

Sharing the Stewardship of a Canadian Conservation Park

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Gatineau Park, Quebec, Canada: A conservation challenge

Gatineau Park is a federally managed natural area located within Canada's Capital Region. Accessible directly from the urban core, it is the most intensely visited park in the country. Some 600,000 visitors make 2.65 million visits annually to its 361 km² of forests, lakes, rivers, and wetlands. It is a year-round attraction with 200 km of recreational trails used for hiking, walking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, winter biking, and horseback riding. In addition, its scenic parkways draw motorists and cyclists and its shorelines draw beachgoers and campers.

Now in its 80th year, the park has evolved from an informal playground and ski area, to a highly coveted recreational park. Intensive use notwithstanding, it retains significant ecological values, with various high-quality ecosystems and habitats and harbouring over 150 legally designated species at risk. Federal environmental laws require increasingly careful management of recreational activities and infrastructure.

In 2005, the Gatineau Park Master Plan stated, for the first time, that the primary purpose of the Park is natural and cultural resource conservation, and that recreational activities must be respectful of the environment. Numerous actions were accomplished through the Master Plan, and yet users continue to regard the park as a personal "playground" with little regard for the conservation of its natural values. Examples of this behaviour include the unsanctioned creation and use of a vast network of unofficial trails, and disrespect of regulations and behavioural codes. In the context of very limited enforcement capacity, the Park has little ability to ensure regulatory compliance.

Affecting a culture change

Gatineau Park's managers have recently undertaken a long-term, multi-pronged approach to try to engage its users in the conservation of the park. Certain activities, such as rockclimbing and horseback riding, have been delegated to user groups to ensure trail maintenance and appropriate user behaviour. A similar approach will be put in place for mountain biking. A major initiative to curtail the creation and use of unofficial trails is underway, starting with raising public awareness of the numerous impacts of these practices. Over a number of years, park staff has been working with user groups to find and implement solutions to reduce overall habitat fragmentation, ecological impacts, and safety issues caused by the trails. The park is also moving to place youth ambassadors and volunteer patrollers on the trails to educate users and increase regulatory compliance.

Currently, the Park management is in the process of renewing its Master Plan. The primary focus of the plan is to institute a cultural shift, whereby users move from assuming "ownership rights" to assuming a sense of responsibility for the park's stewardship. Additionally, regional partners need to be engaged to ensure ecological connectivity and resilience to a changing climate. The long-term ability of the park to maintain its remarkable biodiversity and ecological functions and services depends upon the success of this major effort.