on the shores of the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, Northwest Territories, was put on hold for almost four decades because of the lack of support of Aboriginal people.

The pushback against some of the proposed parks led to some important changes in the establishment process. In reaction to the violence and controversy surrounding the establishment of Kouchibouguac National Park in New Brunswick, the governments of Canada and New Brunswick commissioned a special inquiry in 1980, which ended up condemning the policy of mass expropriations. Reflecting this changing policy, seven communities that were to be originally removed for the new Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland remain, with the park boundary drawn around them. Parks Canada's policy was amended to prohibit the use of expropriation to create or enlarge national parks, and Parliament subsequently amended the Canada National Parks Act with a similar legislative prohibition. Now, land that is required to establish national parks is acquired only on a willing seller-willing buyer basis.

In the early 1970s, the federal government introduced legislation to create Canada's first northern national parks: Kluane, Nahanni, and Auyuittuq. This was not well received by the inhabitants of these lands, such as the Inuit, who charged that the government was expropri-

establish five new national parks in the territories. While it took 25 years, four of the proposed areas are now protected in national parks—Northern Yukon by Ivvavik and Vuntut national parks, Ellesmere Island by Quttinirpaaq National Park, Banks Island by Aulavik National Park, and Wager Bay by Ukkusiksalik National Park—while a fifth, Bathurst Inlet, was dropped in favor of an alternative, Tukturnogait National Park.

The Northern Yukon or Ivvavik National Park was the first national park established through the comprehensive land claims settlement process (Sadler 1989). It was significant because the government of Canada and the Inuvialuit of the Western Arctic achieved their respective goals: representing a natural region of the parks system, prohibiting industrial development within the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd, and agreeing to cooperatively manage the national park.

Completing the national park system

Viewed through the prism of park establishment, the 1985 celebrations around the Banff centennial were disappointing because no new parks were created. Yet the appointment in 1985 of Tom McMillan as the minister responsible for national parks started a renaissance for the establishment program. Under McMillan, five new national parks were created, and the national marine parks policy was adopted with the first national marine park established at Fathom Five in Ontario. And he made public the report of a federal Task Force on Park Establishment that concluded that Canada must take decisive action to protect its disappearing wilderness and complete the national park system by the year 2000 (Dearden and Gardner 1987).

McMillan's priority, however, was to negotiate an end to the logging of the temperate rainforest in the South Moresby Island area (now called Gwaii Haanas) on the southern Queen Charlotte Islands (now called Haida Gwaii). Backed by a unanimous motion of the House of Commons, McMillan achieved an agreement in July 1987 that led to the creation of Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve. He also oversaw the completion of negotiations to establish Ellesmere Island, Pacific Rim, Grasslands, and Bruce Peninsula national parks.

In the late 1980s, campaigns to protect wilderness areas asserted that while resource development was accelerating, there was no corresponding effort by governments to preserve natural areas. This view was backed by the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development that, among its many recommendations, called on nations to complete protected area networks that represented their diversity of ecosystems. And to spur governments to act, World Wildlife Fund Canada and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society launched their Endangered Spaces Campaign in 1989, calling on governments to complete protected area networks by 2000.

The federal government endorsed the goal in 1989, when Lucien Bouchard announced that the government would complete the national parks system by the year 2000 because "the very fragility of the planet compels the expansion of the national parks system" (McNamee 1992). The federal cabinet confirmed this goal when it released Canada's Green Plan in 1990, which called for the negotiation of the necessary agreements to complete the national park system by 2000. Between 1989 and 2000, Parks Canada established five new national parks, adding over 66,700 square kilometers to the system. By the end of the cam-

paign, however, fourteen of Parks Canada's thirty-nine natural regions still lacked a national park.

The dawn of a new century

The dawn of the 21st century brought the next big push for new national parks. In 2000, the government-appointed Panel on the Ecological Integrity of Canada's National Parks made a sweeping set of recommendations on how Parks Canada could meet its legislative obligation to maintain ecological integrity. But the panel looked beyond existing parks, concluding that in order to maintain ecological integrity, one needed a vision of the entire landscape, and this entailed the completion of the national park system in all thirty-nine natural regions. Shortly thereafter, in 2002, then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien announced that the federal government would work to create ten new national parks and five new national marine conservation areas, and to expand three existing national parks. In short order, the following sites were established:

- Gulf Islands National Park Reserve in southern British Columbia to represent the Strait of Georgia Lowlands natural region by protecting approximately 26 square kilometers in 29 sites on 15 islands including over 30 islets and reefs, as well as conserving the endangered Garry oak ecosystem.
- Ukkusiksalik National Park in Nunavut, representing the Central Tundra natural region and named for the soapstone found within its 20,560-square-kilometer boundary. The park is home to caribou, muskox, wolf, polar bear, and barren-ground grizzlies.
- Torngat Mountains National Park protects 9,700 square kilometers of Inuit homeland in northern Labrador, conserving land that is home to polar bears, caribou, and a unique population of tundra-dwelling black bears, along with breathtaking fjords and rugged mountains.

With the transition to a Conservative government in 2006, the momentum to create new national parks continued unabated, demonstrating that the conservation of nature and the establishment of new national parks to protect some of a nation's more precious landscapes is a non-partisan issue in the halls of Parliament.

Since 2006, the federal government has taken action that will ultimately add 90,000 square kilometers to the national park system. Under the leadership of Jim Prentice, the minister responsible for national parks since 2008, Parks Canada has made some impressive gains. Foremost among those achievements is the six-fold expansion of Nahanni National Park Reserve in 2009. Now at 30,000 square kilometers, this expansion was made possible by working with the Dehcho First Nations. The government also announced its commitment to protect the upper South Nahanni River within the settlement region of the Sahtu Dene and Metis people, applying interim protection measures to 7,600 square kilometers for the proposed Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve.

Equally impressive was the 2010 establishment of Gwaii Haanas National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, the first area protected under the Canada National Marine Conservation Areas Act. Protecting and conserving 3,500 square kilome-

ters of marine ecosystems in the waters adjacent to Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, this new protected area is a world-first that protects for all time a natural area that extends from alpine mountaintops down to the deep seabed. For Canada, this is a proud achievement in the International Year of Biodiversity. And again, it was made possible because of the strong collaboration and support of the Haida people.

For both Nahanni and Gwaii Haanas, Prentice exerted the necessary leadership to achieve the support of Canadian Parliament in record time. Additional decisions by the minister in collaboration with provincial governments and Aboriginal people will ultimately leave a legacy of new national parks that will bring Canada even closer to completing the national park system:

- The governments of Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador announced in 2010 their commitment to establish a 10,700-square-kilometer national park reserve in the Mealy Mountains of Labrador, making this the largest national park in Atlantic Canada. Negotiations of the necessary agreements with the province and Aboriginal representatives are underway.
- The governments of Canada and Nova Scotia announced their decision to protect Sable Island, an isolated island with wild ponies and a range of endangered species on the edge of the eastern Continental Shelf, as a national park.
- Prentice and the Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation signed an agreement in 2010 agreeing to open negotiations towards the establishment of Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve, on the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, Northwest Territories. This followed the expansion of the area under interim protection to 33,000 square kilometers.

The East Arm announcement is perhaps a fitting place to end this brief historical review. The fact that the community of Lutsel K'e signed such an agreement speaks to the substantive changes Parks Canada has made to its establishment process. This community told Parks Canada in 1970 to take its maps and go home, putting a 40-year hiatus on the project. After considering that Parks Canada now works in collaboration with Aboriginal people in cooperatively managing new parks, and that their traditional practices will continue, they are now prepared to negotiate a new national park reserve.

Conclusion

Any review of 125 years of establishing national parks will reveal a myriad of lessons. In creating 42 national parks and national park reserves, representing 28 of 39 natural regions, and protecting over 301,000 square kilometers with good prospects for an additional 40,000 square kilometers in the coming years, several lessons or indicators of change and success are apparent:

- Political leadership is necessary. There are no laws that compel governments to create new national parks; thus, it is imperative that politicians lead, and that they receive strong support for the proposals that will set aside, forever, natural areas from industrial development. Canada is fortunate that from the early decision of Sir John A.

Macdonald to create Banff, to some of the more recent decisions by Jim Prentice, the natural landscape has benefited from political decisions.

- Working in collaboration with Aboriginal people is fundamental to achieving new national parks. Progress has been made in recent decades precisely because Parks Canada has taken the time to establish relationships and negotiate agreements to ensure new parks are cooperatively managed. Such agreements must also be consistent with land claim agreements and treaty entitlements.
- With the legislative requirement to make ecological integrity a priority, and with the growing emphasis of Parks Canada on facilitating memorable visitor experiences, the ability to argue for and secure boundaries that make ecological sense has improved over the last decade.
- Finally, the staff involved in the day-to-day work of park establishment are not just increasingly skilled at mapping out a process and undertaking ecological and cultural studies, they are placing greater priority on building relationships with communities, First Nations, stakeholders and the public.

On a spring day in 2006, plains bison were released into Grasslands National Park where they began to roam across natural prairie after a 120-year absence. This event exemplifies the legacy left by the creation of new national parks. The idea of a Grasslands National Park was decades old by the time an agreement was signed in 1988. In a natural state as the result of the decision to protect it as a national park, the new park allowed for the reintroduction of bison as part of an ecological restoration program. It is the act of establishment that first ensures that the people of Canada can benefit from and enjoy these natural areas, and is the first step in ensuring that such wild places are left unimpaired for future generations.

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