
**COMMENTS ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION'S
GATINEAU PARK OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES DRAFT PLAN**

17 FEBRUARY 2012

The Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) is pleased to have this opportunity to provide comments to the NCC as it develops its Gatineau Park Outdoor Activities Plan.

Recreational visitors to Gatineau Park expect a positive recreational experience in a well-preserved natural environment. The park is already very heavily used. As the population of Ottawa-Gatineau continues to increase dramatically, we can anticipate even heavier visitation and usage. Unless very carefully managed, the inevitable results will be degraded and fragmented ecosystems and a loss of visitor enjoyment.

Our general position is to support initiatives that maintain and restore Gatineau Park's natural environment and preserve and enhance its valued ecosystems while still supporting respectful recreation. We strongly support the NCC's vision for Gatineau Park, as defined in its Gatineau Park Master Plan (2005) and Gatineau Park Ecosystem Protection Plan (2010). Preservation and restoration of the park's natural environment must be the NCC's first priority. Gatineau Park must be managed first and foremost for its ecological integrity, and this will necessarily impact the practice of outdoor activities in the park.

Hiking and the Trail Network

Any expansion of the network of official trails in the park should be undertaken conservatively and with extreme caution so as to not cause ecological fragmentation or other environmental damage or increase conflicts with other users. The density of trails is already quite high in certain geographical areas, such as the heart of the park. There may be an opportunity to develop a trail in Meech Creek Valley and to perhaps formalize several existing unofficial trails on the west side of the park (for example, from trailheads on Pilon Road and Steele Line Road) and elsewhere. New trails should be respectful of the natural environment; they should be narrow, have a natural – not gravelled – surface, with stepping stones or simple wooden bridges – not culverts – only when absolutely necessary.

Several recent actions that restrict public access to the park in certain areas are dubious. For example, in the Wakefield area there will be no pedestrian access provided across the new section of Autoroute 5 when it is completed; this will discourage local tourism from the Wakefield Mill and other accommodation in the Wakefield area. Brown's Lake has been a popular destination for walkers for decades.

The regional offer of hiking and walking opportunities outside of the park – especially those accessible by sustainable transportation methods – should be publicized to reduce the stress on the park’s trails.

Unofficial Trails

With an estimated 200 km of unofficial trails in the park, there is a need to better understand the current situation. The network of unofficial trails should be inventoried and mapped. The most popular trails should be studied and evaluated to better grasp user appeal, destinations, environmental impacts, etc. (Perhaps this has been done already?) The resultant information should then be used to determine appropriate action on a trail-by-trail basis – e.g., close the trail, ignore it, or make it an official trail. A campaign should then be initiated to raise user awareness about the potential environmental impacts of using closed trails.

Trail Maintenance Standards

Maintenance standards for Gatineau Park trails should be reviewed and updated to reflect current best practices for Class II protected areas. Many of the trail “improvements” implemented in recent years have been misguided and unfortunate. These include trail widening and levelling, smoothing out bumps, digging deep ditches, installing aluminum culverts, and graveling the trail surface. (A prime example is trail #3.) The trail becomes a road – which kills any sense of wilderness and seriously degrades the user’s experience. Gravelled roads are not only unpleasant to walk on, but can be more prone to erosion than foot-packed earth paths, especially on steep sections. (The severe erosion of trail #56 on 24 June 2011 is a prime example.) Aluminum culverts are ugly and may impede the free movement of aquatic species.

Several of the trails (notably Wolf Trail) are seriously degraded from inadequate design and over-use and now require major restoration.

Trails should be improved utilizing such practices as re-routing around wet areas to avoid trail-widening, the installation of water bars where appropriate to reduce erosion, and providing stepping stones, wooden planks or simple wooden bridges over streams.

Volunteers could be involved in trail maintenance – e.g., National Trails Day.

Mountain Biking

Many, if not most, of the conflicts between trail users in Gatineau Park occur between mountain bikers and hikers – often on trails where mountain biking is expressly not authorized. Mountain biking causes considerable environmental damage, especially on unauthorized trails – trails which are often narrow, steep and pass through wet areas. The network of mountain biking trails in Gatineau Park should not be expanded. Current regulations pertaining to respectful mountain biking, especially beyond the Camp Fortune circuit, should be better enforced.

The NCC should work with area municipalities and other groups to identify mountain biking opportunities outside the park.

Road Biking and the Parkway Network

Cycling on the parkway network should be encouraged and promoted to visitors as an ideal way to experience the park. The parkways should be closed to motor vehicle traffic for a longer period of time on Sundays – until at least 1 pm – to provide a safer, more positive experience for cyclists. Speed limits should be enforced to enhance cyclist safety. The parkways should be closed to motor vehicle traffic during the morning and evening rush hours to prevent their use for commuting. They should also be closed to motor vehicles at night to reduce wildlife mortality.

The width of the pavement is more than adequate for user safety. The grassy shoulders should not be paved, nor should the roadways be widened.

Cross-Country Skiing

No new parking lots should be constructed in Gatineau Park to address the shortage of parking at certain parking lots during peak ski season. The parking issue must be addressed under the Sustainable Transportation Plan.

The network of groomed trails is large and should not be increased, with one exception: With the impending closure of Boul. Gamelin, the Gatineau Parkway between Boul. Alexandre-Taché and Boul. Gamelin should be closed to traffic in the winter and groomed, like the rest of the parkway network, for skate skiing. A parking area outside the park on or near Boul. Alexandre-Taché would be necessary.

The offer for backcountry skiing should be increased, at least to former levels. Backcountry ski trails require no grooming and hence are much less expensive to offer than groomed trails. In recent years, several of the most popular backcountry ski trails in Gatineau Park have been re-identified as snowshoe trails (e.g., the former trail #16, Blanchet, from P13 to Ridge Road, and the trails from Brown Lake to Carmen Trails) or groomed ski trails (e.g., trail #6, Skyline). These trails should revert to their former designations. For trail #16, a separate snowshoe trail through the trees could be marked alongside. This can be done effectively with next to no environmental impact and no conflicts between user groups (as is done, for example, along the Corridor Aérobique in Morin-Heights).

The capacity of the current day-use shelters should not be increased. McKinstry cabin should be renovated to improve its appearance and brightness, as was done to Western cabin several years ago.

To take some of the pressure off the parkway network and Keogan cabin, skate skiers wishing a good workout for training purposes should be encouraged to use the much-underutilized “training course” at Camp Fortune. The existing building near the biathlon range could be renovated to serve as a warming hut.

No additional infrastructure to support cross-country skiing should be built in the park – e.g., no heated ski departure areas, no waxing rooms, no snack bars. Such developments, if deemed necessary, should be conceived, developed, owned and managed by private enterprises outside the park in the adjacent municipalities. One possible exception is at Relais Plein Air, in an area of the park already lost to urbanization. A facility could be placed in the existing parking lot, provided that the parking lot is not expanded and that no additional park land is lost to development.

Cross-country skiing opportunities outside of the park should be publicized. These include the Greenbelt, Nakkertok, and the newly protected and undiscovered areas at Mont O'Brien and Mont Sainte-Marie north of the park.

Snowshoeing

Snowshoeing should be encouraged as it does not require groomed trails and only a minimum of trail maintenance. It is an ideal activity for outdoor education and nature observation and interpretation. Expansion of snowshoe programs – for example, in conjunction with local nature groups or the Friends of Gatineau Park – could be a means of reaching some of the identified under-represented demographic groups, as it is relatively inexpensive and easy compared to some other activities.

The current offering for snowshoeing in the park is inadequate; P15 on Cross-Loop Road is often full on weekends and the trail to Healy cabin is overused. Any additional snowshoe trails should be located away from cross-country ski trails wherever practical.

Water-based Activities

We support the total phase-out of motorized boats on Meech Lake and Lac La Pêche. Meech and Kingsmere lakes must remain accessible to the public for boating and swimming.

The many and varied canoeing and kayaking opportunities outside of the park should be publicized. This includes stretches of the Ottawa, Gatineau, and Rideau rivers in the urban area, as well as the innumerable numerous rivers and lakes beyond the cities.

Rock Climbing

We support the agreement reached between the NCC and the climbing community in 2010. Climbing should not be expanded beyond the areas covered by this agreement.

Caving

Impacts on Lusk Cave and its cave-associated species should be studied. The activity should not be expanded. Educational opportunities should be considered.

Picnicking

Picnic areas and associated parking lots should not be expanded to accommodate more users or larger groups. Trees provide shade from the sun and protection from ultraviolet rays.

Nature Observation and Birdwatching:

Ample opportunities for birdwatching and nature observation exist throughout the park. No additional or expanded facilities (buildings or parking lots) should be provided. Brochures and pamphlets should be made available (see Education and Interpretation, below).

Geo-caching and Orienteering:

We should recognize and accept that Gatineau Park is too small and too sensitive to offer every kind of recreational experience that visitors may desire, now or in the future. Geo-caching and orienteering may be two activities the park cannot offer. The nature of these activities is such that practitioners are tempted to stray off trails and possibly into ecologically sensitive areas. The impacts of these activities need to be monitored and their compatibilities with conservation objectives re-evaluated.

Horseback Riding

We support relocation of the equestrian trail along the Eardley Escarpment to outside of the park.

Downhill Skiing and Camp Fortune

While part of Gatineau Park, Camp Fortune is often (perhaps conveniently?) ignored or downplayed in discussions of protecting the park's ecosystems. It is a blight on the park. The downhill ski area is inconsistent with the park's ecosystem conservation objectives and incompatible with a protected area. It uses a large amount of land for ski runs, parking, and related infrastructure, and consumes significant resources for snow-making and lighting. Its footprint should not be expanded. The ski hill's infrastructure is aging. The future of Camp Fortune should be the subject of discussions with the public and area stakeholders, and a decision taken on its future, prior to the expiry of the current lease.

Overnight Accommodations

The supply of overnight accommodations in the park – campsites, yurts, and cabins – should not be increased. No “glamping” facilities should be constructed. The provision of additional accommodations by private enterprise in the local municipalities surrounding the park, such as Gatineau's Hull sector, Old Chelsea, Wakefield, and Masham, should be encouraged.

Education and Interpretation

There is a significant opportunity for improved education and interpretation in the park. Additional interpretative panels, such as were installed along the Trans Canada Trail in the park several years ago, should be installed. Topics could include native fauna and flora, species at risk, stresses on the park, natural processes, and cultural sites. (The interpretative panels at Forêt LaBlanche are an excellent example.) Trail guides (pamphlets, perhaps produced in conjunction with the Friends of Gatineau Park) could be available at all major trailheads.

Opportunities to support visitors who are unfamiliar with the park should be explored. Perhaps a volunteer program with the Friends of Gatineau Park could offer support services for a fee. This could include a shuttle bus service for transporting small groups who wish to visit certain areas or sites. The net proceeds could be used to support conservation programs and to expand the service.

Fee Structure

The current fee structure for outdoor recreational activities is grossly inequitable – for example, back-country cross-country skiers pay \$170 per year to ski on ungroomed trails, whereas hikers and snowshoers pay \$0. Greater equity between user groups should be an immediate goal, not a medium-term strategy. The fee structure should strongly encourage the use of sustainable transportation methods to access the park and favour those users who reach the park on foot or by bicycle.

Enforcement of Regulations

The NCC and its conservation officers must be given the legal authority to enforce park regulations pertaining to permitted and prohibited recreational activities.

Offerings Outside of the Park

More recreational services could be developed in ecological corridors – currently being defined and hopefully soon formalized – outside of and connecting to Gatineau Park. For example, if there is a demand for longer cross-country ski trails, the trail network could be expanded to include new trails outside the park. Such trails could originate in a village outside of the park, tie into the existing trail network in the park, and terminate in a different village outside the park. Skiers would be able to avail themselves of services (e.g., restaurants, B&B accommodations) in these villages and experience the natural beauty of Gatineau Park – without having to drive to go skiing. This would encourage tourism and longer stays, boosting the economies of the local municipalities around the park. A similar approach could be taken for hiking and snowshoeing trails.

Any trail development in ecological corridors should be carefully planned and managed so as to not impede their use and function as ecological corridors.

Active partnership with area municipalities, tourist organizations and outdoor recreational groups is necessary to increase the awareness of and encourage the use of recreational opportunities and facilities outside Gatineau Park.

Universal Accessibility

Although data are not presented, the mobility-impaired may be a forth category of under-represented clients. Accessible activities and sites in Gatineau Park should be better publicized.

Concluding Remarks

CPAWS-OV believes that the public should continue to access Gatineau Park for the pursuit of outdoor activities compatible with a protected area. We are opposed to any further developments in Gatineau Park. No additional infrastructure to support outdoor activities/recreation should be built in the park. Roads, parking lots and other built facilities should not be expanded to meet increasing levels of visitation.

The NCC should work with the operators of other parks and protected areas in the region to encourage Gatineau Park users to explore these areas.

We look forward to working with the NCC in finalizing this plan. We remain available to meet with you to provide further information or clarifications with respect to our comments. Please feel free to contact us at (613) 232-7297 or by email (jmcdonnell@cpaws.org) to arrange a meeting.