Regional Parks and Near Wilderness: Connecting Local People with Nature, Serving Bigger-Picture Conservation Planning, and Addressing Changing Values of Wilderness

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In this special edition of The George Wright Forum, the George Wright Society (GWS) examines the significance of regional parks and near-urban park systems. In the context of this paper, the term "regional parks" means lands set aside for public use by local governments for park and protected area (PA) purposes. This special edition is, one would hope, an invitation for the GWS membership, supporters, and followers to turn their attention to the important role and rich experiences regional parks and local PA systems offer residents and society in general. For the most part, regional park systems reflect the familiar intent of delivering, in perpetuity, health, enjoyment, and recreational benefits to present and future generations, guided by the protection of plants, animals, biodiversity, and wilderness.

As a boy in the early 1970s, I explored off the paved paths of High Park in downtown Toronto. High Park remains today, a large green space and city park in the core of Canada's largest city. There, I looked for the paths un-trodden, meandered with the creeks, and imagined exploring and discovering lands unknown. In my early years, I was fortunate that the outdoors was somewhere you were sent to by harried parents. Wilderness, for me, was discovered in the city.

Following graduation from university, I was fortunate to have been hired by the Ontario Provincial Park system as a park warden and assistant park superintendent. Eventually, I joined Parks Canada, where I served for twenty-three years, working across Canada and learning from local people their priorities for biodiversity protection and wilderness management.

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Today, I am the senior manager responsible for the Capital Regional District's (CRD's) Regional Park Service on southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, managing six million visits per year. The CRD's regional park system is unabashedly loved by local residents and celebrated by visitors from across Canada and around the world. It is an inspiring system.

The CRD is the regional government for 13 municipalities (including the city of Victoria) and three electoral areas on southern Vancouver Island and the nearby Gulf Islands. Its jurisdiction is 237,000 hectares (585,640 acres), of which nearly 21,000 hectares (51,892 acres) are inaccessible to the public as they protect the drinking water for the population of Greater Victoria.

From the Gulf Islands, on the border with Washington State, to the historic forestry and fishing community of Port Renfrew, located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, 31 regional parks protect 13,000 hectares (32,124 acres) that are home to three large carnivore species: black bear, wolf, and cougar. Including the Greater Victoria Water Supply Area, nearly 14% of the lands owned by the CRD are protected by legal means (CRD 2012). The CRD's protected lands include coastal Douglas fir, coastal western hemlock, and mountain hemlock habitats. Additionally, the regional parks system includes 94 km (58.5 miles) of regional trails that serve recreational walkers and cyclists as linear parks, connecting people of all ages and abilities to nearby nature. The regional trails are increasingly popular alternatives for commuters.

If one considers all lands within the CRD's geographic area that are under some form of protected status (national parks, provincial parks and ecological reserves, regional parks, municipal parks, Islands Trust Fund, land trusts, and the Greater Victoria Water Supply Area), the CRD is approaching 20% protection (47,826 hectares or 118,181 acres) across the landscape (CRD 2012). This percentage is expected to increase as the CRD applies its regional parks land acquisition strategy through 2019 (CRD 2015).

Steady growth in park visitation (between 1% and 5% annually over the last decade) means the CRD's regional parks system has not experienced the declining visitation that has been reported in some recent years for the US and Canadian national park systems (Shultis and More 2011; Rollins et al. 2016). This trend is expected to continue due to the growth of communities located along the west shore of Vancouver Island. To accommodate and manage visitor increases, the regional park classification system will be relied on to address recreation and conservation challenges.

The CRD's regional park system operates as a continuum (Figure 1). Situated at one end, recreation-classed parks invite high visitor use and welcome special events. At the other end of the continuum are wilderness parks. Large in size and relatively remote, visitors must rely on backcountry travel and minimum impact camping skills. Between recreation and wilderness park classifications are, in increasing wilderness character, natural areas and conservation areas (CRD 2012).

Like the national park systems in Canada and the US, wilderness is a fundamental value in the CRD's regional park system. According to the CRD (2012: 72), "wilderness" is characterized by:

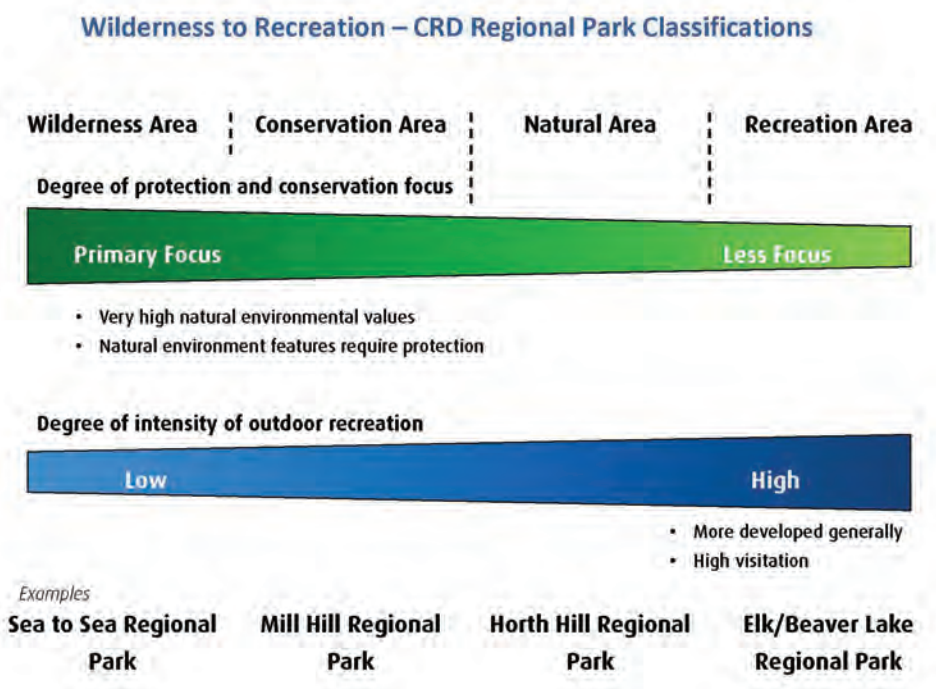

Figure 1. Spanning wilderness to recreation–the CRD Regional Parks classification system.

- A large land base, generally more than 1,000 hectares;
- The conservation of ecosystems with minimal human interference;
- Opportunities for visitors to experience the park's ecosystems firsthand;
- Opportunities for backcountry recreation and camping;
- The provision of only few rudimentary services and facilities, if any; and
- The experience of remoteness, solitude, and harmony with nature.

The wilderness characteristics and outcomes described are likely familiar to PA managers across the US and Canada. Pointedly, the CRD's regional park system recognizes that:

> Maintaining wilderness areas in the region is an important part of the regional parks' function. Wilderness is critical to sustain wildlife and plants that rely on sizable natural areas for their survival and to provide wilderness outdoor experiences and activities. They are places where residents can experience wilderness close to their home (CRD 2012: 72).

Many GWS readers will remember studying Hendee, Stankey, and Lucas' first edition of *Wilderness Management.* Others will know Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind,* "Thinking Like a Mountain" by Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring.*

Figure 2. Visitors enjoying Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park, a regional recreation area (CRD).

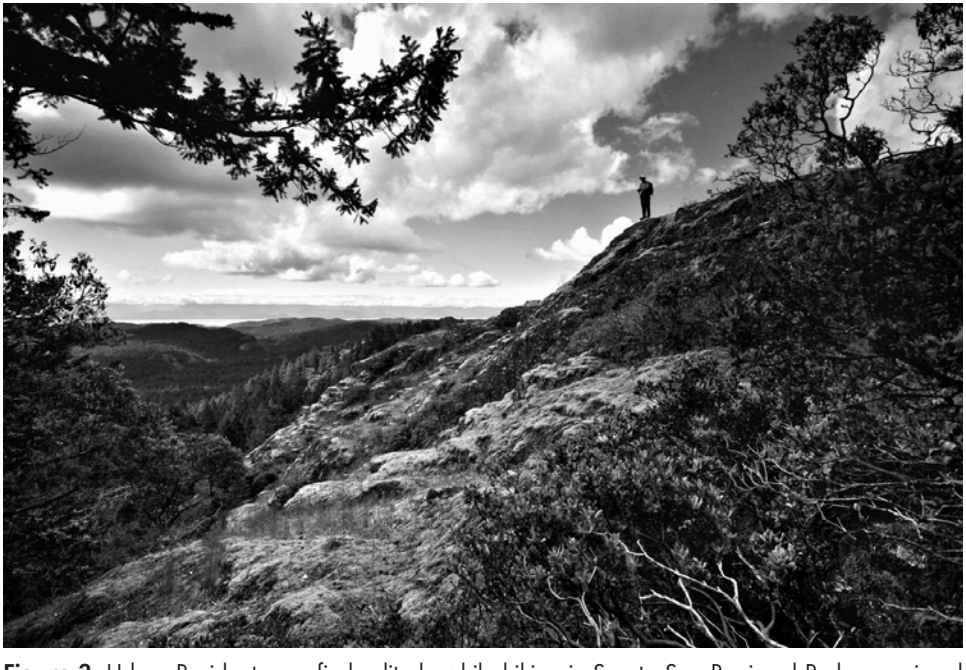

Figure 3. Urban Residents can find solitude while hiking in Sea to Sea Regional Park, a regional wilderness area (Mary Sanseverino).

The writings of Catlin, Thoreau, Marsh, Muir, Mather, Olmsted, Marshall, Harkin, Leopold, Wright and others have influenced a body of knowledge about wilderness that has fundamentally shaped the language, understanding and significance of PAs in Canada and the U.S.

Armed with such understanding, PA managers face growing numbers of complex issues while being cognizant of how few staff are available to address the challenges. Additionally, PA leaders are aware that increasingly urban, multicultural, and ethnically diverse populations may in fact be thinking differently about the need for wilderness and why it is important. William Tweed, writing as part of the GWS's National Park Service Centennial Essay Series, cautions:

> In many ways, traditional national park experiences are not competing well in the leisure-time market.... [S]elling larger segments of society on the value of places where the long-advertised mission is no longer possible, where resources seem to be unravelling, where quality experiences require pre-acquired skills and knowledge to enjoy, and where significant blocks of time are required to recreate, will be anything but easy. Add the complication that this marketing must speak to people who have little or no tradition of national park use and little interest in nature, and the challenge becomes daunting (Tweed 2010: 11).

Similarly, Robert Keiter charges, "wilderness that is far away and home to mountain lions and wolves and bears, may be preferable to today's predominantly urban populations" (Keiter 2011: 240). The warnings are troublesome to PA authorities responsible for regional park and near-urban PA systems, as well as for authorities responsible for distant, larger, state/provincial, and national PAs, but for different reasons.

From the local perspective, the presence of large carnivores on the landscape often signals that wildlife management programs have been successful in creating habitat favorable to large species. On the other hand, human–wildlife conflict in near-urban PAs raises the possibility of negative public reaction that could cause feelings of fear and unwillingness to share the landscape with carnivores (Penteriani et al. 2016). From the state/province or federal PA perspective, observing declines in attitudes favoring the presence of species iconic to PA system values and key species for the restoration and maintenance of ecological integrity raises serious policy issues.

Amidst concerns about remaining relevant to our respective nations' citizens, Canadian and American national park leaders launched campaigns to connect with urban populations. From a Canadian perspective, Pamela Wright notes, "renewed emphasis on providing a broader range of experiences [is] often touted as necessary to attract non-traditional park visitors—that are often heavily dependent on infrastructure—may be tipping the scales in favour of use over ecological integrity" (Wright 2016: 188).

Worryingly, our respective federal systems may be advancing initiatives to increase visitation by drawing from populations that for many reasons are not aligned with existing national park values. The distinct possibility that increased infrastructure spending may only yield modest increases in visitation is necessarily, for some PA authorities, an uneasy reality.

However, in favor of our national park systems continuing to serve national audiences and in support of their mandates, regional parks and near-urban PA systems across Canada and the US offer experiences that are close to home, bringing urban lifestyles to wild nature. In this role, regional parks play a key role in introducing urban populations to the idea of wilderness, wilderness travel, and associated wilderness values. Additionally, because regional parks are located nearby to urban populations, local PAs' association with local political decision-makers is more clear than the link between, for example, Ottawa or Washington decision-makers and federal PAs local to the area.

The combination of responsiveness by local elected officials to their constituents, daily use of regional parks by local citizens, and regional parks' management availability to elected officials and visitors addresses fundamental trust issues between PA authorities and local citizens (Stern 2008). This trust relationship could serve larger conservation and engagement goals associated with upper-tier government priorities.

Regional park systems could play the role of a bridging organization between local and state/provincial and national PA organizations (Olsson and Folke 2001; Berkes 2009). For example, at the CRD's Regional Parks Service, full-time interpreters deliver programs throughout the year at schools, in classrooms, out in the parks and at campgrounds, educating audiences about the natural environment and how human behavior affects wildlife. The social science program gathers baseline information about residents' values toward regional parks, use, wildlife, and preferences for outdoor recreation opportunities. Visitor intercepts at regional parks further assist management's understanding about what park visitors are enjoying about their park system and what can be improved.

Similar programs are taking place across the US and Canada by municipal governments or at regional government levels. Information gathered by local systems, the programs that have been developed to address local issues, and efforts undertaken to address future needs of local residents may be used as key informants to upper-tier governments' conservation, engagement strategies, and visitor use planning.

The tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010 produced *The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020* and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets (COP 2010). Of significance to PA authorities around the world is Aichi Target 11, which calls for by 2020:

> At least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascapes. (COP 2010: 9)

Aichi Target 11 wording, points to the need for "equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, [which are] integrated into the wider landscape and seascapes"

(emphasis added). Regional park systems, known for contributing to the well-being of local people and visitors, are often unrecognized for their contributions to global commitments to the conservation of nature.

While some contest the effectiveness of PAs in protecting biological diversity, many believe they play a role in influencing land use decisions in favor of biodiversity and mitigate against climate change (Butchart et al. 2010; Leverington et al. 2010; Geldmann et al. 2013; Hagerman and Satterfield 2014; Pimm et al. 2014). Woodley et al. acknowledge that "protected areas are a tried and tested approach to nature conservation.... [T]hey remain one of the most diverse and adaptable management and institutional tools for achieving conservation" (2012: 23).

Generally, only PA systems managed by upper-tier governments in Canada and the US have been included in the count toward international conservation targets. However, regional park systems across the two countries have been present on the landscape for longer than some national and provincial/state PAs, and in many cases are protecting lands larger than some national parks. East Bay Regional Park District in the San Francisco's Bay Area, for example, was established in 1934 (EBRPD 2013). At the CRD, the regional park system celebrated 50 years in 2016, and Canada's Metro Vancouver regional park system is celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2017.

Regardless of length of time on the landscape, what is striking about regional parks systems are: their volume of satisfied visitors, their responsiveness to local people and local politicians, and their active land acquisition programs, which reflect a pace of PA expansion not always possible at higher-order authorities. This combination of affirming qualities creates a circumstance where collaboration between local PA officials and local residents is often more possible than between higher-order government officials and local people. This circumstance may be helpful when landscape-scale multi-jurisdictional initiatives are necessary to achieve conservation priorities.

A vision shared by many conservationists is one that sees Canada and the US overlain with interconnected PAs where at least half of the landscape is protected for nature (Locke 2015). It is a landscape where core PAs, whether federal, regional or local, are connected by conservation corridors (Worboys et al. 2016). The corridors allow uninterrupted movement of species and people because areas outside of PAs are stitched together through governance arrangements that recognize conservation values (Walton 2016). Achieving the vision of an interconnected PA landscape requires urban populations to feel safe and welcome in natural environments close to where they live. Efforts to slow, halt, and reverse biodiversity loss are closely tied to our understanding of what is important about nature to those who live in cities (Dawson and Hendee 2009; Hassell et al. 2015). In this realization there is great optimism. It was, after all, city dwellers who inspired the need for wilderness and protected areas (Nelson 1989; Nash 2001; Runte 2010).

Working together, local, regional, state/provincial, and national PA systems can advance public support for PAs as natural solutions to improving human health and well-being, reducing biodiversity loss, and mitigating against climate change (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN 2016). Given that regional parks are backyards to millions of city dwellers, they represent

Figure 4. A near-urban wilderness area on the outskirts of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (Michael Walton).

tangible spaces where human beings might reconcile cultural, spiritual, and social beliefs about wilderness in order to ensure the space for non-human species to live for generations to come.

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