

2022-11-08

CPAWS-OV Position Statements on Gatineau Park

Compilations of CPAWS-OV's considerations on biodiversity, connectivity, economic value, private properties, transportation and recreation in Gatineau Park.

Executive Summary

Gatineau Park has unique habitats that harbour rich biodiversity, including multiple species at risk. Unfortunately, it is under severe threats from climate change, overuse and misuse, shrinking ecological connectivity and habitat loss. Creating legislation, increasing funding to the National Capital Commission and updating the Park's Conservation Plan would work towards protecting its ecosystem.

Furthermore, ecological corridors are also essential to preserving its habitats. Restoring the connectivity network around Gatineau Park should be a priority.

The most recent study for which we have data estimates the economic impact of Gatineau Park at \$241.5 M per year and its ecosystem value at \$152.6M per year.

Private holdings within the boundaries result in habitat fragmentation, loss of ecosystem integrity, restrictions on public access, damage to riparian zones, lower water quality, and loss of public enjoyment. Therefore, the National Capital Commission should focus on acquiring private lands. CPAWS-OV has advocated for responsible park use that respects NCC rules and regulations. We are promoting engagement between governmental agencies and recreational groups.

Gatineau Park offers limited public transportation. Most visitors use motorized vehicles. Unfortunately, this also means that the Park is not accessible to everyone. Therefore, we request the prohibition of further habitat fragmentation and new parking space creation. CPAWS-OV also urges using a demand-response micro transit and an integrated interprovincial transit strategy.

To ensure that Gatineau Park remains intact for future generations, CPAWS-OV calls for the creation of a bill that would:

- Establish Gatineau Park in legislation;
- Ensure that ecological integrity is a priority, and;
- Stipulate that changes to Gatineau Park boundaries can only be made by parliamentary approval.

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Background

The mission of the Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) is to protect and preserve biodiversity in the Ottawa Valley by promoting and advocating for ecological integrity in the management of public lands, working with other local and regional environmental groups, and collaborating with Indigenous Communities, industries and governments. We were established in 1970 when a group of concerned citizens learned about development plans for Gatineau Park. We have since become involved in many issues regarding wilderness protection in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec. Over 50 years later, CPAWS-OV is still concerned about the ecological integrity of Gatineau Park and is working towards preserving its ecosystems.

By securing protection for Gatineau Park, we benefit our local communities and economies and honour our history. We provide recreational opportunities in a natural environment and ensure that the diverse and complex ecosystems of the National Capital Region are protected into the distant future, including the endangered species that depend on our stewardship. Using our expertise, we have compiled information on the issues and considerations of the Park and its management.

Biodiversity

Gatineau Park is unique because it is a convergence point of multiple varied habitats not found anywhere else. It occurs in the transition zone between the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield to the north and the eastern temperate forest of the St. Lawrence Lowlands to the south, with the Eardley Escarpment at the exact junction of the two. Mostly forested, the Park also has over 50 water bodies, from lakes to ponds, that dot its landscape.

This habitat diversity is also reflected in the high number of species found in its 361 sq. km; more than 1100 plants, 17 amphibians and 230 bird species have been documented. It is estimated that around 1200 whitetail deer, 200 black bears and eight wolves exist in the Park. Overall, it provides habitat for 27% of all plant and vertebrate species found in Canada and more than 40% of those found in Quebec and Ontario.

Notably, Gatineau Park is also home to 150 species of plants and animals of conservation concern in Québec and Canada, including twenty-three officially listed as endangered. Government experts have identified these animals and plants as likely to disappear from our country.

Threats to the previously mentioned native species derive from illegal harvesting in the Park, the introduction of non-native species, changing climate, overuse, shrinking ecological connectivity and habitat loss.

CPAWS-OV supports legislation to protect Gatineau Park, increase funding to ensure effective ecological monitoring of species and increase the number of conservation staff. CPAWS-OV advocates for updating the Park’s Conservation Plan, which should include an active ecosystem management strategy.

Connectivity and Ecological Corridors

Connectivity represents the ease with which species can move through a landscape based on the quantity, quality, and spatial organization of habitats necessary for survival. At the same time, ecological corridors are networks of natural and semi-natural landscape components, including habitat cores and buffer zones within a spatially defined area, aimed at facilitating the movement of species. They are essential to allow species to migrate northward in response to climate change.

Climate change is detrimental to isolated ecosystems and will impact Gatineau Park’s important biodiversity. Currently, urbanization, transportation corridors and transformed wildlands in and

around the Park create barriers preventing species from adjusting to changes and moving to ecosystems that support them.

In 2012, the National Capital Commission (NCC), which manages Gatineau Park, commissioned a comprehensive study to identify possible corridors around the Park. However, over the previous decade, only some actions were taken to preserve or restore the local protected area network. Consequently, its ecosystems are gradually being isolated, and the opportunity for creating and maintaining corridors is shrinking. Within the Park, connectivity is also a concern due to unofficial trails, roads and incompatible land use.

Ecological corridors are essential to maintaining environmental integrity. Therefore, CPAWS-OV supports the current efforts of the NCC to maintain and restore the connectivity network around Gatineau Park. We are also promoting the importance and value of establishing ecological corridors to stakeholders, decision-makers and communities.

Economic Value

Studies have shown that parks and protected areas have tangible economic benefits for the surrounding communities. As such, the residents and municipalities of the Outaouais derive direct financial returns from their proximity to Gatineau Park.

There are two components to estimating the financial value of a protected area: its contribution to gross domestic product (economic impact) and the collective value of the ecosystem services it provides (ecosystem value). Ecosystem services are the various benefits to society provided by the Park's different ecosystems. These services are numerous, including habitat for biodiversity, climate regulation and outdoor recreation. Access to nature improves mental health, as was made even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2017, a report commissioned by the NCC estimated the economic impact of Gatineau Park at \$241.5 M. The employment impact was estimated at 4728 full-time equivalent jobs, and an estimated 2.66 million visits were made to the Park.

Researchers from Université du Québec en Outaouais identified the ecosystem services from the NCC's green network in the National Capital Region. They estimated their value to be \$332 M. Further analysis of land use types in Gatineau Park allowed a researcher to compute the total value of the ecological services provided by Gatineau Park as \$152.6M.

Although subjectivity is involved in assessing the economic value of ecosystem services, it is a valuable tool for decision-making as it gives quantitative value to the services provided by

natural spaces. Therefore, CPAWS-OV advocates that regulatory and administrative authorities consider ecosystem value and economic impact when making decisions regarding Gatineau Park.

Private Properties

Gatineau Park was assembled through the transfer of provincially owned public lands and the acquisition of private grounds, sometimes by expropriation in some sectors. Several lands are still privately owned and under municipal jurisdiction. The NCC reports that private owners hold just under 0.7 percent of the Park’s area. These consist of residential, cottage or vacant lots, mainly within the enclaves of Meech Lake, Kingsmere Lake, and the Skyridge area.

These private holdings within the Park are not subject to NCC regulations or policies and remain under the control of several municipalities and the province. As such, they result in habitat fragmentation, loss of ecosystem integrity, restrictions on public access, damage to riparian zones, lower water quality, and loss of shared enjoyment.

In contrast, the acquisition of private property by the NCC increases the amount of public land and reduces the pressure on ecosystems. Hence, CPAWS-OV encourages governmental authorities to pursue the purchase of private lands through a willing seller policy. However, when land use threatens the ecological integrity of Gatineau Park, the NCC must use its expropriation powers to preserve it. Consideration should also be given to gaining access to the lands southwest of the Park. However, although they are outside its current boundaries, they are used informally to access activity sites and are considered essential to the Park’s operation.

Once private holdings are acquired, CPAWS-OV expects the NCC to take action to naturalize the land if needed.

Meanwhile, the MRCs, municipalities, and property owners within Gatineau Park should respect the natural environment in which they reside. Accordingly, we also commit to working with these stakeholders to develop and adopt environmental best practices such as maintaining forest cover, protecting riparian habitats, preventing erosion, choosing appropriate locations to erect buildings and other structures, and maintaining corridors for wildlife.

Similarly, the actions previously outlined should be applied to the private and municipal properties surrounding Gatineau Park. Management decisions on these properties have direct effects on the ecological integrity and connectivity of the Park.

Recreational Activities

As stated previously, Gatineau Park receives about 2.6 million visits annually, welcoming more than 600,000 visitors per year. As the National Capital Region’s most significant greenspace, Gatineau Park is essential for maintaining the biodiversity and integrity of regional ecosystems and providing recreational activities for visitors.

CPAWS-OV has consistently advocated for responsible park use respecting NCC rules and regulations consistent with biodiversity conservation science. Currently, recreation in the Park seems to be out of control, and multiple user groups are overusing it. This situation creates conflict between users reducing the quality of their experience.

We acknowledge that managing visitor numbers and the vested interest groups in Gatineau Park is challenging. However, recreational groups are available and willing to engage with the NCC to collaborate on issues such as access and trail management. Our team supports and desires to facilitate this engagement between stakeholders.

Nonetheless, CPAWS-OV also recommends an increased authority to the NCC to appropriately uphold conservation and recreation policies. Furthermore, we strongly oppose using any recreational motorized vehicles, such as ATVs, snowmobiles and dirt bikes, because they are incompatible with maintaining the integrity of natural spaces.

Transportation

High visitation levels have created significant transportation issues and challenges in Gatineau Park. Traffic jams, particularly during events such as the annual “Fall Rhapsody,” and unauthorized parking on what the public considers to be access roads result in congestion and damage to the roadway. Furthermore, motor vehicles lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions, wildlife collisions and a lack of safety on parkways, especially for cyclists.

These problems have emerged because Gatineau Park offers limited public transportation. Most visitors use motorized vehicles. Unfortunately, this also means that the Park is not accessible to everyone. People with mobility issues and those without the means to own or rent a motor vehicle may not experience this natural space and enjoy its health benefit.

CPAWS-VO supports the prohibition of habitat fragmentation caused by new roads and trails proposed to reduce the impact on the ecological integrity of the Park. We also request that no new parking spaces be created within the boundaries of the Park. Furthermore, we urge the governmental agencies to explore the possibility of providing shuttles, buses and other

transportation services by using demand-response micro transit. Since all residents of the National Capital Region enjoy the Park, we also advocate that any interprovincial transit project focuses on including considerations on transportation in Gatineau Park.

Legislation

In the absence of protective legislation, Gatineau Park's proximity to a large urban area, continuing residential construction and high visitation levels constitute an increasing threat to its ecological integrity.

To ensure that the Park remains intact for future generations, CPAWS-OV calls for the government to grant it legislated protection equivalent to that of a Canadian national park, with boundaries protected in law and ecological integrity as a priority.

Following a lengthy discussion with legislators, environmental and conservation experts and various other stakeholders, CPAWS-OV has identified these three key considerations which should be included in any bill regarding the Park's protection:

- Establish Gatineau Park in legislation and dedicate it to future generations.
- Ensure that ecological integrity is the Park's management priority, and.
- Stipulate that changes to Gatineau Park boundaries can only be made by parliamentary approval, as is the case for Canada's national parks.