

An Overview to Canada's National Parks



National parks are among Canada's - and the world's - natural jewels. They represent the power of Canada's natural environment -- a compelling force -- which has shaped not only the geography of this country, but also the course of its history and the experiences of the people who live and travel here.

National parks are established to protect and present outstanding representative examples of natural landscapes and natural phenomena that occur in Canada's 39 natural regions, as identified in the National Parks System Plan. These wild places, located in every province and territory, range from mountains and plains, to boreal forests and tundra, to lakes and glaciers, and much more. National parks protect the habitats, wildlife and ecosystem diversity

National parks are located on the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic coasts, across the interior mountains and plains and Great Lakes, reaching as far north and south as Canada goes. They range in size from just under 9 km² (St Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada) to almost 45,000 km² (Wood Buffalo National Park of Canada). And they include world-renowned names such as Banff and Jasper, as well as more recently established Ivvavik and Vuntut.

Parks Canada is responsible for both protecting the ecosystems of these magnificent natural areas and managing them for visitors to understand, appreciate, and enjoy in a way that doesn't compromise their integrity.

Understanding and Appreciating

The breathtaking scenery and inspiring natural surroundings in national parks provide the perfect setting for tuning into nature, learning about it, appreciating it, respecting it and pledging to protect it. Each national park is a haven for the human spirit.

National parks tell the stories of Canada's natural beginnings - mountains forming, lakes emerging, rivers running, forests growing, glaciers moving, grasslands evolving - to anyone who takes the time to listen, to look and to understand. They tell tales of human history too, from traditional Aboriginal activities, to early exploration, to European settlement, to modern use. And they reveal ongoing natural processes - floods enriching, fires renewing, species migrating. They provide opportunities to connect with nature, people and events that define Canada.

Understanding the importance of Canada's natural heritage to the nation and the world, and developing support for its protection are critical to the long-term health of the system of national parks.

Visitors can paddle down rivers flowing through canyons carved over thousands of years, observe birds as they rest in their travels along traditional migration routes, walk through vibrant young forests transformed by fire. These are unforgettable experiences, made all the more

memorable by the learning opportunities Parks Canada offers through interpretative walks, exhibits and activities or in co-operation with the heritage tourism industry.

Protecting

Parks Canada is working to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of national parks. This means keeping ecosystems healthy and whole -- a state where ecosystem biodiversity, structures and functions are unimpaired and likely to persist.

Maintaining or restoring ecological integrity is a challenging task that involves a good understanding of the dynamic nature of ecosystems and the stresses they face. It also requires collaboration among people whose actions influence the ecosystems and their sustainability - from neighbouring landowners and businesses, to local residents, visitors and governments. The above reflect the principles of ecosystem management.

The national parks of Canada are a source of pride for Canadians and an integral part of our identity, they celebrate the beauty and infinite variety of our land.

The National Parks

For the national parks system to be complete, there should be at least one national park located in each of Canada's 39 natural regions. To achieve this, 14 additional national parks are needed. Work is underway to create these new parks, in cooperation with provinces, territories, Aboriginal Peoples, other federal departments, interest groups, and the public. Currently, the national parks system encompasses about 225 000 km² or about 2% of Canada's land mass. When the system is complete, it will cover just over 3% of Canada.

By law, Canada's national parks are protected for public understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment, while being maintained in an unimpaired state for future generations. However, there is increasing realization that simply designating an area is not enough to protect it. Parks must be established and managed in new ways if they are to protect Canada's wild ecosystems in the long term.

In most cases, this means that, to be effective, management actions go beyond park boundaries to a wider zone called a "Greater Park Ecosystem", and involve cooperative actions by many conservation partners. A high priority for Parks Canada is to protect the ecological integrity of Canada's national parks. What does this mean? Ecosystems have integrity when their native components, those which should be located in the defined area (i.e. plants, animals, and other organisms), and the processes (such as growth and reproduction) are functioning and are intact.

One key benefit of national parks is that they provide excellent opportunities for the study of natural environments and their components. Studies and research are not only of value in assisting park management and interpretation, but they contribute to the growing body of scientific knowledge concerning our natural world. Scientific studies in natural parks are seen as increasingly important because they provide long term benchmarks and can help reveal changes in occurring in ecosystems as a result of human intervention or nature.