



SUPPORTING THE CBD AICHI BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION TARGETS THROUGH PARK TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF PARKS CANADA'S VISITOR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

Since 2005, Parks Canada has embarked on an agency-wide effort to face the challenge of remaining relevant to Canadians. Visitation to Canada's system of National Parks, National Historic Sites, and National Marine Conservation Areas has been declining, in part, because of a changing social context. Parks Canada Agency believes that fostering visitation will result in individuals' appreciation of and connection with Canada's parks. It is suggested that this can lead to increased support for Canada's national system of natural and cultural heritage sites. Parks Canada has embraced the concept of visitor experience to help address this decline in visitation. Integrated with the protection and education elements of its mandate, the focus on visitor experience is how the Agency will ensure these special places are relevant to Canadians now and in the future. This paper describes how visitor experience is integrated within Parks Canada's mandate and delivered within each of its protected areas. The paper discusses the Agency's work to improve visitor experience at all of its parks and highlights how outcomes arising from this initiative are assessed. Visitation to parks, the income that this generates and the awareness and connection to biodiversity generated amongst park users is an important goal for all countries. Parks Canada's engagement in social science research, and advanced application of a visitor experience approach to parks management provides best practice examples for other countries that will help achieve Aichi targets.

INTRODUCTION

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.
Baba Dioum, 1968.

Baba Dioum's words, spoken to the general assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1968, have often been quoted by conservations. They highlight what Parks Canada, Canada's national parks agency, is attempting to foster through its visitor experience programme. A case study of this programme is outlined in this paper; the programme is designed to connect more

Canadian citizens with Canada's national parks, making Canada's parks more relevant and ensuring continued support for biodiversity conservation. High quality experiences designed with the visitor in mind are a means by which Parks Canada can maintain and increase relevance to Canadians, build visitation and encourage their appreciation and support for the country's system of national heritage places (national parks, historic sites and marine conservation areas).

Beginning with the creation of the External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate in 2005, Parks Canada embarked on an agency-wide effort to face this challenge.



Birdwatchers at Point Pelee National Park, Canada © Glen Hvenegaard

The Agency improved its methods for collecting and analysing social science data, and began working with partners to better understand visitors' unique motivations and interests. The Agency has reviewed the entire visitor experience cycle at Parks Canada protected areas to improve the experiences that are available, and it has launched a number of national programmes targeted at key market segments. The efforts are designed to help the Agency meet its visitor experience objectives related to connection, visitation, enjoyment, satisfaction and learning. Achievement of these objectives will enhance Parks Canada's ability to meet Aichi biodiversity targets (Convention of Biological Diversity, 2010) especially Target 1 (people's awareness of biodiversity values) and Target 19 (knowledge transfer to the public on how to protect biodiversity) through citizen education and engagement.

This paper first situates visitor experience in the context of Parks Canada's mandate. It then describes Canada's changing society, highlighting implications for the relevancy of protected areas. This is followed by a description of the visitor experience concept used by Parks Canada, and a discussion of the Agency's work to improve visitor experience at all of its parks across the country.

Lessons for other countries interested in more intensive engagement in social science, in particular integrating a visitor experience approach with other park management and planning, are discussed.

THE CONTEXT FOR PARKS CANADA'S VISITOR EXPERIENCE CONCEPT

Parks Canada integrates three key elements in all aspects of managing Canada's national heritage places:

- Protection - Conserving heritage resources;
- Education - Fostering public understanding and appreciation; and,
- Visitor Experience (VE) - Fostering enjoyment

These three elements are present throughout the Agency's mandate and vision (Parks Canada, 2010a), as well as its strategic outcome: *Canadians have a strong sense of connection, through meaningful experiences, to their national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas and these protected places are enjoyed in ways that leave them unimpaired for present and future generations. (Parks Canada, 2010a, p. 12).* These elements guide Parks Canada's corporate direction,

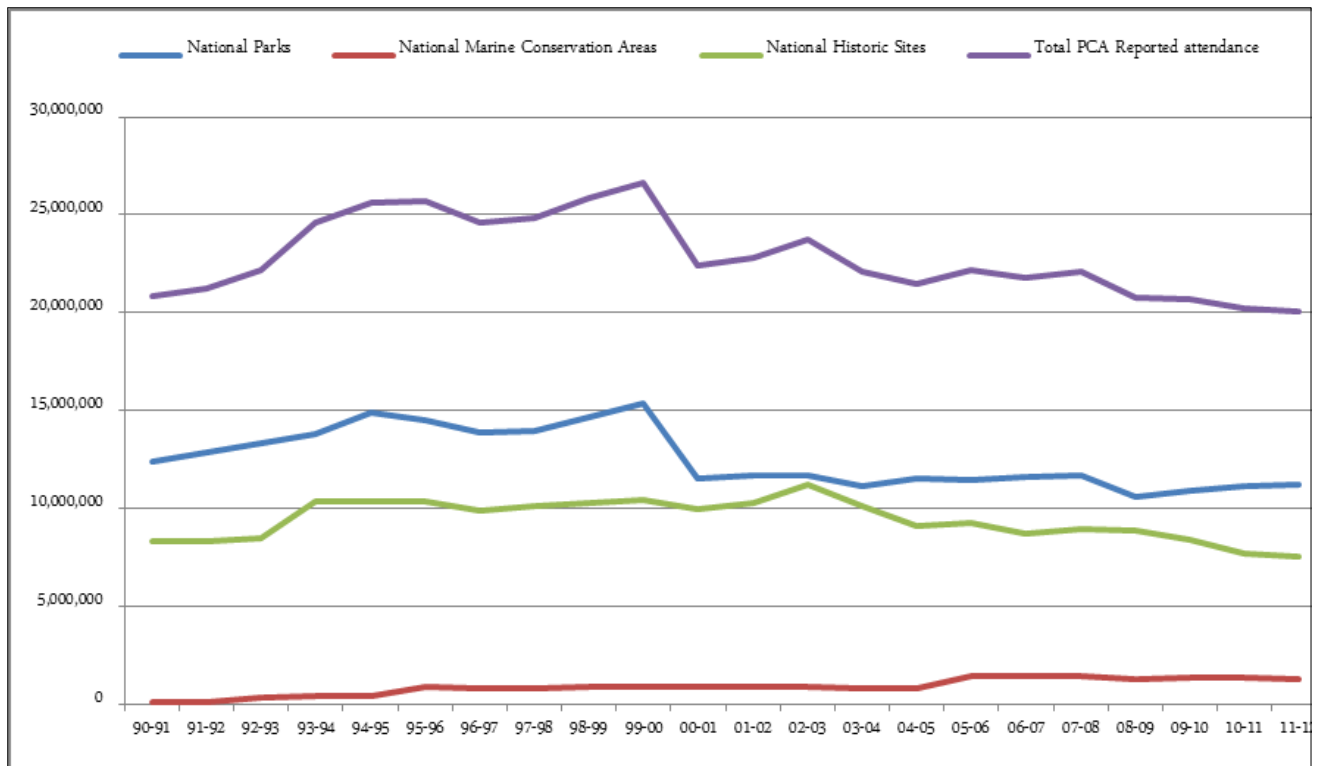


Figure 1: Attendance at Parks Canada Agency Parks, 1990-2012.

Note: Attendance is measured in Person-visits, which is defined as: Each time a person enters the land or marine part of a reporting unit for recreational, educational or cultural purposes during business hours. Through, local and commercial traffic are excluded. Same day re-entries and re-entries by visitors staying overnight in the reporting unit do not constitute new person-visits.

performance management framework, its reporting requirement to the Canadian parliament, its related policies, plans and regulations, and they are linked to the organization's management structure.

Parks Canada has defined a new cohesive management approach that integrates the three elements of protection, education and visitor experience. The Agency has clearly stated that its objective is to protect national parks (NP), national historic sites (NHS) and national marine conservation areas (NMCA) with and for Canadians, not from Canadians (Latourelle, 2010).

While visitor experience is the focus of this paper, this along with protection and education are constantly engaged in to achieve ecological and commemorative integrity. "Parks Canada's objective is to allow people to enjoy national parks as special places without damaging their integrity...ecological integrity is our endpoint for park management" (Parks Canada, 2009c). *Ecological integrity (EI)* is a "condition that is determined to be characteristic of its natural region and likely to persist, including abiotic components and the composition and

abundance of native species and biological communities, rates of change and supporting processes" (Parks Canada, 2000c). Similar definitions guide the Agency's effort to protect cultural heritage. This is defined as *commemorative integrity (CI)* and it describes the health and wholeness of a national historic site. These sites possess commemorative integrity when: (a) the resources directly related to the reasons for designation as a national historic site are not impaired or under threat, (b) the reasons for designation as a national historic site are effectively communicated to the public, and (c) the site's heritage values (including those not related to designation as a national historic site) are respected in all decisions and actions affecting the site (Parks Canada, 2009b).

It is believed that enhanced visitor experiences work with achievement of ecological and commemorative integrity because optimized visitor experiences foster Canadian awareness of and connection with the country's federal parks. Awareness is tied to the education mandate listed above; humans will not support the protection of natural and cultural heritage that they do not know exists (Bamberg et al., 2007; Chawla, 1999; Hines et al., 1987;

Newhouse, 1990). Connection can be characterized by positive emotional bonds, individual and group identification with parks, and on-going use or visitation of parks. Functional, emotional and identity-based bonds can move individuals and groups to engage in place protective behaviours such as park volunteerism, voting for pro-conservation politicians and support of park fund raising programmes (Halpenny, 2007a, Halpenny, 2010; Kohl, 2006; Ramkissoon, 2012). These bonds can also result in positive word-of-mouth promotion and repeat visitation (Halpenny, 2007b; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). This concept has been expressed by Rick Potts, formerly of the United States National Parks Service: “*You cannot love a park or wilderness to death. Although love cannot kill a wild area, apathy and irrelevance certainly can*” (Potts, 2007). For Parks Canada, visitors are part of the solution, not the problem. Visitors are an essential part of the future of protected areas and their experiences are an integral component of the Agency’s mandate.

Visitation has important financial implications for all protected areas agencies that are increasingly forced to seek sources of revenue that are not derived directly from government coffers (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Crompton & Kaczynski 2004; Eagles & McCool, 2002; Emerton, Bishop, & Thomas, 2006). Increased stewardship and patronage of Canada’s Parks by Canadian citizens is theorized to result, indirectly, in ecological and commemorative integrity. However, there is also the challenge within Parks Canada Agency to allocate resources effectively towards protection, education and visitor experience, to achieve these integrity goals.

While visitation is perceived to be very important to maintaining Canadian citizens’ support of the nation’s protected areas, Parks Canada parks have experienced visitation declines. From 2001 to 2009 visitation to NPs dropped by 5.3 per cent while visitation to NHSs decreased by 13.6 per cent (Parks Canada, 2010b). These visitation declines are particularly challenging when one considers the clear link between experiencing heritage and connecting with it. For example, by segmenting the results of its 2009 National Survey of Canadians, Parks Canada found that visitation to NPs is critical to connecting Canadians to these national treasures. Nine out of ten (90 per cent) Canadians who had visited one of Canada’s 42 NPs in the previous three years expressed feeling a ‘sense of connection’ to them. By comparison, only two out of ten (20 per cent) Canadians who had not visited a NP were able to say the same (Parks Canada, 2010c).

A CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

Parks Canada operates in a globalized arena; recent years have brought significant changes that affected visitation. The aftermath of 9-11, the down turn in the global economy, and a stronger Canadian dollar in recent years have contributed to reduced park visitation. While the Agency may not be able to affect these national and global trends, it can address institutional factors that may also influence visitor numbers; these include entry fees and user fees (e.g., firewood). In addition to these global and institutional factors, Parks Canada must consider a number of demographic and social trends as it strives to increase visitation and ensure the continued relevance of national parks and historic sites to Canadians. The Canadian population is aging rapidly. As the large ‘baby boomer’ cohort ages, the number of Canadians age 55–64 continues to increase; from 9.4 per cent of the Canadian population in 2001 to 12.7 per cent in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). It is estimated that Canadian seniors, age 65 and over, will outnumber Canadians under the age of 15 by 2016. These older Canadians present unique opportunities and challenges. They typically have more time, resources and desire to travel; however, they are also more interested in soft adventure activities and more comfortable accommodations (Foot & Stoffman, 2000). Parks Canada must evaluate the opportunities currently offered in NPs and NHSs in light of these evolving interests.

Canada is a highly urbanized society, with 35 per cent of Canadians now living in the three largest cities, Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. Eighty-two per cent of Canadians live in cities with more than 10,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2011). While Canada has been highly urbanized for some time, an accumulative effect arising from several generations of urban living could be creating a psychological disconnection with ‘the land’ (Balmford, 2002; Kareiva, 2008). Additionally, less leisure time reported by Canadians may be constraining their ability to take the long vacations necessary to reach and enjoy distant national parks (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012; Duxbury & Higgins, 2012).

The disconnect between people and nature, referred to as nature-deficit disorder, has gained an elevated profile in recent years and has initiated international movements like the Children and Nature Network, inspired by Richard Louv’s (2008) book *Last Child in the Woods*. Parks Canada’s research with urban Canadians highlighted the barriers this distance creates to visitation and connection (Decima Research, 2010). In some ways, urbanization does

Table 1: Explorer Quotient types

Traveller type	Description
No hassle Traveller	A bit of an escapist, you search for worry-free and secure travel. You look for relaxation, simplicity, and a chance to experience the outdoors with family and friends.
Free Spirit	Something of a thrill-seeking hedonist, travel satisfies your insatiable need for the exciting and the exotic.
Cultural History Buff	You strive to go beyond your own roots to understand the history and culture of others. You are the most likely to own a passport, and you enjoy solitary travel.
Gentle Explorer	You like to return to past destinations and enjoy the security of familiar surroundings. You appreciate convenience, relaxation and typically look for all the comforts of home.
Virtual Traveller	Tending not to travel very often, you prefer the comforts of home to the uncertainties of new places or cultures.
Cultural Explorer	You are a very active traveller who enjoys frequent weekend escapes. Always on the move, you immerse yourself in nature, local culture and history.
Authentic Experiencer	Your traveller type is something of an improv artist, exploring nature, history and culture, all on the path to personal development.
Rejuvenator	For you, travel is a chance to totally disconnect and get away from it all. When you travel, you want to stay in top hotels where you are most comfortable, secure, and can...
Personal History Traveller	You travel to gain a deeper understanding of your ancestry and heritage. Your travel tends to be a shared experience, both during and after the trip.

Source: Parks Canada (2012): *Planning your visit – Explorer Quotient*: www.pc.gc.ca/voyage-travel/qe-eq/qe-eq_e.asp

not pose the same challenge for NHSs, since many are located in or near major urban centres; however, they often lack the profile of NPs and their visitation has been declining at an even faster rate than that of NPs.

Canadian society is also becoming increasingly diverse because of immigration. Immigrants represented approximately 21 per cent of the Canadian population in 2011, up from 18.4 per cent of the population in 2001. These new Canadians are also contributing to the urbanization of Canada with 97 per cent of new immigrants choosing to settle in an urban area and 69 per cent of them settling in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal

(Statistics Canada, 2006). At the same time, new Canadians are significantly under-represented in visits to NPs and NHSs, representing 12 per cent of visitors (Parks Canada, 2009). New Canadians bring with them different experiences, interests and perspectives. Parks Canada must better understand and respond to their needs if it hopes to be relevant to Canadians, particularly as immigrants become a larger part of the Canadian population (Deng, Walker, & Swinnerton, 2005; Deng, Walker, & Swinnerton, 2006; Ho, Sasidharan, Elmendorf et al., 2005; Hung, 2003; Lin, 2010; McBane, 2007).

Influenced by these and other factors, the tourism industry is also changing. Travellers want a wide variety of unique, authentic, interactive and personalized experiences (Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Mossberg, 2007). This trend is linked to the idea of the experience economy, the shift in the source of economic value from commodities, to goods, to services, to experiences, is seen in the evolution of the tourism sector (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Linked to this shift is the division of travellers into more distinct market segments that need to be better understood, specifically identified and targeted with specialized products, promotions and communications (Arsenault & Gale, 2004). At the same time, there is increased competition for potential visitors' time and attention. Travellers have more choice, are better informed and want a bigger role in choosing and creating their travel experiences. Parks Canada has been working to

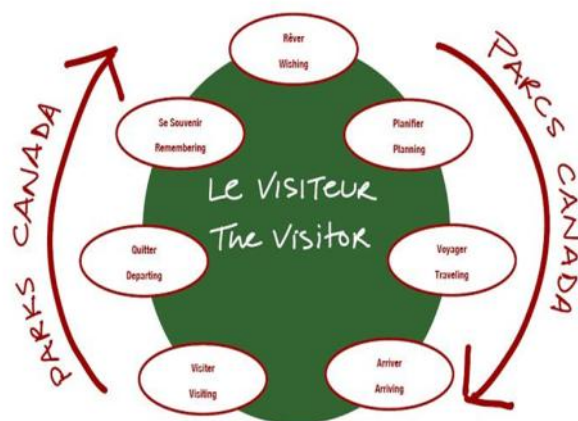


Figure 2: The Visitor Experience Cycle

Table 2: 2012-13 Performance Management Framework – Visitor Experience

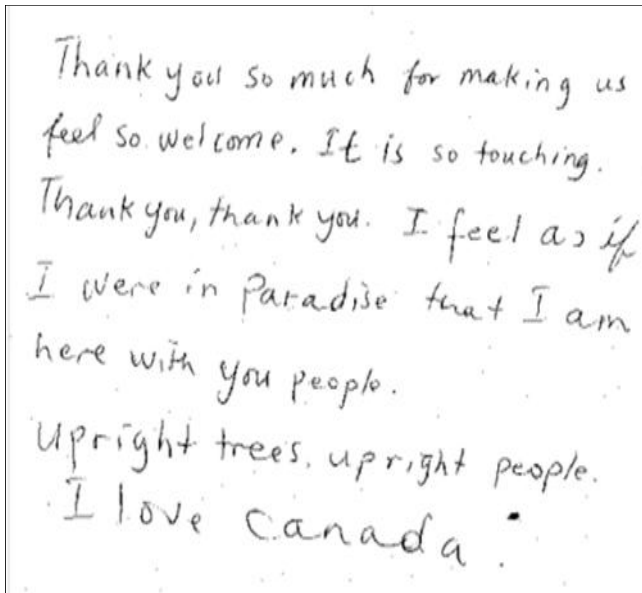
VISITOR EXPERIENCE	
Expected Results:	Visitors at surveyed locations feel a sense of personal connection to the places visited.
Performance Expectations:	On average, 85 per cent of visitors at all surveyed locations consider the place meaningful to them. On average, 90 per cent of visitors at surveyed locations are satisfied and on average, 50 per cent are very satisfied with their visit.
MARKET RESEARCH AND PROMOTION	
Expected Results:	Canadians visit Parks Canada administered parks.
Performance Expectations:	22.4 million visits at Parks Canada administered parks by March 2015.
NATIONAL PARKS INTERPRETATION	
Expected Results:	Visitors at surveyed national parks learned from experience and active participation.
Performance Expectations:	On average, 60 per cent of visitors at surveyed national parks and national marine conservation areas reported they learned about the natural heritage of the place. On average, 85 per cent of visitors at surveyed national historic sites reported they learned about the cultural heritage of the place.
NATIONAL PARKS VISITOR SERVICE OFFER	
Expected Results:	Visitors at surveyed national parks enjoyed their visit.
Performance Expectations:	On average, 90 per cent of visitors at surveyed national parks enjoyed their visit.

understand these distinct market segments, develop opportunities that correspond to visitor needs and interests, and describe the opportunities in the traveller's terms so that Parks Canada protected areas are part of their travel experience.

In 2010, Parks Canada conducted focus-group research in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver on attitudes and behaviours regarding visiting national parks and national historic sites. Participants highlighted the need to increase awareness of national parks and national historic sites in general and the diversity of experiences available. They also recommended that Parks Canada develop tailored experiences for different types of visitors. Specific suggestions included designing opportunities for young Canadians that build on their desire for social interaction, recognize their cost sensitivity and accommodate their busy lives. Parents desire experiences that appeal to their children, are educational and allow parents to enjoy themselves as well. Participants also noted the perception that visiting a national park was synonymous with camping and that there needed to be a wider variety of accommodation options available. These suggestions are clearly linked with the larger demographic shifts taking place in Canada.

WHAT DOES PARKS CANADA MEAN BY VISITOR EXPERIENCE?

Parks Canada's renewed focus on visitor experience starts with good data about visitors. Decision-making must be based on solid knowledge of current and potential visitor needs and expectations gathered through social science research. Embedded in this market-based approach is the Explorer Quotient (EQ) programme (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2010). The EQ programme was developed by the Canadian Tourism Commission with the market research firm Environics Analytics, and uses research methods based on psychographics. It explains why people travel and why different types of travellers seek out different travel experiences. Parks Canada is one of the first organizations to apply the EQ programme to connect nine EQ types (see Table 1) with opportunities that match their values, interests and expectations. Example itineraries at each park, for different EQ types can be found at: www.pc.gc.ca/voyage-travel/qe-eq/qe-eq_e.asp. Combined with other market intelligence, the EQ programme helps Parks Canada make sound decisions on how to effectively develop and facilitate experience opportunities that are relevant to Canadians. An introduction to EQ is part of Parks Canada's core staff service training (offered to more than 4,000 staff each



Feedback from a participant in the Learn to Camp pilot in Banff National Park, Canada © Parks Canada

year) and EQ has been specifically applied at over 50 Parks Canada protected areas. It is reflected in promotional materials and is part of a wide variety of visitor experience planning tools used across the organization.

The Agency recently added another important social science tool to help build its understanding of visitors. Environics Analytics has developed a segmentation system called PRIZM C2 that classifies Canada's neighbourhoods into 66 unique lifestyle types based on psychographic and demographic data. PRIZM C2 also cross-references EQ types with neighbourhoods. With this information Parks Canada can better understand the experiences sought by potential visitors and how to target promotion of these experiences (see en-corporate.canada.travel/resources-industry/explorer-quotient for details). This tool is being integrated into Parks Canada's visitor experience planning tools and market segmentation training.

The next step is to look at how the visitor experiences 'the place'. The visitor brings their personal story, their values, motivations, expectations and interests. Parks Canada, along with its tourism partners, sets the stage by preserving natural settings, facilitating access to culture and by providing facilities, services, staff, products and programmes. The interaction of the visitor with the place (the physical infrastructure, the people and the services) creates the visitor experience. Parks Canada then uses the Visitor Experience Cycle to develop opportunities that incorporate all aspects of the experience. The various



Parks Canada's OTenTik © Parks Canada

stages of the experience are consciously evaluated to maximize their positive impact. The visitor's experience is divided into the following stages:

- **Wishing:** How are the experiences available at Parks Canada parks promoted to potential visitors?
- **Planning:** What information does the visitor need to decide on their destination and plan their visit?
- **Travelling:** How can Parks Canada facilitate the travel experience so that it is as easy and enjoyable as possible?
- **Arriving:** How is the visitor welcomed and informed about the experiences available?
- **Visiting:** Are the products, programmes, services and facilities available on site designed, delivered and maintained with the visitor in mind so they lead to positive, memorable experiences?
- **Leaving:** Is there a distinct sense of departure? What can they take with them to remember their experience?
- **Remembering:** When the visitor recalls and shares the details of their visit through pictures, stories, souvenirs can they follow-up with Parks Canada in ways likely to lead to a return visit?

Combining an understanding of larger social trends, the variety of needs and expectations of visitors, and a comprehensive approach to the entire VE cycle, Parks Canada is working to develop opportunities for visitors to experience Canada's natural and cultural heritage and build a strong sense of connection to these places.

MAKING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE CONCEPT A REALITY

As noted earlier in this paper, Parks Canada's renewed focus on visitor experience started in October 2005 when the External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate was created. This directorate includes a Social Science function as well as the Visitor Experience Branch. In 2008, Parks Canada realigned the External Relations and Visitor Experience functions in the field to equip all sites with a team of people responsible for aligning the experience with the needs and expectations of visitors.

The organization also reviewed its performance management framework as related to VE, and established targets related to visitation, learning, connection, enjoyment and satisfaction (see Table 2). Parks Canada's visitor survey programme or Visitor Information Programme (VIP) evaluates these factors. Parks Canada has set increased visitation as a clear target for the organization – an increase of 10 per cent by 2015 (Parks Canada, 2010a). Performance measures such as this will help Parks Canada continue to build on and improve its focus on VE. The integration of the VE concept into the organization's management framework and the development of policies and guidance that consider the



River walker, Mississippi River, Canada © Elizabeth Halpenny

visitor's needs first, are key to providing support and guidance to managers and their teams. Parks Canada has developed a suite of performance indicators and measures related to understanding visitors, providing opportunities, delivering high quality services and connecting visitors to these special places. The measures are aligned with the Agency's corporate direction and are part of the planning and reporting framework (Parks Canada, 2010a). The measurements include: number of visitors, visitor satisfaction, enjoyment and sense of connection and learning. In addition, the organization sets performance targets for its parks and sites that encourage the on-going renewal and diversification of the visitor experience offer. In 2012, each Parks Canada place was required to renew or diversify at least three experiences. This objective supports an environment of continual improvement.

Initially, visitor experience planning was organized around the Visitor Experience Assessment (VEA). The assessment looks at the current state of opportunities offered from the perspective of the visitor to help managers, staff and partners work collaboratively to assess, understand and enhance visitor experience. Participants assess a broad range of themes related to the VE Cycle including: visitor research, pre-trip planning services, on-site reception, interpretation programmes; working with partners, management and business planning, staff training, infrastructure, performance measurement and visitor feedback. Based on social science information, areas where the performance of the park or site could be improved are identified and specific actions are developed. Once completed, the assessment provides guidance for the management of the NP or NHS in areas related to visitor experience.

The VEA tool has been used at more than 90 locations since 2005. On average, locations using the assessment tool have generated 77 actionable items designed to improve the experience on site. On average, 65 per cent of these actions are completed or are underway. Action items cover all the elements of the VE cycle. Across the system, sites have highlighted the need for more specific social science data and more strategic thinking in planning and product development. These locations have also identified actions to address issues raised in VIP surveys. The planned changes vary in scope and scale; the majority are smaller, gradual changes rather than wholesale (i.e., change to more serviced campsites over time or the introduction of more diversified accommodation offerings).

The data available through the Explorer Quotient programme and Prizm C2 has allowed for the development of additional visitor experience planning tools that integrate this important social science information. Parks Canada is currently reviewing the suite of visitor experience planning tools and is piloting a market segmentation approach, as well as a product development tool linked to the EQ programme.

The Agency recently took advantage of two significant anniversaries to increase awareness of Canada's National Parks and National Historic Sites. 2010 was the 125th anniversary of the establishment of Banff National Park, Canada's first national park. This anniversary also coincided with the Vancouver Winter Olympics and Parks Canada launched a national advertising campaign during and after this event. Last year was the 100th anniversary of the creation of Parks Canada, the world's first national park service. Surveys show that these strategies helped increase awareness of Parks Canada from 66 per cent in 2007, to 87 per cent in early 2010. During this period the Agency also improved its media relations capacity and as a result has maintained awareness at or above 80 per cent into 2011. Increased awareness is a critical component of the VE cycle (wishing) and was highlighted by participants on the previously cited focus-group research.

To help managers consider new activities, the organization issued a tool titled: *Recreational Activity and Special Event Assessments* in 2008 (Parks Canada, 2008b). This management bulletin helps managers assess new or existing activities and events that present significant opportunities and areas for improvement. An assessment involves a wide range of staff, partners and stakeholders, and the output is a set of guidelines to follow during development and implementation. The assessment may be national or local in scope. Since issuing the bulletin, six national assessments have been undertaken covering geo-caching, mountain biking, traction kiting, guided interpretive canopy walks, zip lines, via ferrata and aerial parks, non-motorized hang-gliding and paragliding, and one non-tourism activity, community gardening. The assessment process guides the Agency in decision making regarding new activities and is designed to help managers to consider all aspects of the mandate, including current and potential visitor needs and expectations.

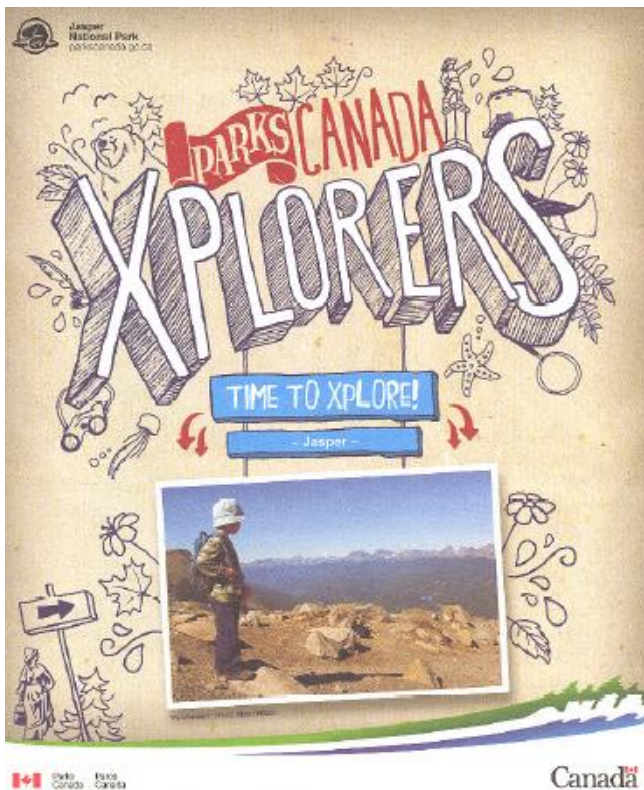
One example of how the Agency is adapting to the needs and expectations of potential visitors is the introduction of the Learn to Camp programme in 2011. The programme



Mountain hiking in Banff National Park, Canada © Elizabeth Halpenny

aims to introduce new Canadians and families with young children from urban areas to the camping experience. The programme began with a coordinated national urban event in June 2011 that was held at 10 urban centres across Canada – Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec and Halifax. More than 1,000 participants took part in a variety of activities, including interpretive programmes, camping workshops (focused on equipment, camping etiquette, camp cooking, etc.), and camping-related activities such as campfire sing-a-longs and stargazing. Feedback on the programme has been positive. Participants point to the experience as being part of becoming Canadian and many follow-up by visiting a nearby national park for their own camping experience.

Building on the success of the first year, Parks Canada expanded the event to 17 sites and nearly 2,000 participants in 2012. A virtual camping component has been added to the Parks Canada website, and on-site Learn to Camp activities in national parks will support positive experiences for new campers (see www.pc.gc.ca/eng/media/lte-dlc/index.aspx). Parks Canada launched the Learn to Camp app that has been downloaded more than 20,000 times.



Xplorers programme pamphlet © Elizabeth Halpenny

Parks Canada's effort to connect urban Canadians with their natural and cultural heritage continues with the Government of Canada's plans to create Canada's first National Urban Park in the Rouge Valley in Toronto. The lands of Rouge Park are currently managed by a variety of provincial, municipal, aboriginal and community stakeholders. As plans proceed, Parks Canada will be responsible for this special place; it will be a showcase for Canada's system of national parks within easy reach of 20 per cent of the Canadian population. Parks Canada's visitor experience approach will help connect Canada's most urban and diverse community with the country's rich natural and cultural heritage.

To reach youth and families, 2011 also saw the launch of Parks Canada's Xplorers programme. Xplorers is designed for children between 6 and 11 years old and their families. The programme encourages participants to discover and connect with the parks they visit in their own way through a wide variety of activity options. Once they complete the programme, they receive a certificate and a souvenir. Activities are different at every place and most national parks use some activities as an opportunity to introduce themes and messages related to conservation. The programme allows participants to customize their experience, since completion is based on a selection of

available activities. The programme is in place in 43 Parks Canada locations and in the first year, there were 78,000 participants. It was expanded to more than 60 parks in 2012 with more than 100,000 participants. Xplorers responds directly to input from urban Canadian parents, who desire experiences that appeal to their children, are educational and can be enjoyed by the whole family.

To meet the needs of visitors seeking a more comfortable and accessible camping experience, Parks Canada has started to offer diversified accommodation experiences. In 2011, the Agency developed guidelines to help Parks, Sites and Conservation Areas modernize their accommodation offer and adapt to changing demands and markets. In association with those guidelines, a number of tools have been developed to help managers in the field make sound decisions and to facilitate the implementation of diversified accommodation options. These include a fee structure, a unique accommodation offer (the Parks Canada oTENTik) exclusive to Parks Canada, and a facilitated financial analysis tool to ensure diversified accommodation is offered on a cost-recovery basis. There are now unique accommodations in 10 parks across the country and 100 oTENTiks will be added at 10 locations in 2013. Demand for the offer has exceeded expectations. Feedback has been positive and responds to the desire many visitors have for comfort and ease while participating in the unique experiences that only Parks Canada offers.

Parks Canada's efforts to improve visitor experience opportunities across Canada's systems of national parks, historic sites and marine conservation areas are having a positive impact on Canadians and the Agency. The trend of declining visitation has been reversed in national parks and marine conservation areas with visitation growing from 11.9 million in 2008 to 12.5 million in 2011. At national historic sites, there have been some success stories at specific sites, but the overall trend has not been reversed. Despite this, it is clear that new offers, events and activities are in demand and generating visitation leading to positive experiences. Examples include Halloween programming at Lower Fort Garry NHS in Manitoba; an Aboriginal weekend at Rocky Mountain House NHS in Alberta; the cranberry festival in Fort Langley NHS in British Columbia; the murder mystery evenings at Les Forges du Saint-Maurice and the Farmer's Market in Coteau-du-Lac, national historic sites in Quebec.

Work to improve the opportunities that are meaningful and memorable for visitors is also happening in other

areas. Parks Canada's Quality Visitor Experience training programme continues to bring the visitor experience concept and related service standards to all employees. A visitor-centred approach is integrated with interpretive planning tools through professional education and interpretive product development. Parks Canada also has significantly enhanced their social media presence on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. In all these cases, the core concepts of Visitor Experience and understanding current and potential visitors is key to the decision making process.

CONCLUSION

Stakeholders from other park systems can take several important lessons from this case study. Of primary importance is well-executed social science. All park agencies need to make a commitment to engage in and support social science research, conducted either internally or by research partners. Humans significantly affect biodiversity; knowledge of humans and their processes is equal in importance to the study of natural elements and processes. While Parks Canada has access to significant resources to fund national surveys and partnerships with private sector research partners, alternative, lower cost approaches to learning about visitors and non-visitors can be achieved through partnerships with universities, ENGOs, donor agencies and so on. Second, social science needs to be fully integrated into the planning, management and operations of protected areas. Good science is not effective if it is not applied in a holistic and systematic manner. At the heart of Parks Canada's visitor experience approach is a commitment to integrate knowledge about visitors and non-visitors with other facets of park management. Third, evaluation of the effectiveness of new programmes, such as the visitor experience programme, needs to have well-constructed indicators, and political and financial commitment to measure outcomes on an on-going basis. Parks Canada's commitment to monitoring learning, connection, number of visitors, visitor satisfaction, enjoyment, and conducting Visitor Experience Assessments, is an example of this. Finally, recognition that visitors are not a problem, but an opportunity to push forward the biodiversity conservation agenda worldwide needs to be embraced by park agencies. Visitation, if managed in a sustainable manner, is a powerful tool for fostering awareness, connections, environmentally friendly behaviour and support for protected areas and biodiversity conservation.

Parks Canada has embraced the concept of visitor experience as vital to the success of the NP, NHS, and

NMCA treasures with which it is entrusted. Integrated with the protection and education elements of its mandate, the focus on visitor experience is how the Agency will ensure these special places are relevant to Canadians now and in the future. The agency has incorporated the visitor experience concept into its corporate direction and its national and local organization structure. It has developed a framework to implement a visitor-focused approach across the organization and it has undertaken national initiatives to improve the visitor experience. The Agency's work is starting to produce results and it will be critical to evaluate this approach over the next five years to ensure that Canada's national heritage protected areas are increasingly relevant to Canadians. Continual appraisal will be essential to evaluating the effectiveness of the visitor experience approach. In addition to monitoring sense of connection, visitor numbers, and visitor satisfaction, additional evaluation of outcomes related to learning and awareness as well as the more difficult to assess leap from connection to support would be valuable. Support is currently assessed by increases and decreases in the number of visitors frequenting Parks Canada's protected areas. More research in this area would help our understanding of the kinds of support that are inspired by the enhanced visitor experiences that are now offered. Support can include personal donations of money, voting patterns, petition writing, membership in parks support groups, and hands-on stewardship such as citizen science and other types of conservation volunteerism. Mapping these outcomes, especially over a longer time period of multiple visitor experience opportunities, would help park managers understand the more profound contributions an emphasis on visitor experience can have on Parks Canada's efforts to meet its mandate, including its work to maintain ecological and commemorative integrity.

Other park agencies throughout the world have engaged in varying degrees of visitor management and planning; however the extensive application of visitor experience theory and practice by Parks Canada is what makes this case study unique. Other park agencies should consider the opportunities the approach presents; the emphasis on visitor experience in tandem with the application of many sophisticated marketing approaches that enable directed outreach to key population segments and facilitate matches between visitors and the experiences they are seeking, can generate greater returns for biodiversity conservation and achievement of the Aichi targets.

NOTE

This paper presents an update to information provided about Parks Canada's visitor experiences programmes detailed in "Managing for Visitor Experiences in Canada's National Heritage Places", published in the Jager, E. et al., (2006). *IUCN Parks Magazine*, 16(2): 18-24, and Jager, E. and Sanche A. (2010). "Setting the Stage for Visitor Experiences in Canada's National Heritage Places," published in *The George Wright Forum*, 17 (2): 180-190.

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RESUMEN

Desde 2005, Parks Canada ha venido afrontando el reto de seguir siendo relevante para los canadienses. Las visitas al sistema de parques nacionales, sitios históricos y áreas marinas de conservación de Canadá han disminuido, debido en parte a un contexto social cambiante. La agencia Parks Canada cree que promoviendo las visitas se incrementará el aprecio y la conexión de la gente con los parques de Canadá. Se sugiere que esto podría devenir en un mayor apoyo para el sistema de sitios del patrimonio natural y cultural de Canadá. Parks Canada ha adoptado el concepto de experiencia del visitante para ayudar a contrarrestar esta disminución en las visitas. Junto con los elementos de protección y educación de su mandato, el enfoque basado en la experiencia del visitante contribuirá a fomentar el interés de los canadienses en estos lugares especiales, ahora y en el futuro. Este artículo describe cómo se integra la experiencia del visitante en el mandato de Parks Canada y cómo se lleva a la práctica en cada una de sus

áreas protegidas. El documento analiza la labor de la agencia para mejorar la experiencia del visitante en todos sus parques y pone de relieve cómo se evalúan los resultados derivados de dicha iniciativa. Las visitas a los parques, los ingresos que ello produce y la sensibilización y conexión con la biodiversidad generada entre los usuarios de los parques es un objetivo importante para todos los países. La participación de Parks Canada en la investigación en ciencias sociales y la aplicación avanzada de un enfoque basado en la experiencia del visitante para la gestión de los parques ofrece ejemplos de buenas prácticas que podrían ayudar a otros países para el logro de las metas de Aichi.

RÉSUMÉ

La reconnaissance officielle de dizaines de milliers d'aires protégées pour répondre à l'Objectif 11 d'Aichi augmentera en conséquence les besoins en gestion compétente. La plupart de ces aires protégées s'appuieront sur le tourisme et la fréquentation pour au moins une partie du financement nécessaire à leur gestion, également préconisé dans l'Objectif 11. La gestion du tourisme et de la fréquentation demande un certain nombre de compétences indispensables qui offrent des cadres de direction. Ces compétences incluent la pensée stratégique, la planification et les domaines opérationnels. Il est peu probable que l'enseignement supérieur offre, à court-terme, les compétences éducatives nécessaires. Il est donc indispensable de développer des programmes de formation continue et des communautés de pratique afin de répondre à ce besoin.