

A Progressive Vision for Meech Creek Valley in Gatineau Park





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Introduction

Gatineau Park is situated in the Southern Laurentians of Quebec, in close proximity to Canada's fourth largest urban area, Ottawa-Gatineau. It is registered as an IUCN Category II protected area, for which nature conservation is the highest priority. Due to the park's high biodiversity and other features, management must adhere to the recognized international standards specified in the Natural Heritage Conservation Act.

The Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) has long been concerned about development pressures on Gatineau Park and its surroundings, due largely to the park's proximity to the ever-expanding city of Gatineau. The expansion of the road network, residential housing, shopping centres, and commercial development fragment the park's ecosystems and isolate them from other natural areas.

The Meech Creek Valley has great importance for landscape connectivity, high value as a key component of an ecological corridor between Gatineau Park and the Gatineau River, and high potential for ecological restoration. However, this area will be seriously impacted by the Autoroute 5 extension and is threatened by proposals for agritourism and other developments within the valley and an adjacent industrial park.



Geographic Setting

Meech Creek Valley is a 9.2 km² area of fields and forested land located in the eastern portion of Gatineau Park between Chelsea and Wakefield, Quebec.

The bedrock of the area is Precambrian granites and gneisses of the Grenville Province of the Canadian Shield. Minerals in the area include mica, graphite, magnetite and molybdenum. Glacio-fluvial material called till were laid down by continental glaciers 10,000 years ago. The till is primarily gravel, sand and boulders overlain by marine clays. Bedrock exposures can be seen in the sector north of Pine Road. The terrain is rolling and highly variable, which contributes to its present-day scenic value.

The soils in the area are humo-ferric podsols, which developed under a deciduous and mixed forest. In the absence of forest cover, these acidic silt-clay soils in the valley are sensitive to disturbance and are difficult to cultivate due to the undulating surface and steep slopes. The limitations for cultivation resulted in sparse financial returns for the original farming community.



The open fields have been used primarily for grazing cattle and for hay production. The bottom lands near the creek bed have suffered from erosion and slumping due to past agricultural activity.

Meech Creek drains the chain of three large lakes (Philippe, Mousseau and Meech), flowing northward from the south end of Meech Lake then northeast to the Gatineau River. This drainage system has played a dramatic role in shaping the valley for thousands of years. The upper reaches of the creek near Meech Lake flow through a rugged, steep-sided and heavily forested valley. This area is ecologically very important. The outlet of Meech Lake is dammed, and further downstream the remains of another dam, associated with the Thomas “Carbide” Willson ruins, partially blocks the flow of Meech Creek. These ruins are an important historical feature occupying both sides of the rocky gorge.

Another much smaller watershed associated with Brown and Carman lakes lies in the north end of Meech Creek Valley in Gatineau Park. Drainage is southward, joining Meech Creek near the covered bridge on Cross Loop Road. Local information suggests that an important aquifer is part of the watershed, and that construction of Autoroute 5 may cause irreversible damage to this ecosystem.

Gatineau Park is situated in the northern temperate vegetation zone, dominated by broadleaf and mixed wood stands. Most areas are covered with a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees typical of the zone, such as sugar maple, red oak, basswood, yellow birch, white birch, hemlock, white pine, balsam fir and white spruce. The riparian forests and wetland complexes of Meech Creek Valley have particularly important ecological characteristics that were impacted by over 100 years of farming. Reduced land usage in recent decades has permitted some recovery of the ecosystem, and the area has high potential for complete restoration. Numerous mature woodlands and wetlands exist in the valley. Biodiversity is high in several areas. There is at least one federally threatened plant species (*Panax quinquefolia*), and additional surveys are required to identify other species and habitats of concern. Populations of birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles are quite diverse.

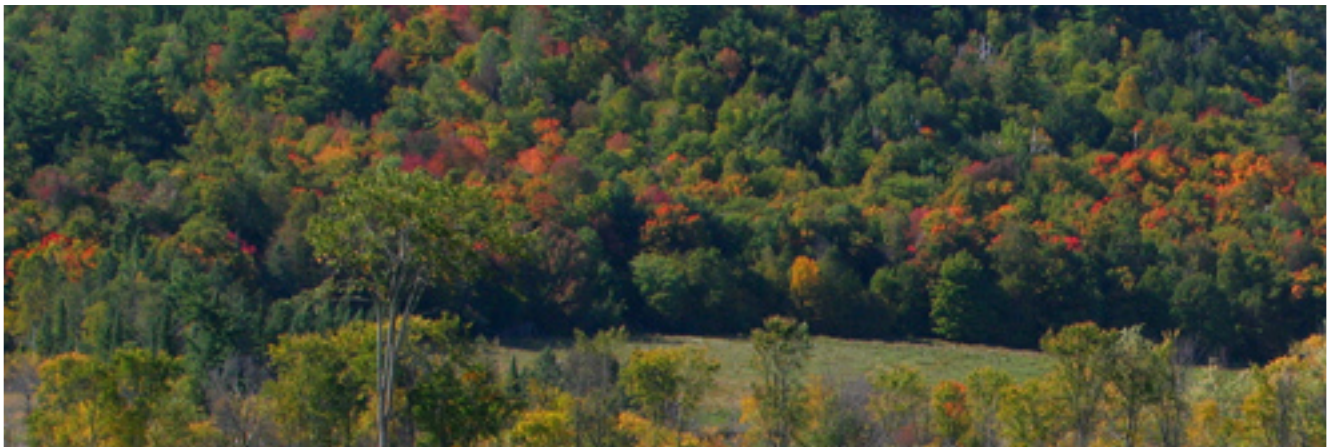
Much of the upper valley (near Meech Lake) has recovered significantly from early timber cutting and agriculture, and now appears quite pristine. Steep upland rocky areas were not extensively grazed and therefore remained more natural. Significant natural regeneration has occurred. The slopes of the valley are covered with large sugar maple, yellow birch, red oak, hemlock and striped maple. The forest floor has an abundance of ferns, club mosses, trilliums and wild leeks. The condition of the upper valley gives some indication of the possibilities for restoring the lower Meech Creek Valley to the extent that it could have “high ecological value”.

Historical Context

Gatineau Park and the surrounding region were forested lands occupied by Algonquin peoples prior to the arrival of and settlement by Europeans. A preliminary archaeological assessment has been carried out for Meech Creek Valley. Archaeological resources, including any remains of the early Algonquin culture, require a high degree of protection.

Most of the original forest of Meech Creek Valley was harvested for timber and firewood in the 1800s and then cleared for agriculture. It soon became a landscape representing a typical farming community of the Gatineau River basin. Ten or more farms were expropriated by the Quebec Government in the mid-1970s to create a zoo. Thankfully, this project did not materialize. As farming was gradually discontinued, the majority of the original farm buildings collapsed or were removed. Those remaining are in poor repair. Some land was leased for cattle grazing until recently, and hay continues to be harvested. Other historical land uses in the valley have included mining, a gravel/sand quarry near Carman Lake, and landfills for domestic waste and large appliances. An aircraft landing strip occupied a site off Cafferty Road, but is no longer in operation. Some limited farming and residential use continues through leases.

The grazing of cattle was discontinued around 2002; this has allowed limited recovery of the creek's riparian zone and improvements in water quality. A large part of the valley has been maintained as hay fields and fallow land. There is growing pressure to develop an area around Carman Lake with a housing subdivision; several building permits have already been approved by the Municipality of Chelsea.



In 1994 a contiguous 634 hectare portion of Meech Creek Valley was acquired by the National Capital Commission (NCC) in a complex transaction involving a cash payment and a land exchange with the Commun  t   urbaine de l'Outaouais. In the early stages of planning, developments such as a hotel, golf course and housing were considered. In 1998, the Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept proposed the development of a recreation/tourism attraction in the valley in order to contribute to the regional economy.

The valley was deemed to have high potential for development, given its site characteristics, notably good drainage and a lack of forest cover, and its prime location within Gatineau Park, near the Gatineau River and midway between Old Chelsea and Wakefield.

The Meech Creek Valley is presently an important area for hiking, bicycling, skiing and snowshoeing, with trails radiating out to other areas of the park. Popular destinations are Lac Philippe, Meech Lake, the historic Healey and Herridge farmsteads, and Brown Lake. A section of the TransCanada Trail runs from Wakefield past Meech Lake and through the south portion of the park.

Previous Public Consultation

Fourteen years ago, in June 1997, a public consultation on the Meech Creek Valley was held in Old Chelsea. The NCC and the Municipality of Chelsea jointly convened another public workshop in April 1998 to solicit input on preserving and enhancing the landscape and the ecological integrity of the valley. These public consultations yielded a wide range of responses but little consensus as to how Meech Creek Valley should be managed. At those meetings, participants expressed little public support for residential development. There were calls for preserving some of the open landscapes, but there was no broad public support for maintaining the rural landscape in its present state. Some participants showed significant support for no development, and suggested that the fields should be allowed to regenerate naturally. Others supported recreational and educational opportunities and some agricultural uses. Significant scepticism was expressed regarding the economic viability of proposed agritourism developments.

The Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept (1998)

The Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept was released in 1998, soon after the public consultation. This concept presents the shared ambition of the NCC and the Municipality of Chelsea to develop 20% of Meech Creek Valley with “recreational/tourism services and activities.” Proposed developments include interpretation facilities, restaurants, inns, shops, galleries and a riding stable. A further 20% is designated for “agricultural activities or other uses that will maintain the open landscape.” Potential agricultural uses include grazing and hay production. Future development plans submitted by proponents will provide more specific details.

The Municipality of Chelsea was tasked with revising its Municipal Plan and zoning Meech Creek Valley according to the terms of the Land Use Concept, even though the land is considered to be part of Gatineau Park. It seems apparent that the municipality will be involved in the completion of a comprehensive development plan for the valley. CPAWS-OV is strongly opposed to this initiative and maintains that the municipality should not have any responsibility for managing federal lands or establishing zoning for Gatineau Park, and most certainly should not be given any authority to manage the area through a long-term lease. The municipality is overly interested in development, which is contrary to the public interest for wise management of Gatineau Park. Municipal approvals are already heavily impacting the water quality and ecology of Meech Lake, and municipal goals are not harmonized with the conservation goals established for the park. Housing development was approved for the Carman Lake area, which is contrary to the stated intention of the NCC to acquire all land within the proposed boundaries for park purposes.

Following the release of the Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept, no effort was made to determine if interest groups supported the concept. The public and special interest groups have not been consulted further regarding development plans for Meech Creek Valley, and the current status of these plans has not been made clear. However, the NCC has actively contributed to the planning of the Autoroute 5 extension where it crosses public lands managed by the NCC. An interchange in Meech Creek Valley was requested by the NCC in 2008 to facilitate public access to Cross Loop Road and the northern portion of the valley.

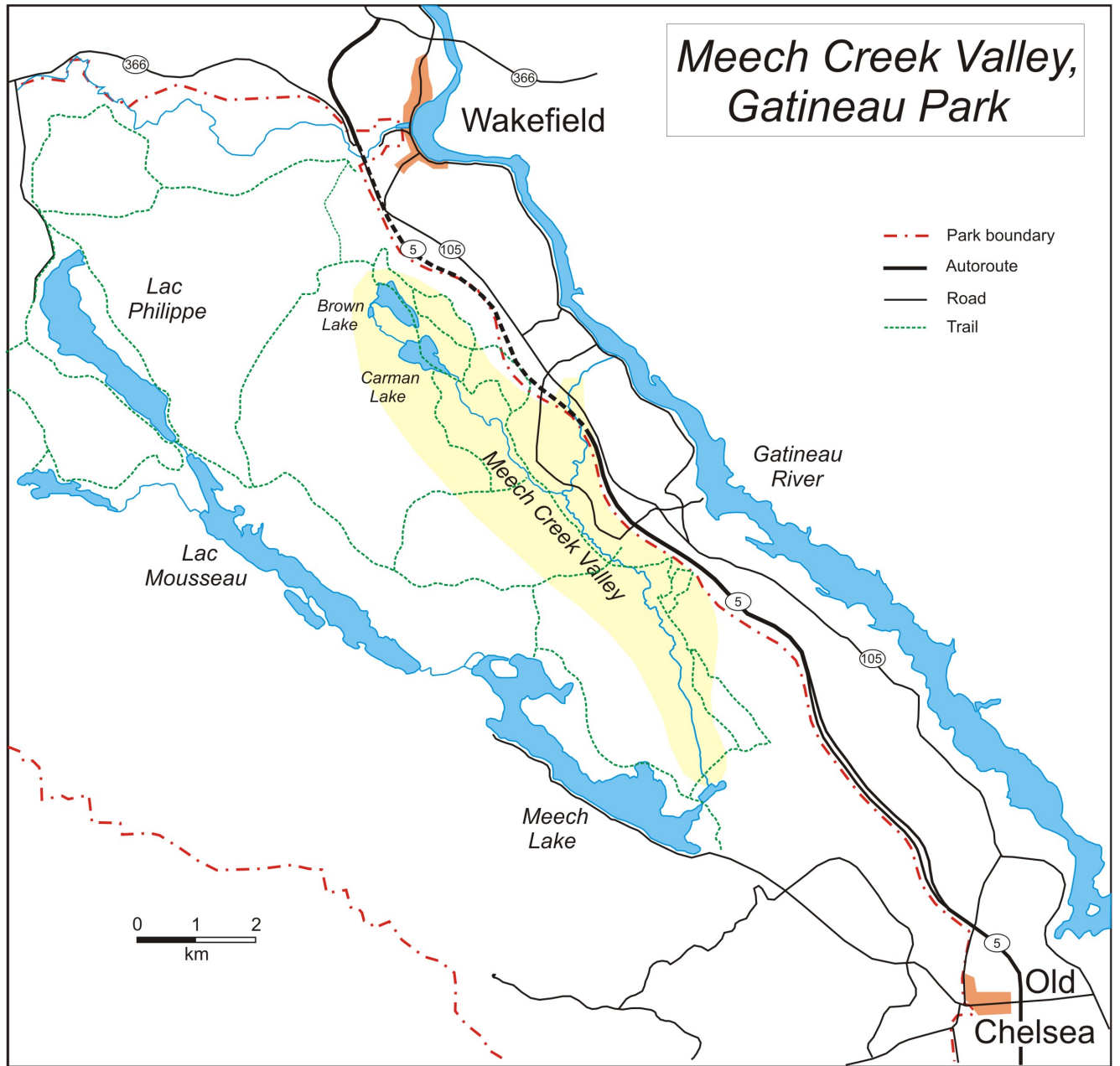
CPAWS-OV opposes this interchange as it will provide a rationale for proceeding with the development plans for the valley described in the Land Use Concept.

The large scale of this divided highway and its encroachment on Gatineau Park lands is of great concern, and does not bode well for protecting the valley and maintaining its rural character. Potential parkland will be transferred to the province to support highway development. Extensive clear-cutting of the forest will be required and wetlands will be permanently lost. The new highway will create a “hard” boundary to this portion of Gatineau Park. It appears that no provisions have been made to ensure landscape connectivity and wildlife corridors to the Gatineau River. There is a significant risk that this new highway will contribute greatly to the ecological isolation of Gatineau Park.

CPAWS-OV opposes the Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept (1998). This plan is extremely outdated, and inconsistent with recent planning and modern thinking on the management of protected areas. It does not reflect the will of the general public that this important natural area should be fully protected within the boundaries of Gatineau Park. Much of what is proposed is contrary to the intent of the Gatineau Park Master Plan (2005) and the Gatineau Park Ecosystem Conservation Plan (2010).



Map of Meech Creek Valley



Planning Context

Legislation

The federal government has not yet passed legislation to protect Gatineau Park. In 1973 the Quebec Government gave Gatineau Park legal status as a provincial game preserve. The Quebec Government's Department of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks has also registered Gatineau Park as a "Protected Area," and has designated it an IUCN Category II park. The Quebec Natural Heritage Act (section 6) states:

Land within a protected area that is entered in the register provided for in section 5 cannot be assigned to a new use, be sold or exchanged or be the subject of a transaction that affects its protection status, unless the Minister of the Environment has been consulted.

The NCC has stated that it will manage Gatineau Park as an IUCN Category II protected area. This should preclude developments such as those proposed in the 1998 Concept. Unfortunately, the park is yet to be defined in the National Capital Act or any federal statute as a protected area. Boundaries are not legislated and changes can be made without any parliamentary oversight. Adjacent lands managed by the NCC, but not included in Gatineau Park, are particularly vulnerable as they have no special status and can be developed, sold or exchanged at will.

When the federal government introduced Bill C-37, An Act to Amend the National Capital Act, there was optimism that a suitably amended bill could have strengthened protection for Gatineau Park. Unfortunately, C-37 died on the order paper when the House of Commons was prorogued in 2009. The bill has been reintroduced as Bill C-20; however the question of federal legislation is still uncertain.

Gatineau Park Master Plan (2005)

The 2005 Gatineau Park Master Plan identifies a principal concern: urban development and roads are changing and fragmenting the park. At the present rate development will soon encircle the south and east sides of the park, and buffer zones will be obliterated. To address this concern, the NCC has wisely stated it wishes to limit development of new infrastructure and activities to projects that contribute positively to resource conservation.

The plans for Meech Creek Valley outlined in the 1998 Land Use Concept are confirmed in the Master Plan. The valley is zoned "agrotourism [*sic*] and conservation." Agricultural uses (e.g., hay production, cattle grazing, market gardening) are permitted. A stated objective is "the implementation of recreational and tourist projects (agro-tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism)." Possible developments could include facilities for horseback riding or an agricultural theme park. These developments would be in addition to the envisioned visitor services, inns, restaurants, shops and galleries.

The "agrotourism [*sic*] and conservation" zoning is totally inappropriate for a protected area; agritourism and conservation of nature are incompatible land uses. CPAWS-OV believes that the paramount goals should be nature conservation and ecological restoration of the entire valley, and that the zoning designation should be changed to "conservation and restoration." Commercial developments belong in the nearby communities, such as Wakefield and Old Chelsea. Agritourism activities could be more appropriately developed on farmland near the park or at the Moore Farm in Gatineau.

There have been no studies to evaluate the potential appeal of visitor attractions related to farming heritage or agritourism in an area where farming has had only marginal success in the past and has been discontinued. The NCC is overly focussed on the recent cultural landscapes and farming heritage, rather than more appropriate scenarios that relate to aboriginal history or restoring significant ecosystems. Meech Creek Valley has very high potential for ecological restoration because it is not developed and farming has been largely discontinued.

Developing up to 40% of Meech Creek Valley is clearly contrary to the intent of the Master Plan to establish Gatineau Park as “the Capital’s conservation park.” Built structures are particularly inappropriate as they result in a large permanent footprint on the landscape that will remain for generations. Development begets yet more development. It is inevitable that conservation goals and objectives will remain a low priority if the valley is developed with commercial businesses and/or tourist attractions.

Gatineau Park Ecosystem Conservation Plan (2010)

The Gatineau Park Ecosystem Conservation Plan states that growing pressure from human activities and the fragmentation of habitat due to built infrastructure are major concerns. Wildlife corridors and landscape connectivity are identified as important features of Gatineau Park, and yet one of the best wildlife corridors will be seriously impacted if much of Meech Creek Valley is developed. The conservation plan states that “forest ecosystems are regressing in the peripheral areas.” It makes more sense to restore the forests in the peripheral areas, since forcing more development into these areas will fragment the ecosystems even further.

Human impacts have been high in Meech Creek Valley. The valley has suffered from erosion and eutrophication of the creek, so naturalizing the stream corridor is important. The priority should be restoration of aquatic ecosystems, not more intensive development. Riparian ecosystems are extremely important to the park’s ecosystems, and the valley is ultimately an important ecological corridor for wildlife. The Ecosystem Conservation Plan states that the shorelines of Meech, Mousseau and Phillippe lakes are progressively deteriorating, and much of the damage is caused by erosion from increased use and residential development. Erosion of the shorelines of the “chain of three lakes” is undoubtedly having deleterious effects on the water quality of Meech Creek.

The NCC considers that the most important features of Meech Creek Valley are its distinctive pastoral landscape, its mature forests on the valley slopes, and its riparian habitats on the valley floor. Meech Creek Valley is also a cultural attraction, so a heritage conservation plan should be prepared to establish priorities, objectives, and criteria for establishing appropriate standards.

It is inconceivable that decisions will be made beforehand regarding commercial uses such as inns, stores and restaurants when all these services are offered already in communities such as Chelsea and Wakefield. Most agricultural activity has been discontinued, and after years of dealing with contamination of the creek by cattle, now is an excellent opportunity to restore the natural forests and the watershed rather than pursuing agricultural objectives that will not contribute to the goals of a protected area.

The valley has extremely high potential for wildlife habitat if development is prevented and restoration is undertaken. Many other parts of the park have recovered well from past agricultural uses, and are now considered “valued ecosystems.” If the NCC were to take the long view, Meech Creek Valley could also become a “valued ecosystem” by applying “restoration ecology” principles.



Green Transportation Plan

A green transportation plan is currently being prepared by the NCC to address problems related to traffic congestion in the park – yet the NCC wishes to direct even more traffic into Meech Creek Valley via an interchange off the new Autoroute 5 extension. Creating a secondary visitor reception centre in Meech Creek Valley will attract more visitor traffic. This may be desirable if revenue generation were the principal goal; however, revenue generation is not the principal goal set forth in the Gatineau Park Master Plan. Existing roads such as Cross Loop are currently not designed or maintained to a standard that can accommodate a large increase in traffic exiting from Autoroute 5.

This will mean that major redevelopment of local roads will have to be undertaken to ensure adequate safety, particularly during peak periods of the summer and fall. This will lead to a complete change in the valley's rural character, perhaps even requiring a new bridge adjacent to the historic covered bridge. CPAWS-OV strongly opposes the construction of an interchange on Autoroute 5 to access Meech Creek Valley.



There is growing concern in the area regarding other impacts of Autoroute 5, portions of which will be built on lands managed by the NCC but not included in Gatineau Park. Entrances to the park, such as from Brown Lake Road, will be lost. Highway development and ensuing urban development will contribute to the ecological isolation of the park. The local headwaters and an aquifer associated with Brown and Carman lakes will be severely impacted by the highway development. This has the potential to permanently disrupt local groundwater flow and quality, and ruin the nearby Wakefield spring.

The village of Wakefield will be forever altered by up to 12 lanes of traffic (two highways, on- and off-ramps, etc.) adjacent to the community.

The NCC should be very concerned about the inappropriate scale of this kind of development in the National Capital Region, and how it will affect the character of Gatineau Park and its rural surroundings. The public has not been adequately consulted regarding the major changes being pursued.

Ecological Goods and Services

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the careful consideration of the inherent values and benefits of natural ecosystems and processes and assigning “economic value.” Gatineau Park would be ideal for gathering information and building a model for ecological goods and services provided to the National Capital Region. Applying dollar sums to environmental initiatives is a compelling argument when considering the potential for scenic landscapes, biodiversity, healthy wildlife populations, clean water, clean air and a healthy human population. Environmental protection and sustainable management ought to be measured in real – not abstract – terms, and a long-term view is extremely important when considering the value of self-sustaining ecosystems.

Summary and Conclusions

1. The 1998 Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept plan, if implemented, will have many detrimental effects on Gatineau Park and its surroundings, including:

- increased footprint from buildings, parking lots and related facilities
- fragmentation of ecosystems
- urbanization of the park's perimeter
- increased traffic volumes
- significant increase in visitation
- air, water, light and noise pollution
- disturbance of wildlife movements
- increased conflicts with wildlife
- loss of an important park buffer zone
- loss of rural character
- cumulative impacts

2. CPAWS-OV opposes the current “agrotourism [*sic*] and conservation” zoning for Meech Creek Valley. We feel that the NCC's vision and land use plans for this very important and beautiful area are inappropriate, outdated, and do not reflect the principles defined in the NCC's Master Plan and Ecosystem Conservation Plan.

3. CPAWS-OV is sceptical about the potential for the proposed development to generate significant revenues and feels this is an inappropriate goal. The desire for more revenues in the future will lead to pressure from developers to diversify and expand their influence over public lands in Gatineau Park.

4. CPAWS-OV opposes the transfer of public lands to the Ministère des Transports du Québec for the purpose of extending Autoroute 5 adjacent to Meech Creek Valley and along the border of Gatineau Park.

5. CPAWS-OV opposes the construction of an interchange off Autoroute 5 to serve Meech Creek Valley.

6. CPAWS-OV opposes any initiative that would permit the Municipality of Chelsea to designate zoning and management of lands within Gatineau Park, or any federal lands under the control of the NCC.

Recommendations

1. The entire Meech Creek Valley should be included within the boundaries of Gatineau Park and zoned “conservation and restoration.”

2. Construction of the Autoroute 5 extension should be halted pending further environmental assessment and public consultation.

3. The Meech Creek Valley Land Use Concept (1998) should be abandoned.

4. None of the lands within Meech Creek Valley should be leased to the Municipality of Chelsea or a third party.

5. A detailed conservation plan for Meech Creek Valley, which focuses on restoring the natural landscape and ecosystems and promoting ecological connectivity, should be prepared.

6. Studies should be undertaken to fill information gaps, particularly with regards to flora and fauna. Significant habitats and species of concern should be identified, mapped and protected.
7. No more structures should be built in the valley.
8. The remaining fences should be removed and no new agricultural leases issued.
9. All residential leases should be terminated and the buildings not of significant historical value removed.
10. Accommodations and other visitor services should be provided in existing communities.
11. Viable and compatible recreational attractions that can contribute to the local economy should be built outside Gatineau Park.
12. The remaining private lands around Carman Lake and Brown Lake within Gatineau Park should be acquired on a priority basis before further housing can be approved and developed.
13. The Gatineau Park Master Plan (2005) should be updated to reflect the above-mentioned changes.

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