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THE NATIONAL PARKS OF CANADA

Canada's national parks, established to preserve select natural areas of the country in a near-original state, are in the midst of a boom in outdoors recreation whose demands challenge traditional ideas about parks.

The combination of outdoor recreation and travel is a bargain holiday for most Canadians, particularly when they can camp or park their trailers in publicly-owned parks. With good roads and efficient transportation, more money to spend, and an increasing amount of leisure time, they are visiting parks, both national and provincial, and outdoor recreation areas more frequently and in greater numbers.

The number of visitors to the 17 national parks that are easily accessible increases each year and there is no indication that a peak will ever be reached. Since 1958, attendance has almost doubled and, in 1963 alone, 32 per cent more people came to the national parks than during the previous year. About 7,000,000 visitors a year now pour into the national parks, most during the months of June, July and August. It is no longer surprising that the concentration of national parks in the mountains of Alberta and British Columbia, 2600 miles from the heavy urban concentrations of population, should be absorbing more than a third of all the visitors.

All this is a far cry from the year 1887, when the first national park, Rocky Mountains Park in Alberta, was established. Similarly the modest area of 260 square miles that was the original park has grown into the 29,288 square miles of today's system, which, if combined, would almost cover the provinces of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

How to preserve the original character and purpose of the parks while providing for the enjoyment of millions of users is the central problem of national parks management in Canada today.

Administration

While the national park system is now firmly established, preservation and wise use depend ultimately on public understanding and appreciation of the idea and purposes of the parks. The obligation to provide for proper use, at the same time preserving nature and natural features inviolate, is a continuing one. Since the parks belong to the people, the administration has a duty to make them accessible by road and trail, and to provide accommodation and other facilities necessary for their enjoyment. But the more the parks are used, the more difficult it becomes to prevent their impairment. Without careful planning and regulation of the kind and quantity of visitor facilities and activities, the parks could lose the qualities that justified setting them apart as a national heritage. Hence, a modern national park system is a complex, many-sided enterprise, a study in land-use and preservation and a challenge to administration.

Against a timeless background of mountain peaks, lakes, forests and sea coast, the management of the national parks is engaged on the practical level in large-scale outdoor housekeeping. There are, for example, 787 miles of motor roads to be maintained, including the world-famous Banff-Jasper Highway and the Cabot Trail, sections of the Trans-Canada Highway, where this route traverses the national parks, and secondary roads. There are 625 miles of fire roads, 2,404 miles of riding and hiking trails, 996 miles of hard surfaced and secondary roads. To patrol the larger parks, wardens must move with the seasons as well as the times, using trucks, tracked vehicles, canoes, launches, saddle horses, skis, snowshoes, ski-dos and even a motor scooter.

By the terms of the National Parks Act, the parks are "dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education, and enjoyment". It is the responsibility of the National Parks Branch of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources to plan their use and development so as to leave them unimpaired for future generations. To shape their future wisely and with imagination calls for some far-reaching decisions. It is recognized, for example, that by 1975 the population of Canada may have grown to, or beyond, 25,000,000 and that possibly 10,000,000 visitors may be using the national parks.

To provide for future variations in use without lowering the quality of the national park experience offered to visitors calls for long-range planning and systematic development. Careful examination of all relevant factors is made, before an area is developed or redeveloped, to make sure that the changes will agree with the master plan of that particular park.

Description

From east to west, the national parks extend from Newfoundland to the mountain peaks of Alberta and British Columbia - Banff, Jasper, Waterton Lakes, Yoho, Glacier, Kootenay and Mount Revelstoke. Though dissimilar in size and character, all have in common significant qualities that make them worthy of national preservation.

Wood Buffalo National Park, lying half within northern Alberta, half in the Northwest Territories, comprises 17,300 square miles of still largely undeveloped wildlife habitat. Wood Buffalo - home of the largest herd of bison on the North American continent and nesting ground of the whooping crane - is easily the biggest of the parks.

It is the only national park not administered by the National Parks Service. As yet fairly difficult for the average Canadian to visit, Wood Buffalo serves mainly as a wildlife preserve and the Northern Administration Branch, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, allows some commercial use of natural resources.

In contrast to wide-ranging Wood Buffalo is Point Pelee National Park on Lake Erie, the smallest (6.04 square miles) and the most southerly in the system. Point Pelee lies on the Mississippi flyway and is a favourite resting place for millions of migratory birds. Point Pelee, like other national parks, is a natural museum, and nothing that will harm its animals or natural features, even the picking of wild flowers, is permitted.

The great scenic and recreational parks that lie among the Rockies claim almost a third of all visitors: Banff, Jasper, and Waterton Lakes along the east slope of the Rockies in Alberta; Kootenay and Yoho on the west slope of British Columbia; Glacier and Mount Revelstoke in the Selkirk Mountains in the same province.

These parks, some as famous for their winter sports as summer recreation, share an Alpine majesty. Single peaks rise so high that even the mid-summer sun does not melt their snow caps and sprawling glaciers. Far below, the valleys are watered by narrow, winding rivers and dozens of snow-fed lakes of green and blue.

Banff, first in age and attendance, second in size, is known for its hot springs and for mirror-like Lake Louise. It acts as the hub for a network of highways and hiking and riding trails that lead to scores of beauty spots. Jasper Park, largest in the system after Wood Buffalo, is linked to Banff by the Banff-Jasper Highway, as spectacular a road as any in North America.

West of the Continental Divide is Yoho National Park - named by an Indian word expressing wonder and delight - and Mount Revelstoke, a mountain park crowned by pine, meadows and a breathtaking view.

Glacier National Park is the location of the famous Rogers Pass, where avalanches threaten a section of the Trans-Canada Highway, built at a cost of a million dollars a mile.

Waterton Lakes Park, in southwestern Alberta, adjoins Glacier National Park on the United States side of the International Boundary. Together they form the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, which for many years has been to countless tourists a constant reminder that this is a boundary between nations that mount no frontier guns.

Elk Island Park, 30 miles east of Edmonton, is best known for its herds of bison. This, though only 75 square miles in area, is a park where people are fenced off from animals. A popular resort for the people of Edmonton, with camping and boating facilities, it combines recreational attractions with the practice of basic conservation.

North of the Great Plains in Saskatchewan lies Prince Albert National Park, with a background coloured by the romance and adventure of the fur-trading days. Here, too, throughout the summer, people and wildlife live side by side in bewildering numbers. Much of the park's 1500 square miles consists of lakes and forested islands, making it a great resort for the outdoor enthusiast. Prince Albert is the only park in the system that contains both a golf course and a pelican rookery. On a hot June day, visitors who enjoy a rare sight can take off from the townsite and, after a boat trip, watch hundreds of rubbery red pelican chicks breaking out of the eggs. Later in the summer, one of the sights of Prince Albert Park is to watch the pelicans launch their shrill white flotillas across Lake Lavalee.

Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba rises more than 1,000 feet above the surrounding plains. Its profusion of lakes and forested tableland are in striking contrast to its prairie environment. "The Riding" is on the borders of the Mississippi and Central flyways, and no park in the system has a more fascinating variety of birdlife, or birds that are less troubled by the presence of man.

Ontario has three national parks. The most northerly is Georgian Bay Islands, a group of 42 wooded islands in the Bay's popular resort area. The second is Point Pelee and the third lies in the Thousand Islands region of the St. Lawrence River, where part of the mainland and 14 islands have been set aside as a national park. These smaller wooded parks, set against the background of

sparkling water and the wide sweep of the St. Lawrence River, are among the most popular in the system. True to regional topography, unlike the mountain or the prairie parks or the salty Atlantic coastlines, Ontario's three national parks, less than 12 square miles in area, are another illustration of the sharp contrasts in landscape between the different regions of Canada.

The mixture of seascapes, rocky coasts and shores teeming with marine life, and forested inland areas provides splendid park potential, and it is not surprising to find four national parks in the Atlantic Provinces, one in each province.

Terra Nova National Park looks out on Bonavista Bay on the east coast of Newfoundland from gently rolling forested barrens. Cape Breton Highlands National Park occupies almost the whole northern tip of Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, a rugged plateau that drops steeply to the sea. Fundy National Park is located on the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick; part of its great popularity with visitors comes from its excellent recreational facilities, which include the New Brunswick School of Arts and Crafts.

Next to Banff, the most popular national park is Prince Edward Island National Park, where nearly 900,000 people a year come to relax on 25 miles of wide sandy beach and swim in salt water warmed by the Gulf Stream.

Selection of Sites

Since the national parks offer such contrasts in size and natural features, what criteria are used in selecting an area for development?

A prospective park must, first, be free of other types of development and be representative of the finest scenery in a region. It must contain fauna and flora native to the area, so that visitors studying the park a century hence will be able to see a complete cross-section of the life that flourished in this part of Canada before man interfered.

There should be some unusual natural features, not found elsewhere, that are worthy of being preserved for people to see and appreciate. The area must lie within a reasonable distance of centres of population and be adaptable for road links with existing public highways. The land must remain in a fairly wild state and be free of agricultural, forestry and mineral developments and permanent settlements. In Canada, even with its immense area, there are few regions left with national park potential, and recreation space of any kind is limited in the vicinity of concentrations of population.

Once a new park area has been established, it undergoes a period of intensive study before development begins. It is necessary to control the design of buildings and other development to ensure that structures complement the natural landscape and do not intrude upon it.

Concessionaires and resort owners are encouraged to respect the national park atmosphere. The position of buildings is also carefully controlled to harmonize as far as possible with the landscape.

What do Canadians - and Americans, who form a large part of the park clientele - want to do when they visit a national park? Certainly, they do not seek the same artificial and contrived amusements and activities they use the rest of the year in their

cities and homes. Sightseeing, resting and relaxing, observing and studying nature - these are the favourite activities of the national park visitors, and opportunities for these activities that renew and relax are precisely those the parks were intended to provide.

Camping, by tent or trailer, is increasingly popular and is an appropriate way of enjoying the benefits of a national park. All national park campgrounds are crowded in July and August and, though the National Parks Service is establishing new campgrounds and enlarging existing ones as quickly as possible, facilities invariably fall behind demand.

Public preference is for smaller campgrounds with minimum facilities and a natural setting that allows for privacy and the feeling of outdoors living. To answer this need, all new campgrounds are mainly of the semi-serviced type and designed so that they will fit inconspicuously and attractively into a natural setting.

Park naturalists and a special type of showmanship are the answer to the bored park visitor who wants to be entertained. He can walk by himself along short and interesting nature trails where plants, trees and other natural wonders are identified and explained or he can join others in a conducted hike led by a naturalist who is their patient guide to the world of nature. In the evenings, there are showings of color slides and movies related to the national park and informal talks about the animals, the forests, the plants, the geology and other natural aspects of the park.

Forest and Wildlife Protection

But in a national park there are obligations more fundamental than providing for the enjoyment and convenience of visitors. The natural features must be protected from damage or destruction by natural or human causes. There is an élite corps of protectors known, because of their kinship with the wardens who protected medieval cities, as the Park Warden Service.

The park wardens keep a watchful eye on the health and the safety of the forests and the wildlife and, when action is required to control a forest fire, feed a starving elk herd or rebuild a foot bridge, it is usually the park wardens who direct the operation. Quick and efficient communication is essential for the fighting of forest fires, the rescue of visitors injured in mountain, water, trail or road accidents, and the apprehension of game poachers, so the park wardens operate and maintain fire roads and trails, radio and telephone nets, and lookout towers.

In the mountain national parks, visitors are occasionally injured or trapped when mountain climbing and skiing, and wardens are highly trained and well equipped to meet any emergency. Most are skilled in mountain rescue techniques and have qualified as mountaineers.

Biologists of the Canadian Wildlife Service advise the staff of the national parks on wildlife management and protection, while the rearing and stocking of game fish in the lakes and streams of the parks is handled by Wildlife Service limnologists seconded to the National Parks Service staff.

Canada, with the second largest national parks system in the world, is fortunate that at an early stage in its development far-sighted legislators took steps to preserve for the people of later generations large areas of unique natural beauty and interest as national parks.

Millions of today's visitors are finding in the national parks the same inspiring sights and enjoyable experiences that the parks offered in 1887, and a large number of them are coming to think of the national parks as not merely a place to holiday but a part of their common national heritage to be used with care and respect.

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