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Amending Ontario's Parks Act 50 years later

By AnnaMaria Valastro, Melissa Tkachyk, and Anita Krajnc

Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government is reviewing the Provincial Parks Act—an act that has not been substantially revised since 1954 when there were only 8 provincial parks. Now there are 316 Provincial Parks and 249 Conservation Reserves in the province. New legislation is long overdue that prioritizes the ecological integrity of these wilderness areas against new and increased threats.

Most Ontarians envision parks and protected areas as wildlife sanctuaries, not as hunting grounds or ATV (all-terrain vehicles) and snowmobile play fields. Parks are seen as peaceful getaways to appreciate and value nature in all its magnificence. From a conservation biology standpoint, parks and protected areas are a core part of a larger plan to protect an extensive network of protected core areas, wildlife corridors connecting core areas, and buffer zones surrounding parks and protected areas.

Without this approach, little will distinguish protected areas from the surrounding area. Such an approach will fail to achieve the ultimate goal of preserving natural areas for future generations. In the end, they will be nothing more than glorified Crown land.

Ontario's Parks and Conservation Reserves are currently managed for a range of objectives, attempting to balance the importance of environmental protection with recreational, commercial and economic interests. A variety of non-compatible, high-impact recreation and industrial activities are permitted in different classes of parks and protected areas compromising the preservation of the natural environment. The level of protection also varies from zone-to-zone and park-to-park depending on the individual zone managers and park superintendents.

Many people would be surprised to know that more than 75% of Algonquin Park, the province's oldest park, is open to logging (see sidebar A: Logging in Algonquin Park). The outdated Parks Act currently permits mining in 23 Provincial Parks, according to the Wildlands League, and there are still existing mining claims that have not been resolved in several of the new protected areas established by the previous Conservative government under the Lands for Life land-use planning process. Sport hunting is allowed in 428 Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves across the province. New roads are being built and existing roads and trails are being expanded through protected areas to provide easy access to forestry operations adjacent to parks and to make the wilderness more accessible for other exploitative or high impact activities ranging from commercial trappers, snowmobilers, and ATV'ers.

To its credit, the Liberal government is keeping its promise to review and amend the parks act. The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) released a discussion paper, outlining key legislative proposals to strengthen protected area legislation. A Public Consultative Process was launched this fall in nine cities across the province, beginning in Timmins and stopping in North Bay, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, Huntsville, Ottawa, London, and Toronto.

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The most significant proposal is the government's commitment to ban industrial activities such as mineral exploration and extraction, gravel pits, peat extraction and hydroelectric generation. However, the McGuinty government has so far avoided a number of contentious issues surrounding park protection, such as logging in Algonquin Park, cottage development, sport hunting, commercial fur harvesting, bait collection, and excessive motorized vehicles. But the most glaring omission is its failure to highlight ecological integrity as the primary principle that will guide all park management decisions. Ecological Integrity is mentioned in the new proposed legislation but it is not the overriding principle, and it should be. Here's why.

Permitted activities, such as roads, cottage development, sport hunting, angling, commercial bait collection, trapping, snowmobiling, all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and motor water crafts can be as degrading and pervasive to the natural environment as mining and/or hydroelectric development, but the proposed legislation is moot on this point. If ecological integrity is identified as the primary principle in which to judge all permitted activities, then certain low-impact, non-consumptive activities may be appropriate in some protected areas and not in others. The allowable park uses would be judged in terms of their environmental footprint rather than the whims or politics of interested parties.

It is surprising how commonly so little distinguishes protected areas from the surrounding landscape, especially in southern Ontario. Most activities occurring outside the park are also permitted inside the park regardless of any lingering damage. For instance, sport hunting is permitted on the vast majority of Crown land yet the Liberal government seems reluctant to ban sport hunting from the province's protected areas. Quite simply, the wildlife are not protected in our parks if it is permissible to shoot them (see sidebar B: no hunting in parks).

According to the MNR, close to 200 of the animals found in our parks are considered rare or endangered species at risk. Each year, the number of species threatened with extinction increases as a result of habitat loss, hunting and trapping pressures and a shamefully slow and incomplete protection process.

As Ontario's population approaches 12 million, our cities continue to sprawl and our air and watersheds become more polluted - the need to fully protect wilderness areas from these disturbances becomes all the more critical.

Challenges the Liberals face

The Ontario Liberals face significant challenges in safeguarding the province's wild spaces and wildlife. It is important that the public consultations are not treated as superficial, and that the government not declare that it is keeping yet another promise by merely accepting a few amendments while ignoring other crucial amendments.

In his 2000 annual report, the Environment Commissioner of Ontario argued that the province had no overall wildlife framework or strategy. He attributed the problem to a lack of protection policies governing parks and protected areas as well as the weakness of any protective measures for the vast Crown that are subject to massive clearcut logging, tree farming, mining, and other industrial development.

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The status of parks and protected areas took a significant blow with the “Lands for Life” fiasco (1997-1999). The Ontario’s Living Legacy deal announced in March 1999 created 378 new parks and protected areas and additions. Although the deal among a select group of environmental groups, the forest industry and the Harris government was announced with much fanfare on the eve of an election campaign, the deal had major shortcomings and loopholes so large, that a logging truck could drive straight through them.

Premier Mike Harris’ parks initiative expanded the allowable activities in the province’s parks and protected areas to include everything but large-scale logging. Even more damaging, the land-use planning process which involved half of the province, guaranteed wood supply to the forest industry, making it difficult to increase the percentage of protected land base (without compensating the industry first). The Ontario’s Living Legacy increased the amount of area protected in provincial parks and conservation reserves by a few percent for a total of just nine per cent of Ontario, overall an inadequate level of protection.

Even the widely cited 12 percent target announced in by the Brundtland Commission in its 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, is politically constructed targets and is now seen as ruefully inadequate. A 90 percent loss of habitat area could leave half of all terrestrial species vulnerable to extinction.

Many conservation biologists like Michael Soulé, Thomas Lovejoy, and E. O. Wilson have demonstrated that even large parks and protected areas (habitat ‘islands’) are not enough to sustain the long-term viability of ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity. They argue that our many scattered parks will not be sufficient to preserve biodiversity unless they are connected to each other.

Nature reserves must not only be much larger than previously thought, but must be linked to their surrounding landscape and to each other through landscape ‘corridors’. The biodiversity in isolated reserves decays without the opportunity to move outside parks and mix genes with other populations. As well, when parks are unconnected islands, species are unable to move when environmental changes occur, something which could be especially problematic with global climate change. Many conservation biologists believe that the principle of connectivity means that about 50 percent of the land base needs to be set aside to ensure the protection of most elements of biodiversity.

Implementation this vision would require nothing short of a paradigm shift in Ontario’s wildlife strategy. But given the increasing loss of biodiversity as one of the most critical environmental problems facing the world today, Ontario—a wealthy province—should play a leadership role.

The government needs a bold vision for Ontario’s parks that involves a two-pronged approach. First, it should ban all high-impact activities including sport hunting and fishing and commercial trapping in protected areas. Secondly, it needs to significantly expand Ontario’s parks and protected areas, buffer zones, and wildlife corridors in order to establish a vast network ecosystems and wilspaces.

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Sidebar A: Logging in Algonquin Park

There should be a phase-out of logging in Algonquin Park. Currently, Algonquin Park is an industrial zone that allows canoeing, camping and hiking.

More than 75% of the park is open to industrial logging. The impacts of industrial logging, whether it be clearcut logging or selective logging (as is the case in Algonquin), are tremendous. Both these logging techniques permanently alter native forests.

While the origins of Ontario's oldest Provincial Park may lie with the logging industry, the need to protect Algonquin as a forest reserve is no longer there. The park now has greater value as a wilderness area and this value will only increase in terms of both the revenue generated from ecotourism and the increased ecological benefits derived from a phase-out of logging.

The 3000 kilometres of logging roads in the park fragment wildlife habitat, deteriorate water quality of adjacent rivers and streams, lead to an increase in wildlife mortality from road kill, and dramatically increase the number of consumptive park users because of the convenient access. The thousands of kilometres of logging roads even exceed the length of canoe routes in the park.

The Liberal government's proposal to strengthen protected areas legislation currently excludes the issue of logging in Algonquin from being examined. The government needs to begin by assessing the ecological impacts of logging in the park and developing a just economic transition plan for any loss of employment due to a logging phase-out.

However, the loss of jobs should not trump environmental protection, not in the case of Algonquin Park or any other park. The loss of thousands of jobs for the purpose of privatization or enforcing the bottom line seems to be acceptable but not when it comes to environmental protection. Wood supply should not be allocated to other regions to offset sawmill closure. This would only shift logging pressure from one area to another. Significant government support must be in place to encourage a diversification of the local economy.

Sidebar B: No hunting in parks

If you plan to visit one of Ontario's provincial parks or conservation reserves, be sure to wear a bright orange safety vest because sport hunting is allowed in many of these areas across the province.

Allowing hunting in these popular recreation areas flies in the face of common sense and public responsibility.

Many people don't realize that sport hunting is allowed in the vast majority of these areas because the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) makes little effort to alert visitors of this dangerous and often conflicting park activity.

Instead, they actively encourage people to visit parks year-round. The Ontario Parks Guide states that parks never really close, "And because, many of our hiking trails are designed to be enjoyed year-round, there's no such thing as hiking off-season."

Unfortunately, many people are first made aware of the fact that hunting is allowed in their favourite park when they hear the shots. Their quiet recreational retreat is disrupted by the sounds of gunfire and revved up all-terrain vehicles. So much for leaving the hustle and bustle of the city behind for the serenity and peace of nature.



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With more than 90 per cent of the public land in Ontario already available for hunting, it is intolerable that protected areas be open to this activity. Nature-based tourism is a growing industry that spans all seasons and is a vital component of the shifting economies in Northern communities. Imagine the promotional opportunities if we could invite people from all over the world to explore and observe natural processes in more than 600 protected areas where hunting is not permitted.....

Provincial parks and conservation reserves comprise just nine per cent of Ontario. This would be a very small gun-free area to set aside for the preservation of wildlife. Is it not reasonable to preserve a fraction of the landscape for hiking, nature photography and wildlife viewing as well? We're not a gun culture, so what is the difficulty?

One of the problems is the historically close ties between the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, who have developed a partnership to the exclusion of those who would prefer a non-consumptive approach to wildlife management including eco-tourists and operators, environmentalists and animal rights advocates.

It's time the province listened to the people in Ontario who oppose hunting in parks and protected areas.

Province-wide polling has repeatedly shown that the vast majority of Ontarians oppose sport hunting in Protected Areas. A survey commissioned by Earthroots and conducted by Sudbury based, Oracle poll in March 2004 revealed that 88 per cent of Ontarians strongly opposed hunting in parks, including 84.4 per cent of people who live in Northern Ontario and 66.7 per cent of people who have a hunting license in their household.

The survey also revealed that the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat was seen as the primary purpose for Ontario's parks.

Until that legislative amendment is made, hikers, canoeists, photographers and campers should wear bright orange safety vests in the parks in the fall during hunting season. Unfortunately, the migratory birds, water fowl, moose, rabbits, deer, bears and other species that can be hunted do not have this option.

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