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THE NATIONAL PARKS OF CANADA

Canada has embarked on the largest development programme in the history of its National Parks. A mounting population, new trends in leisure, the facilities to reach almost anywhere in the country on wheels or by air, have brought about an increase in National Parks use that would have seemed impossible to predict ten years ago. Over this period attendance has risen more than 240 per cent. In 1958, more than four million people visited the eighteen National Parks in Canada, and indications are that this record figure may be exceeded in 1959.

All this is a far cry from the year 1887 when the first National Park was established as Rocky Mountains Park in Alberta. As remote from this modest 260-square mile area are the 29,288 square miles that comprise the system today and which, if combined, would almost cover two Provinces - New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

But size alone, in a country as large as Canada is no proof of distinction. What makes the Parks notable is their fascinating variety of terrain, strongly regional, distinct in topography, deeply a part of the life and colour of the Canadian landscape.

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 Parks System is now firmly established, preservation and wise use depend ultimately on public understanding and appreciation of the national park idea and park purposes. The obligation to provide for proper use and yet at the same time to preserve nature and natural features inviolate is a continuing one. Since the parks belong to the people by right of citizenship, the administration has a duty to make them accessible by road and trail, and to provide accommodation and other facilities necessary for the enjoyment of the natural scene. But the more the parks are used the more difficult it becomes to prevent 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 for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. 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 National Parks are 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 710 miles of secondary or fire roads; 2,404 miles of riding and hiking trails; 1,344 miles of telephone lines. To patrol the larger parks, wardens must move with the seasons as well as the times, using trucks, tracked vehicles, canoes, launches, horseback, skis, snowshoes, sno-cats and bombardiers.

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 the year 1975 the population of Canada may have grown to - or beyond - 25 million people and that possibly 9 million visitors may be using the National Parks. This estimate is based on something more solid than surmise. Between 1951 and 1957 the population of Canada rose 41 per cent. In the same period visits to parks rose 84 per cent. This trend is causing the National Parks Service to place a new and high priority on long-range planning.

Two years ago the National Parks Service set up a planning Section to study the Parks singly, and as a whole, and to recommend to the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources plans for long-range development. The planning Section is a permanent research group that works with data collected from every field of Parks management.

Description

From east to west the National Parks extend from Newfoundland on the Atlantic coast to the mountain parks of Alberta and British Columbia - Banff, Jasper, Waterton Lakes, Yoho, Glacier Kootenay and Mount Revelstoke. From north to south they illustrate by dramatic contrast how totally dissimilar two areas can be in size and character and still have in common the qualities to fulfil the requirements for a National Park.

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. Here, in the protection of the wilderness, the young crane, rusty brown and all but invisible in the cover of underbrush, learns to become airborne for the long north-south migration that begins in Northern Canada and ends in Texas. Few bird journeys receive such publicity as the yearly flight of the surviving handful of whooping cranes.

In contrast to wide-ranging Wood Buffalo is Point Pelee National Park on Lake Erie, one of the smallest (6.04 square miles) and the most southerly in the system. Yet tiny Point Pelee can also claim its share of distinguished bird life for it lies on the Mississippi flyway and is a favourite resting place for millions of migratory birds. Point Pelee, like every National Park, is a natural museum for the study of animal and birdlife, tree species and regional flora.

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 in 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 mid-summer sunshine does not melt their snow caps and huge, sprawling glaciers. Far below, the valleys are watered by broad, twisting rivers and hundreds of snow-fed lakes of a jade green colour.

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 the Indians "Yoho", a word expressing wonder and delight - and Mount Revelstoke, a park set on the slopes of a mountain crowned by pine, meadows and a breathtaking view. The summit of Mount Revelstoke Park - eighteen winding miles uphill - is a first-rate point for a warden to spot the thin grey smoke plumes that may appear on the mountain sides after a lightning storm.

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 Peace Park that for many years has been to countless tourists a constant reminder that this is a boundary between nations which mount no frontier guns.

Elk Island Park, 30 miles east of Edmonton, is best known for its herds of moose, elk, and deer. Elk Island, though only 75 square miles in area, also is a park which people and wildlife share generously with one another in very large numbers. A popular resort for the people of Edmonton, with camping and boating facilities, it combines great visitor appeal with the serene grazing areas of a wildlife refuge. Elk Island herds, in fact, thrive so well that they are thinned every few years to prevent the wildlife population from exceeding the grazing capacity of the park.

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 is made up 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 golf course and 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 a thousand 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. "The Riding" is second only to Banff in the number of visitors who flock there every year.

Ontario has three National Parks. Most westerly is Georgian Bay Island, a group of thirty wooded islands in the Bay's popular resort area. To the south lies Point Pelee on the shores of Lake Erie, most southerly tip of the Canadian soil. The third in the Ontario group lies in the "Thousand Islands" region of the St. Lawrence River where part of the mainland and more than a dozen 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 coastlines of the Atlantic, 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.

Four Parks have been established in the Atlantic Provinces. The development of Terra Nova Park in Newfoundland, was begun in the spring of 1957 and may not be completed till 1961. Its bold headlands, striking out into the Atlantic, are typical of Canada's most easterly province.

Cape Breton Highlands in Nova Scotia, like every Atlantic Park, is rich in history. The Cabot Trail, on Cape Breton Island, circles the park. Climbing high over mountain shoulders with sheer drops to the sea, it leads the visitor to the quaint fishing villages that give Cape Breton a special charm.

Prince Edgard Island Park, on pastoral Prince Edward Island, extends 25 miles along the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Its sandy beaches are among the best in the world and the salt water here is considerably warmer than waters hundreds of miles to the south.

Along the shores of Fundy National Park in New Brunswick ebb and flow the greatest tides in the world. Like every Park, Fundy has well-equipped campgrounds and recreation areas but with these modern amenities still retains a few old covered wooden bridges along park highways to remind the visitor of pioneer days. Fresh water lakes offer a choice for those who enjoy combining salt water bathing with similar sport in inland waters.

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 of all, be free of other types of development and be representative of the finest scenery in a region. It must be able to support all forms of wildlife, forest species, and flora native to the area, so that visitors studying the park a century hence, will find the natural climate undisturbed no matter what other development has taken place within the park.

There must be scope for adequate visitor accommodation, recreation, and the maintenance of a good highway system. The area must lie within reasonable distance from centres of population and be adaptable for road links with existing public highways. Although this has not always been the case, care is now taken to exclude wherever possible, land of commercial value to agriculture, forest operations, mineral development, or hydro-electric potential. Only countries that still have an adequate amount of uncommitted land at their disposal can meet the conditions that all these factors require. Even in Canada, still comparatively land-rich, the choice is narrowing year by year.

Once a new Park area has been established it undergoes a period of intensive study before development begins. Terra Nova National Park in Newfoundland is an example. It is the Parks' policy to control the design of buildings and other developments to ensure that new structures complement the natural landscape and do not intrude upon it.

Concessionaries and resort owners are encouraged to use only display signs made from native woods and other harmonizing materials, and high standard in the design of building and direction signs is maintained throughout the parks. The position of buildings is also carefully controlled to harmonize as far as possible with the landscape.

What type of holiday do most Canadians choose when they visit a National Park? Like the majority of vacationers they prefer to have the best of two worlds - the world man lives in today and the world the way it used to be. Highly mobile, in search of a holiday that combines an authentic touch of the wild with water, electric light and plenty of activity, more and more visitors are showing a preference for campgrounds and trailer parks. A limited sampling taken in the summer of 1958 showed that rather more than half the visitors polled expressed a preference for campgrounds, or the type of de luxe trailer park that the Service has built at Banff and Waterton Lakes.

To serve this growing trend toward a holiday of which the nucleus is the family car, well stocked with camping equipment, the National Parks Service is testing a number of small, unserviced camp sites with space for about a dozen tents. The main purpose of this less elaborate type of campground is to relieve the pressure on the fully-serviced areas and provide for those who genuinely enjoy the simple life.

These sites, convenient to highways and water supply, need fewer supervisory services than the larger grounds with their well-equipped kitchen shelters and wash-houses and electric lighting.

The new Tunnel Mountain Trailer Park at Banff, with a 250-trailer capacity, has been designed for those who prefer a less mobile form of vacation on wheels. The Tunnel Mountain Trailer Park and the new trailer development at Waterton Lakes are a far cry from the pitched tent by the mountain stream. Tastefully landscaped with shade trees, hedges, flowers and sidewalks. equipped with ample electrical outlets, the modern trailer park provides for camping de luxe.

To private enterprise the National Parks Service looks for most of the accommodation provided in the form of hotels, lodges, motels, cabins and bungalow camps. Sites for these developments are provided by the Government on long-term leases, subject to the plans of would-be concessionaires being acceptable. Under the terms of the National Parks Act - and indeed under the fundamental concept of the Parks - lands within a National Park cannot be sold.

Forest and Wildlife Management

But a Park has obligations beyond providing the public with good accommodation, essential though this may be. Forest and wildlife management are inseparable from the total operation of any National Park. Forest protection is among the important duties of the Warden Service, acting under the direction of the Chief Park Warden. Communication within the wide-spread range of the park is by forest or radio telephone. Fire roads and trails are not only essential for detection and suppression of forest fires but for game patrols. Forest fire look-out and control stations are established at key points throughout the parks.

Wildlife management, including the work of the fish hatcheries, is carried out under supervision of the Canadian Wildlife Service, a division of the National Parks Branch. Wildlife is so fundamentally a part of the character of a park that without it the concept of these great national nature preserves would be without meaning.

Only in part does even the most dedicated and far-sighted Parks career man see the result of his lifetime of work. Rarely is he fortunate enough to watch the plans he helped to shape mature fully. He is always building on somebody else's work or creating new bases for those who come after him.

This, at least, has been largely true in the past. It is becoming less and less true today. The pace of national development is shortening the old time-tables. The Parks are a unique and invaluable national heritage and Canadians are discovering them in ever-growing numbers. National Parks administration that once entailed the care of one small area in the Canadian Rockies today entails the administration of a dynamic national estate. Those who manage it on behalf of the people of Canada not only must move with foresight but with rapidity.

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