

**“One of the finest park systems in the world”:
Managing Ontario’s Provincial Parks and Protected Areas**

For well over a century, Ontario's provincial parks system - which currently features over 330 parks - has provided citizens with regular opportunities to get in touch with nature and indulge in the region's awe-inspiring landscape.¹ While these parks have historically served as centres of fun and relaxation for many Ontarians, the provincial government has had to deal with the far more strenuous task of managing these areas effectively. For much of the twentieth century, a variety of competing interests have clashed in the province's parks. The creation of the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) in the early 1970s, however, constituted a big step toward the modernization of the management of Ontario's provincial parks, and this ultimately had a positive impact on the development of the parks system as a whole. Today, Ontario Parks, the arm of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) responsible for overseeing exactly what its title implies, explains that its mandate is guided primarily by the notion of "ecological integrity," meaning that it aims to keep the province's parks and other protected areas as natural and unmarred by human activity as possible.² Understanding the history of Ontario's provincial park system allows one to better appreciate the importance of ecological integrity and to gain a clearer picture of how the MNRF's park policies have evolved over the last five decades.

Ontario's provincial parks were established and managed quite differently during the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century than they are today. Indeed, prior to 1954, the province was home to only eight provincial parks, each of which had been created in response to particular circumstances rather than as part of a broader systematic planning initiative. For

¹ "Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry," *Government of Ontario*, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-natural-resources-and-forestry> (accessed 12 January 2017).

² "Ecological integrity," *Ontario Parks*, <https://www.ontarioparks.com/ecologicalintegrity> (accessed 12 January 2017).

example, in 1893 the government of Ontario created its first provincial park, Algonquin, located in the District of Nipissing, in order to appease the demands of different interest groups who wanted a public park that could serve as a forest reserve, fish and game preserve, and recreational site.³ Over the next fifty years, the Ontario government's approach to establishing provincial parks was characterized by "a total absence of planning" in the sense that each "new park was established without reference to the others, because no one had yet conceived of a system of interconnected parks."⁴ In contrast, there was greater consistency in terms of how each of Ontario's provincial parks was actually managed during this period. By the 1940s, the concept of "multiple-use," whereby economic development and environmental preservation were viewed as compatible elements within the parks system, had risen to prominence amongst many park administrators and politicians across Ontario. Nevertheless, conflict arose between those who wished to exploit park resources for profit and those who wanted to conserve them for aesthetic and recreational purposes⁵

The two decades following the end of the Second World War witnessed major economic and social changes in Ontario which significantly altered the ways in which the province's parks were established, managed, and enjoyed. The rapid growth of Ontario's middle class during these years meant that an unprecedented number of people had the money and leisure time to visit nearby provincial parks. With a host of new pressures being placed upon Ontario's provincial parks system, the provincial government had practically no choice but to remodel its relevant policies and managerial structure. First, it passed the *Provincial Parks Act, 1954*, which

³ Gerald Killan, *Protected Places: A History of Ontario's Provincial Parks System* (Toronto: Dundurn Press Limited, 1993), 1-8; Richard S. Lambert and Paul Pross, *Renewing Nature's Wealth: A Centennial History of the Public Management of Lands, Forests, and Wildlife in Ontario, 1763-1967* (Toronto: Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, 1967), 277-281.

⁴ Killan, 54.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

affirmed that provincial parks were intended to protect certain “natural advantages” in Ontario while simultaneously ensuring that citizens had access to plenty of outdoor recreation opportunities. Then, also in 1954, the Department of Lands and Forests (DLF) – predecessor to the MNR – established its own Division of Parks, thereby largely centralizing provincial parks under one administrative body. What followed was a period of remarkable growth for Ontario’s provincial park system, which reached a total of 94 parks by 1967.⁶ Ontarians responded favourably to this phenomenon, with over 9,000,000 visits to the province’s parks recorded in 1964 alone. That same year, Frank MacDougall, the Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests (1941-1966), aptly captured the essential purpose of Ontario’s provincial parks when he stated that “if a man wants the trappings of civilization there are plenty of places he can go ... We feel that the parks are for people who want to get away from everyday life.”⁷

Everything was not completely harmonious in Ontario’s provincial parks during the pre-MNR years, however. Indeed, from their earliest days, the province’s parks have been sites of both leisurely activity and outright conflict. For example, in 1910 a public outcry erupted over the destructive practices of a timber company in sections of Algonquin Provincial Park. The government of Ontario promptly bought out the company’s licence, but logging continued as a major activity in the park. Unsurprisingly, by the late 1920s many Ontarians were expressing concern about the effects of logging, hunting, pollution, and urban development on the scenic and natural landscape of the province’s parks. Although “multiple-use” management helped to reconcile partially the tensions that existed between resource developers and environmentalists, the advent of the postwar recreation boom brought huge numbers of people, with the associated

⁶ Ibid., 74; 86-87.

⁷ “Ontario To Add 3 Parks,” *The Globe and Mail*, 15 October 1964, page 27.

litter and human waste, and differing opinions on park management to the forefront. Soon enough, overcrowded campgrounds, rowdy park visitors, environmental deterioration, and clashes over park resources became all too common in Ontario's ballooning park system, and this became almost too much for park administrators to handle.⁸ The provincial politicians and bureaucracy soon realized that major administrative changes were both desirable and inevitable.

The formation of the MNRF had a significant impact on Ontario's natural resource sector in general and its provincial park system in particular. The passage of *The Ministry of Natural Resources Act, 1972*, amalgamated the DLF with the Department of Mines and Northern Affairs, a move which served as part of the more general reorganization of the provincial government that was being carried out by Premier William "Bill" G. Davis and the Progressive Conservative Party during the early 1970s.⁹ Although the Davis government had initiated this restructuring primarily in an effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public service, the creation of the MNR also marked a giant step toward "modern" resource management principles in Ontario which upheld the importance of environmentally and socially responsible stewardship. This, of course, had occurred against the backdrop of the nascent environmental movement, which gained considerable momentum across the Western world, including Ontario, beginning in the 1960s.¹⁰ This paradigm shift ultimately had far-reaching implications for Ontario's provincial

⁸ Killan, 38-40; 54-57; 73; 120.

⁹ *Committee on Government Productivity: Report Number Ten – A Summary* (Toronto: Committee on Government Productivity, 1973), 65-66.

¹⁰ Mark S. Winfield, *Blue-Green Province: The Environment and Political Economy of Ontario* (UBC Press, 2012), 21; "Public concern growing on environment: Davis," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 August 1971. See also Ryan O'Connor, *The First Green Wave: Pollution Probe and the Origins of Environmental Activism in Ontario* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2015).

parks. A new Division of Parks was established within the MNR to handle these matters, and it was originally organized into three branches: Planning, Management, and Historical Sites.¹¹

The Parks Division faced many hurdles during the 1970s, but on the whole it emerged from this decade with a clearer sense of policy direction, a more sophisticated park planning system, and a respectable track record in executing its agenda. The Division inherited a provincial park system that was in many ways languishing due to years of haphazard planning strategies, and it initially lacked the firmly defined set of core policies that it needed to carry out its duties. This situation was further exacerbated by “the intensifying demand for parkland and outdoor recreation opportunities in the heavily populated regions of southern Ontario,” as well as by the continued rise of environmentalist ideals which called for fundamental changes in how provincial parks were administered.¹² Over time, the Ministry and the Division of Parks responded to controversies over park policy with a great deal of composure, and generally implemented programs and policies which satisfied the bulk of Ontario’s provincial park users.

The Planning Branch was undoubtedly the most active section of the Division of Parks during the 1970s. Its purpose was “to develop and co-ordinate long-range, master and environmental plans for the provincial park and public lands creation system” while also providing relevant advice, expertise, assistance, and services to other parties involved with Ontario’s provincial parks.¹³ From the moment of the MNR’s inception, the Planning Branch worked steadily to develop policies which would guide how each of the province’s parks were established, classified, and managed. A rank and file of professional park planners was required

¹¹ Killan, 243.

¹² Ibid., 205; Winfield, 30.

¹³ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1976)*, 16.

to perform this lengthy and complicated undertaking. By the mid-1970s, the Parks Division had hired many new individuals from a wide spectrum of disciplines – including history, biology, economics, and landscape architecture – to help guide the planning process.¹⁴

The Division of Parks' efforts finally came to fruition in 1977 when it released the *Ontario Provincial Parks Planning and Management Policies* manual. This document defined provincial parks as “areas of land and water managed for the benefit of present and future generations and dedicated to the people of Ontario and others who may use them for their healthful enjoyment and appreciation.” Next, it stated that the goal of Ontario’s provincial park system would be “to protect significant natural, cultural, and recreational environments.” It listed six different classes of provincial parks: Wilderness, Nature Reserves, Historical, Natural Environment, Waterway, and Recreation. In May 1978, the Ontario government accepted these provisions as the foundation of its official provincial parks policy and made the necessary adjustments to the *Provincial Parks Act*. Then, a few months later, the Ministry released the “Blue Book,” a document closely associated with the aforementioned manual which outlined the activities that were permitted in each class of park and within particular park zones. These initiatives constituted “one of the most comprehensive and advanced endeavours of its kind undertaken in North America” which represented “nothing short of a triumph for Ontario’s Division of Parks.”¹⁵

By the end of the decade the MNRF had established itself as a leading figure in parks planning in North America. Its success stemmed mainly from the Division of Park’s “second to none” master planning program. This meticulous, collaborative program allowed politicians,

¹⁴ Killan, 239; 248.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 282-286.

civil servants, private stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, and the public to come together to determine how best to create and manage provincial parks. Various experts first worked together to compile extensive inventories of an area's natural and cultural features in order to assess its potential as a provincial park. A regional interdisciplinary team then issued a tentative statement of policy which set out the proposed park's purpose and associated management guidelines. The provincial government and the public were then invited to review and scrutinize these policies before it received final approval from the Minister of Natural Resources. The master plan for a given park had a twenty-year lifespan, with reviews being conducted every five years to ensure it was still meeting its intended objectives.¹⁶ By 1978, twenty master plans had been approved by the Minister, and about half of all of Ontario's provincial parks had master plans either completed (and awaiting approval) or underway.¹⁷

The other two branches of the Parks Division, Management and Historical, also underwent notable changes throughout the 1970s. The latter was responsible for conducting historical research and planning relating to Ontario's provincial parks. Although the Historical Branch made some major strides during its first few years of existence, including the development of its own historical parks planning system, in 1975 it was relocated to the newly formed Ministry of Culture and Recreation, leaving the Division of Parks essentially to fend for itself in this regard.¹⁸ The Management Branch, on the other hand, gained a wealth of experience during these years. It was responsible for directing the daily operations of Ontario's provincial parks, including "their structural and facility design, concessions, interpretive facilities, and

¹⁶ Ibid., 240-241.

¹⁷ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1979)*, 20.

¹⁸ Killan, 256-262.

management control, and for the information of the public.”¹⁹ With millions of people visiting Ontario’s provincial parks each year, this was a formidable task. The Management Branch dealt with practical issues like water, sewage, road, and electrical systems within the parks, as well as more educational services like museum tours, lectures, and exhibits. It also maintained canoe routes, snowmobile trails, and access points for boaters on lakes and rivers. The Branch even dealt with law enforcement; in 1974, for instance, it evicted over 5,000 people from Ontario’s provincial parks and charged another 1,824 under the *Provincial Parks Act* for illicit behaviour.²⁰ These statistics suggest significant divisions in public opinion about the purpose of parks, and the challenge of keeping the public informed about their natural and recreational values. By the end of the 1970s, the Management Branch was responsible for coordinating all these duties within 128 provincial parks.²¹

At the same time, however, the MNR had to grapple with some much more controversial matters in Ontario’s provincial parks during this decade. For example, in 1971, after years of lobbying from preservationist groups, the government of Ontario banned all commercial logging in Quetico Provincial Park, located in northwestern Ontario along the border with Minnesota, and later made similar concessions in Killarney Provincial Park on the north shore of Georgian Bay.²² Even more contentious was the battle over logging activities in Algonquin Provincial Park. Beginning in the late 1960s, segments of the public began demanding tighter control of timber harvesting in the park to better protect its wilderness qualities. The situation became quite heated, with groups such as the Algonquin Wildlands League accusing the forest industry of

¹⁹ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1976)*, 16.

²⁰ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1974)*, 16.

²¹ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1979)*, 20.

²² Killan, 192-194.

“outrageous hypocrisy.”²³ After six years of debate and analysis, the Ministry finally made its decision. In November 1974, it announced the creation of a Crown corporation which was vested with the power to oversee timber operations in Algonquin Provincial Park. The Algonquin Forestry Authority (AFA) came into being on 1 January 1975, and was bound to the guidelines found stated in the recently released *Algonquin Provincial Park Master Plan* (1974). The Ministry’s decision to form the AFA has been widely credited with having restored “a semblance of peace to the park.” It has proven successful in balancing the needs of industry and recreationists, although many environmentalists want a complete ban on logging in Algonquin.²⁴

The 1980s proved to be an immensely challenging time for Ontario’s provincial parks system, but, rather than faltering, the MNR ultimately rose to the occasion and devised innovative ways to overcome the obstacles it faced. Budgetary constraints, rival factions, and overlapping government policies, particularly as they related to land use, posed problems for the Ministry as it sought to fully realize its own mandate in Ontario’s provincial parks. Fortunately, the Parks and Recreational Areas Branch (which replaced the Division of Parks in 1979) was able to ease these strains by implementing new management strategies that had positive long-term effects for the parks system. Indeed, while this decade has been described as “one of the most difficult periods” in the history of Ontario’s provincial parks, the Ministry and its partners came together and transformed the park system into “a much more efficient and effective organization.” Most importantly, by the end of the decade the MNR had strengthened both its

²³ “Logs cut, left in Algonquin Park, Wildlands League survey finds,” *The Globe and Mail*, 7 October 1971, page 11.

²⁴ Mark Kuhlberg, *One Hundred Rings and Counting: Forestry Education and Forestry in Toronto and Canada, 1907-2007* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 205; Killan, 200.

commitment to preserving Ontario's natural wealth as well as the public's confidence in its ability to regulate competently the parks system.²⁵

At the same time, the onslaught of a severe global recession in the early 1980s pushed the Ministry to enact various measures designed to manage Ontario's provincial parks in a more economical fashion. One of the primary means through which it pursued this objective was by working with volunteers and cooperating organizations. In 1981, the MNR formally established a volunteer program for Ontario's provincial parks, allowing citizens to help with research, park maintenance, and much more.²⁶ Within three years, about 500 people had contributed nearly 10,000 days of service to the program.²⁷ Then, in 1983, the Ministry reached an agreement with an organization known as The Friends of Algonquin Park, whereby the latter agreed to finance the publication of the various booklets, guides, and maps sold at Algonquin Provincial Park and to use the proceeds from their sales to fund other projects associated with the park's visitor service program. The association soon became "a vital, even essential partner" for Algonquin park staff, setting the tone for agreements that were later made between the provincial government and similar organizations in other provincial parks, including Quetico, Killarney, Rondeau, Presqu'île, and Fathom Five.²⁸

The Ministry adopted a number of other strategies over the course of the 1980s which enhanced the state of Ontario's parks system. In 1981, for example, it launched a marketing campaign intended to draw more visitors into the province's parks and generate much-needed revenue for the Parks Branch. With attendance on the decline in recent years, the MNR decided

²⁵ Killan, 288; 319-324; 373-374.

²⁶ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1982), 33.

²⁷ Killan, 293.

²⁸ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1984), 16; *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1986), 70; Killan, 295-296.

to use “a combination of advertising, improved customer services and several new consumer-oriented publications” in order to promote “parks as desirable vacation areas where a variety of outdoor activities could be pursued.”²⁹ Along with releasing pamphlets, newspaper and journal articles, and even some films, the Ministry continuously strove to improve park facilities in order to boost visitor satisfaction by, among other things, renovating buildings, installing hot water and showers in comfort stations, and upgrading road, sewage, and electrical systems. The Ministry’s efforts had a noticeable effect, with annual visitation in Ontario’s provincial parks increasing from 5.5 million visits in 1981 to over 8 million by 1987. This steady increase in park attendance injected a flurry of activity into Ontario’s economy; in 1986 alone, for instance, the province’s park system “generated an estimated economic impact of about \$500 million.”³⁰

Ontario’s provincial park system expanded considerably during the 1980s, a reality that both opened doors and created difficulties for the Ministry. By 1989, there were 261 provincial parks scattered across Ontario, more than double the number just a decade earlier.³¹ Predictably, planning for this massive development was not entirely straightforward. First, the Ministry had to ensure that any enlargement of the parks system occurred within the parameters of its broader Strategic Land Use Planning (SLUP) program, which aimed to administer Ontario’s vast supply of Crown (i.e., publicly owned) resources in a sustainable manner. Within the context of provincial parks policy, this required that the establishment of any new park not negatively impinge on the needs of other resource users. From 1980 to 1983, the MNR worked diligently to integrate parks planning into SLUP, with much controversy being raised along the way over

²⁹ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1981), 35; Killan, 304.

³⁰ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1982), 31; *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1983), 21; *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1987), 74; *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1988), 50.

³¹ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1981), 35; *Ministry of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1989), 25.

issues like logging, mining, hunting, and Indigenous rights. Finally, in the spring of 1983 the provincial government announced the creation of 155 new provincial parks, and stipulated that “non-conforming activities” (including commercial tourism, hunting, and mineral exploration) would, under certain conditions, be permitted within them. Although the Ministry had hoped that its decision would be viewed as a reasonable compromise, segments of the population – specifically environmental groups – were far from pleased.³² Nevertheless, the MNR later emphasized that the “addition of these new parks enhances what is already one of the finest park systems in the world.”³³

Five years later, however, the Ministry made an even bigger announcement regarding Ontario’s provincial parks. From 1985 to 1988, the provincial government undertook a serious review of its park policies, a process which relied heavily on public hearings and consultations. For example, in March 1985 nearly 1,000 people attended a series of public debates on the future of the province’s parks. The Ontario Provincial Parks Council, a citizens’ advisory committee established in 1974 to provide park-related advice to the MNR, convened the sessions.³⁴ While this process helped to mitigate some of the concerns surrounding Ontario’s parks system, the topic of “non-conforming” activities still remained a sore subject, with environmental groups insisting that the Ministry reverse its decision. Many Ontarians supported this pushback because, as one newspaper noted in May 1986, “most people consider parks a sanctuary.”³⁵ Although the Ministry itself was divided on the issue, in May 1988 it put an end to years of debate. From this point onward, the MNR explained, “no commercial logging, hunting, trapping, mining, or

³² Killan, 323; 335-44.

³³ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1985), 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 202-203; 356-358; *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1987), 80.

³⁵ “Hunting, hydroelectric development considered: Ministers divided over new park uses,” *The Globe and Mail*, 1 May 1986, page A18.

hydroelectric development [would be] permitted in Ontario's Wilderness and Nature Reserve parks and zones," while the latter three activities would be banned in all the other classes of parks as well. Furthermore, logging would be allowed in just two provincial parks, Algonquin and Lake Superior, and would be carried out under strict guidelines. Environmentalists and other citizens praised the move, which essentially ushered in a new era of parks policy in the province.³⁶

Yet the Ministry's efforts to preserve Ontario's natural wealth during this period were not limited to this landmark decision. In fact, the MNR greatly advanced its preservationist agenda throughout the 1980s. At the start of the decade, for instance, it expressed its intention "to accent the cultural and historical heritage of Ontario."³⁷ One example of this came in 1985, when the Ministry built a structure to protect a large concentration of Indigenous petroglyphs (rock carvings) located in Petroglyph Provincial Park near Peterborough. According to the MNR, these particular petroglyphs, estimated to be between 500 to 1,000 years old, served as "some of the best examples of native art in Ontario."³⁸ The Ministry also sought to protect significant natural areas located outside Ontario's provincial parks by lending support to the burgeoning private stewardship movement. In 1998, the provincial government, backed by the MNR, the Ontario Heritage Foundation, and the National Heritage League, passed the *Conservation Lands Act*, which offered a 100 percent property-tax rebate to "owners of provincially and regionally significant" areas (such as wetlands) who agreed to maintain their property in accordance with conservationist principles. Described by parks historian Gerald Killan "as potentially one of the most important pieces of legislation in the history of natural heritage protection in Ontario," the

³⁶ Killan, 323; "53 parks to be created in Ontario," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 May 1988, page A1.

³⁷ *Ministry of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1983), 20.

³⁸ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1985), 51-52.

act represented a crucial shift in the Ontario government's land-use philosophy.³⁹ In addition, it illustrated that the core tenets of the MNR's parks policies – environmental preservation and ecological sustainability – were finding a foothold beyond the channels of the provincial parks systems.

By the turn of the decade, Ontario's provincial parks system, which celebrated its centennial in 1993, possessed both an accomplished history and a bright future. Nearly a quarter century ago, historian Gerald Killan rightfully asserted that “No one can predict what the challenges of the 1990s hold for Ontario's system of provincial parks.” However, he also posited that “the strengthening public interest in environmentalism” could conceivably “result in more weight being placed on the protectionist objective” in Ontario's provincial parks, an assertion which proved to be prophetic.⁴⁰ As it turned out, the MNR ended up making noteworthy adjustments to its park policies and administrative apparatus over the course of the 1990s which echoed Ontarians' deep-seated desire to protect their province's invaluable stores of forests, wildlife, lands, and waters.

The year 1993 marked the 100th birthday of Algonquin Provincial Park and the parks system it inaugurated, an event which the Ministry invested much time and energy into commemorating. In 1988, it launched a five-year program, at an approximate cost of \$50 million, to revitalize Ontario's provincial parks in preparation for the upcoming centenary. This funding was used to improve existing park facilities and construct new ones, as well as to conduct marketing and other parks-related research.⁴¹ The anniversary celebration itself included a wide

³⁹ Killan, 311-320.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁴¹ *Minister of Natural Resources: Annual Report* (1988), 50.

range of activities intended to evoke a feeling of excitement, pride, and optimism about the province's parks, including long distance canoe races, the opening of a new visitors centre in Algonquin Provincial Park, and the production of television specials and books. In November 1993, an article featured in *The Globe & Mail* reminisced about all that Algonquin Provincial Park had offered Ontarians for the past century, deeming it "a natural shrine, drawing the faithful, year after year, with its soul-restoring beauty and wilderness."⁴² This description could just as well have been applied to Ontario's provincial parks system as a whole, which by this point encompassed an area of 6.3 million hectares, making it larger than the province of Nova Scotia.⁴³

The Ministry also had plenty of reasons to look toward the future, prompting it to eventually create a new administrative body designed to guide Ontario's system of provincial parks into the twenty-first century. In 1996, Ontario Parks was officially formed and became tasked with continuing "the province's long-standing commitment to protect our natural and cultural heritage" while simultaneously becoming "more focused on customer service and more financially self-sufficient."⁴⁴ At the same time, a Special Purpose Account was set up to receive all provincial park revenue and to help cover Ontario Parks' expenditures. In its first few years of existence, Ontario Parks set out to modernize management, planning, research, marketing, and customer service strategies in the province's parks system. For example, it formed partnerships with the University of Waterloo, Brock University, and Nipissing University to support park research programs - particularly as they related to ecological sustainability - that it would have been unable to execute independently. At the same time, Ontario Parks completed new park

⁴² "Centennial reflections: Three Voices of Algonquin," *The Globe and Mail*, 30 November 1993, page D30.

⁴³ *Ministry of Natural Resources: Annual Report (1992-1995)*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ontario Parks: Annual Report (1996-1997)*, 2.

management plans and updated existing ones, including a major management plan review for Bronte Creek Provincial Park near Oakville. It also prepared a tentative plan for Missinaibi Provincial Park, located in northern Ontario within “the heart of the Chapleau Crown Game Preserve, the world’s largest wildlife preserve.”⁴⁵ By 1998, Ontario Parks was delivering services in 270 provincial parks, receiving 8.5 million visits annually, generating about \$1 billion per year in gross economic impact, and supporting approximately 12,000 jobs.⁴⁶

The best was yet to come for Ontario’s provincial parks system. In 1992, the Canadian government brought together delegates from each of the country’s provinces and territories, including Ontario’s Minister of Natural Resources, to sign *A Statement of Commitment to Complete Canada’s Network of Protected Areas*. The purpose of this deal was to broker “a consistent national goal for protected areas,” with each region agreeing to “make every effort to complete Canada’s network of protected areas representative of Canada’s land-based natural regions by the year 2000.”⁴⁷ Five years later, in order to decide exactly which lands it would protect, the government of Ontario launched a series of extensive public meetings known as the “Lands for Life Round Tables,” which focused specifically on 39 million hectares (96 million acres) of Crown land in northern Ontario. After over a year of deliberations, which involved the MNR, resource industrialists, the public, and Indigenous peoples, the provincial government decided to protect nine per cent of the area in question.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2-9; “Missinaibi,” *Ontario Parks*, <https://www.ontarioparks.com/park/missinaibi> (accessed 3 February 2017).

⁴⁶ *Ministry of Natural Resources: Business Plan (1997-1998)*, 10.

⁴⁷ *Working Together: Parks and Protected Areas in Canada* (Federal-Provincial Parks Council, August 2000), 5.

⁴⁸ *Ontario’s Living Legacy: The Making of the Ontario Forest Accord – A Background Document* (Government of Ontario, 1999), 10-11.

The Ontario government's preservationist crusade did not end here. In 1999, its officials negotiated two historic, closely related agreements involving the Ministry, the forest industry, and environmental groups. The first, known as Ontario's Living Legacy, added 378 areas, comprising a total of 2.4 million hectares (5.9 million acres), to the province's system of parks and protected areas. At the time, this was the largest one-time expansion of protected spaces in Ontario.⁴⁹ Moreover, along with these new parks and protected areas, which represented 12 per cent of the land base originally discussed at the Lands for Life meetings, the provincial government prohibited timber harvesting in many other large areas. Counterbalancing this protectionist land use strategy, the Ontario government also established a \$30 million Living Legacy Trust fund, which was used to invest in natural resource projects in general and the scientific study of forest, fish, and wildlife management in particular. The second agreement, the Ontario Forest Accord, was signed as part of Ontario's Living Legacy and sought to provide the forest industry with a stable supply of timber while concurrently adhering to sustainable forest management practices in Ontario's woodlands. The government of Ontario attributed the success of these negotiations to the Ministry's "history of cooperating and sharing information" with both the forest industry and environmental groups, which allowed for meaningful, effective collaboration between all of the parties involved.⁵⁰ With the people of Ontario articulating a heightened concern for the environment throughout the 1990s, Ontario's Living Legacy and its associated programs proved to be a fitting conclusion to what was an eventful decade for the MNR and the parks system it administered.

⁴⁹ Anne Koven, "Policy Networks and Paradigm Change in Ontario Forest Policy, 1988-2014," (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2015), 59.

⁵⁰ *Ontario's Living Legacy*, 11-12.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) – a title it officially adopted in 2014 – has built upon the success of Ontario’s Living Legacy and continued to expand the province’s system of parks and exceptional natural areas.⁵¹ In 2001, John C. Snobelen, the Minister of Natural Resources (1997-2002), proclaimed that “Ontario’s Living Legacy ... launched a dynamic new chapter in the history of resource management in Ontario.”⁵² In retrospect, his comments could not have been more accurate. For nearly two decades, the MNRF and Ontario Parks have worked with the provincial government, private interests, Indigenous communities, and the general public to implement many new park-related laws, policies, and programs which reflect a stronger dedication to modern scientific and environmental principles relating to biodiversity and ecological sustainability. Of course, Ontario Parks’ mantra of “ecological integrity” is reflected in these broader initiatives, and has helped the Ministry to solidify itself as the trusted steward of the province’s parks and natural heritage.

Multiple pieces of legislation have been passed in recent years pertaining to Ontario’s system of provincial parks and protected areas, thereby enhancing the MNRF’s ability to make certain that these spaces remain intact for the benefit of future generations. In 2003, for example, the Ontario government passed the *Kawartha Highlands Signature Site Park Act*. This legislation called for “the protection of the ecological integrity of the Kawartha Highlands Signature Site,” an area of over 35,000 hectares located north of Peterborough that features an abundance of fresh water, rare plant species, and bird and animal populations.⁵³ Then, in 2006, the provincial government introduced the *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act*, the first overhaul

⁵¹ “Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources adds forestry to its title,” *CBC News*, 14 July 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/ontario-ministry-of-natural-resources-adds-forestry-to-its-title-1.2706127> (accessed 5 February 2017).

⁵² *Ministry of Natural Resources: Business Plan* (2000-2001), 1.

⁵³ *Kawartha Highlands Signature Site Park Act*, 2003, Statutes of Ontario 2003, Chapter 6, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/03k06> (accessed 6 February 2017).

of the province's parks legislation in 50 years.⁵⁴ It sought to “permanently protect ... provincially significant elements of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage and to manage these areas to ensure that ecological integrity is maintained.” The MNRF was also required to report publicly on the state of Ontario's provincial parks and conservation reserves at least every five years.⁵⁵ The latest piece of preservationist legislation to receive royal assent in Ontario was the *Far North Act, 2010*, which aimed to set aside 225,000 square kilometres of untouched boreal forest in northern Ontario as part of an interconnected network of protected areas designated in community-based land use plans.⁵⁶ Since the turn of the century, Ontario's network of protected spaces has grown rapidly, presently covering over 10,000,000 hectares, or about 10 per cent of the province's entire land base.⁵⁷

The MNRF and Ontario Parks currently use environmentally progressive planning methods to provide policy and management direction for the province's parks and protected areas. The key components of this process are found within *Ontario's Protected Areas Planning Manual* (2014), which, along with other supplementary guidelines, templates, and tools, provides the Ministry with a uniform planning framework for the over 600 provincial parks and conservation reserves in Ontario. While this planning model is quite complex, it basically involves “identifying and analyzing values and pressures to determine management priorities and actions” for any particular significant natural area. This requires an extensive amount of information collection and analysis, as well as in-depth stakeholder consultations, especially with

⁵⁴ “Results-based Plan,” *Ministry of Natural Resources* (2007-08), 26.

⁵⁵ *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006*, Statutes of Ontario 2006, Chapter 12, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/06p12#BKI> (accessed 6 February 2017); “State of Ontario's Protected Areas Report,” *Ministry of Natural Resources* (Queen's Printer, 2011).

⁵⁶ Koven, 62-63; *Far North Act, 2010*, Statutes of Ontario 2010, Chapter 18, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/10f18> (accessed 6 February 2017).

⁵⁷ “Ontario's parks and protected areas,” *Government of Ontario*, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-parks-and-protected-areas> (accessed 6 February 2017).

Indigenous communities and the general public. The *Planning Manual* also underscores the centrality of ecological integrity in the MNRF's parks planning strategies, defining it as "a condition in which ... ecosystems ... are characteristic of their natural regions and rates of change and ecosystem processes are unimpeded." More importantly, it asserts that the MNRF "will build on existing and develop new tools and guidance to support the maintenance of ecological integrity."⁵⁸ Furthermore, the Ministry works closely with the Ontario Parks Board of Directors, a public advisory board with members appointed by Order-in-Council to provide the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry with advice on parks management.⁵⁹ Today, the MNRF uses modern scientific and ecological principles to promote the ecological integrity of Ontario's parks and conservation reserves, which includes supporting biodiversity conservation, additional protections for coastal wetlands and other significant natural areas, and improved wildlife regulations, particularly with regard to threatened or endangered species (though there is much work to be done and plenty of room for improvement).⁶⁰

Using a public sector-based business model, Ontario Parks is also responsible for overseeing the administrative aspects and daily operations of the parks system. Its business-like, customer-focused managerial approach allows it to effectively coordinate an assortment of activities and essential services in the over 330 provincial parks found across Ontario, which attract a combined total of about 8 to 10 million visits each year. This includes providing recreational and educational opportunities to park visitors, such as camping, day-use and picnic areas, museums and interpretive programs, and access to hundreds of kilometres of trails and

⁵⁸ *Ontario's Protected Areas Planning Manual*, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2014), 2.

⁵⁹ *Ontario Parks: Annual Report (2012-13)*, 3.

⁶⁰ "Results-based Plan," *Ministry of Natural Resources (2014-15)*, 45.

canoe routes. It also entails handling admission fees, management and resource planning, and research and inventory in order to maintain the long-term sustainability of Ontario's protected areas.⁶¹ In addition, the MNRF has recently stated that it will be investing in upgraded infrastructure in numerous provincial parks to improve safety and customer service, and "will also pursue other Ontario Parks financial sustainability initiatives."⁶² With the provincial parks system generating an estimated gross economic impact of \$380 million, the intrinsic value of Ontario Parks' work cannot be understated.⁶³ In fact, in 2010-2011, Ontario Parks became the first provincial organization in Canada to achieve the highest level of certification in the National Quality Institute's Progressive Excellence Program (now administered by Excellence Canada), which measures and recognizes organizational excellence.⁶⁴

Although a number of things have changed in Ontario's provincial parks system over the course of its 124-year history, many of its original features have clearly managed to endure the test of time. The sheer size of the modern parks system provides the most obvious indication of its dramatic transformation, while the legal and philosophical evolution of the various policies and programs that guide its management serve as a more intricate example. Nonetheless, the basic rationale behind the creation of provincial parks has remained constant since the 1890s, with the desire to preserve and use Ontario's bountiful natural wealth still serving as the primary motor. Under the MNRF, however, the means to which this paradoxical end is achieved has undergone a fundamental shift. Politicians, outdoors enthusiasts, industrialists, and other interest groups originally dominated decision-making in Ontario's provincial parks, and while these

⁶¹ *Ontario Parks: Annual Report (2012-2013)*, 3-5.

⁶² "Results-based Plan," *Ministry of Natural Resources (2013-14)*, 13; "Results-based Plan," *Ministry of Natural Resources (2014-15)*, 15.

⁶³ *Ontario Parks: Annual Report (2011-12)*, 3.

⁶⁴ "Results-based Plan," *Ministry of Natural Resources (2010-11)*, 31.

figures still remain prominent, since 1972 the Ministry has made a concerted effort to allow Indigenous peoples, the scientific community, and the broader public to play a more influential role in shaping parks policy. This has allowed the MNRF to develop an environmentally and socially responsible model for preserving Ontario's natural resources in general and its provincial parks system in particular. Thus, as one observer has suggested, the Ministry's "corporate strategy ... should serve as a protectionist cornerstone of the sustainable development" movement for years to come.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Killan, 383.