

Brief to the Senate Standing Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources

Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

Ottawa Valley Chapter

(CPAWS-OV)

Bill S-229

An Act to amend the National Capital Act (Gatineau Park)



April 30, 2026

Introduction

The Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) was founded in 1969 in response to threats to Gatineau Park. It is one of thirteen regional chapters of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, a nation-wide charity focused on protecting Canada's public lands and waters. CPAWS-OV is proud to have participated in the drafting of Bill S-229 and is therefore supportive of the provisions of the bill which seeks to:

1. Establish the boundaries of Gatineau Park,
2. Prioritize the ecological integrity of the park in its management by the National Capital Commission (NCC),
3. Prohibit the sale of public lands within the park, with certain exceptions,
4. Strengthen consultation and collaboration between the NCC, the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation and neighbouring municipalities,
5. Promote the use of services from businesses and workers of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation for maintenance and conservation activities in Gatineau Park,
6. Authorize the creation of regulations to oversee activities in the park and set corresponding fees.

Summary

Gatineau Park is a 'park' in name only. It is not a national or provincial park, nor does it currently benefit from any legal protection afforded by an Act of Parliament. Established in 1938 and comprising some 361 km², Gatineau Park is home to a diverse array of plants and animals, including over 140 species at risk. It provides countless ecosystem services to residents of the National Capital Region while supporting over 4800 jobs and contributing close to \$241 million annually to the local economy based on a 2017 report by the NCC. It is a major tourist attraction for the region, with close to 2.6 million annual visits by residents and tourists, and as such, it is one of the most heavily visited parks in North America. A 2026 study by CPAWS demonstrated that protected areas in Canada contribute \$10.9 billion to Canada's gross domestic product and support 150,000 jobs, many of which are in rural, remote or northern areas. Without legislative protection, the ecological and economic benefits of Gatineau Park are at risk of being lost.

The proximity of Gatineau Park and other natural areas, like the National Capital Greenbelt, to the urban core of Ottawa and Gatineau contributes immensely to the quality of life of residents of the National Capital Region as both cities are consistently ranked among the most livable in North America. According to the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), nature plays an important role in human health and welfare. Spending time in nature has been linked to numerous physical and mental health benefits, including reduced stress, improved mood, enhanced cognitive function and lower risk of chronic diseases. Large and diverse natural areas, like Gatineau Park, with a variety of forests, wetlands, lakes, streams and caves, provide opportunities for physical activity, social interaction and relaxation, all of which contribute to overall health. The CMA endorses the Parks Prescription program which promotes spending time in nature as a way to improve physical and mental health. A recent, international survey, places the value of mental health services from protected areas at \$6 trillion (US) globally, which is an order of magnitude greater than the direct

benefit value yielded from global PA tourism. Gatineau Park is therefore an asset of immeasurable proportions to the residents of the National Capital Region providing varied and highly valuable services to the public.

The Governments of Québec and Canada made commitments to protect at least 30% of public lands and waters by 2030. While progress has been made in recent years with the establishment of some new protected areas in the Outaouais region, including the protection of 1776 km² of the Dumoine River watershed (of which 800 km² is found in the Outaouais region) and 852 km² of the Noire and Coulonge River watersheds, the region remains far from the target of 30% with slightly over 10.2% of the Outaouais region and approximately 11% of the Ottawa River watershed considered protected from development.

Current reporting on Canada's progress toward its 30x30 goal includes Gatineau Park's 361 km² even though the park does not meet the internationally accepted standard for designation as a protected area. Without amendments to the National Capital Act as proposed in Bill S-229, Canada risks sliding backwards in its conservation objectives as the lands comprising Gatineau Park do not meet the criteria for a protected area should an audit ever be performed of Canada's Protected and Conserved Areas Database (CPCAD).

What is a Protected Area

The Convention on Biological Diversity and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) define a protected area as a clearly defined geographical space with boundaries set in law, recognized, dedicated, and managed through legal means, such as an Act of a legislature, with the objective of ensuring the long-term conservation of nature, ecosystem services, and associated cultural values.

Its purpose is to maintain the composition, structure, ecological functions, evolutionary potential of biodiversity, and cultural heritage at the level of species, habitats, ecosystems, and landscapes. Its size and configuration must ensure ecological integrity and the long-term maintenance of conservation targets.

A protected area is managed according to a structured plan, supported by a monitoring and evaluation program that promotes adaptive and locally grounded management, and is based on clear, equitable, inclusive, and effective governance. It meets the values and intentions of Indigenous communities inhabiting the territory and aims to permanently preserve the reasons for which it was established, including ecological, geomorphological, landscape, and cultural features.

Protected areas provide essential ecosystem services, particularly by contributing to clean water, air, climate regulation and resilience to climate change. For example, the many lakes of Gatineau Park eventually drain toward the Ottawa and Gatineau Rivers, helping to supply clean, fresh water to communities downstream. A 2017 Natural Capital report by TD Economics and the Nature Conservancy of Canada estimated that eastern forest ecosystems, like those found in Gatineau Park, provide a value of \$20,000/hectare, from their ability to impact air and water quality, and store

carbon. Protected areas may also generate significant benefits for local communities, offer recreational opportunities compatible with their objectives, support low-impact scientific research, and promote education as well as public support for conservation. A protected area excludes any form of industrial resource exploitation.

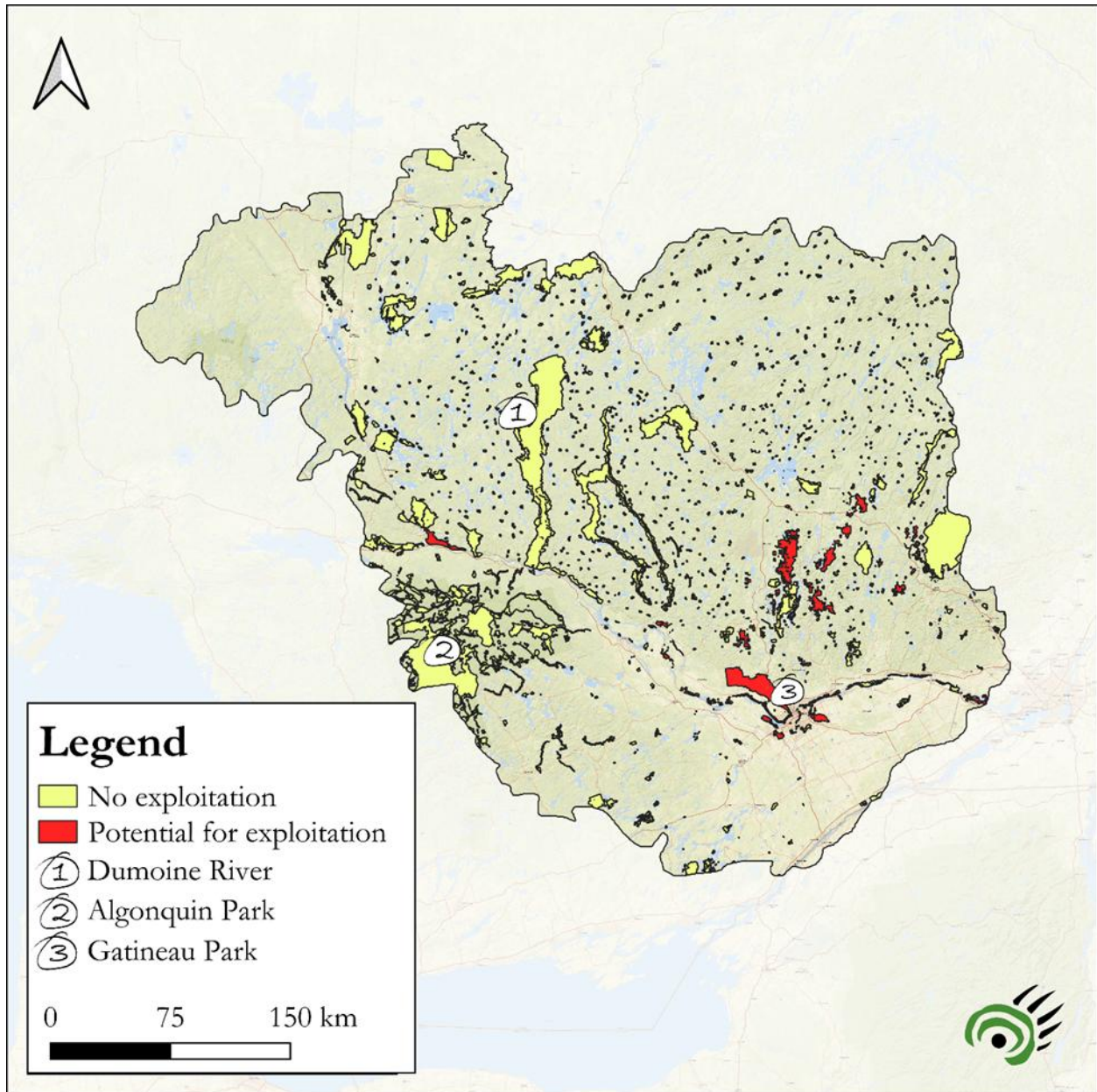


Figure 1: Protected Areas in the Ottawa River Watershed. In red are areas deemed protected by relevant authorities, but which do not meet the criteria for designation as a protected area according to the IUCN.

Analysis

The need for robust legislation is required given the vulnerability of the park’s lands to development with rapidly growing communities surrounding much of it. The National Capital Act provides the Minister responsible for Gatineau Park – the Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) with the authority to dispose of park land by way of a simple Order in Council and without any Parliamentary approval. The most recent example of park lands being alienated occurred on June 20, 2024 when the Minister approved the transfer of 17.6 hectares of park land to the province of Québec to allow for the construction of a hospital on the site of the former Asticou Centre despite the fact the park Master Plan called for those lands to be re-integrated into the park once the vocational training activities ceased at the site. In spring 2026, a further threat to the park’s fragile ecosystems emerged as it was revealed roads in the sector will need to be widened to accommodate increased traffic related to the future hospital. There is growing concern in the community given federal government budget constraints that more park land could be deemed extraneous to raise revenues for the NCC and/or to support future regional infrastructure or housing needs. CPAWS-OV is of the view that there should be no net loss of park land as a result of projects like the new Gatineau Hospital, any land developed should be replaced with land of equal or greater ecological value.

Gatineau Park is barely referenced in the National Capital Act and there is no direction given to the park manager, in this case the NCC to put nature first in decisions pertaining to the way in which the park is managed and developed. While the 2021 Gatineau Park Master Plan suggests the maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity be the overriding management priority for the park, it is not enshrined in legislation and therefore the park manager is not obligated to make management decisions based on this principle.

The boundaries of Gatineau Park have never been recognized in an Act of Parliament; as a result of various boundary rationalization undertakings by the NCC, parts of the park have been lost to development and under the current regulatory framework, the sale, lease and development of park lands remain possible without Parliamentary oversight or approval. The undefined nature of the park boundaries causes various administrative issues for municipalities and neighbours of the park and makes the enforcement of park regulations challenging.

Public and Regional Support

CPAWS-OV secured the support of several key rights-holders, stakeholders and partners.

Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation:

Chief Jean-Guy Whiteduck confirmed his support and that of the Band Council for the provisions of Bill S-229 in a meeting with CPAWS-OV on January 21, 2026, and in letters to the Member of Parliament for Pontiac-Kitigan Zibi in October of 2024 and again in January 2026.

Kebaowek First Nation:

Chief Lance Haymond conveyed his support for the protection of Gatineau Park to CPAWS-OV in March 2026.

City of Gatineau:

At the request of CPAWS-OV, the City of Gatineau passed a resolution on November 14, 2023 calling on the federal government to amend the National Capital Act to grant Gatineau Park protections akin to those provided to national parks, including boundaries recognized in law and enshrining the maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity as the guiding management principle for the park.

Petitions to the House of Commons:

Since 2021, CPAWS-OV has generated over 10,000 signatures on various petitions calling on the federal government to take steps to protect Gatineau Park. These have been tabled in the House of Commons by different MPs, including over 4500 signatures tabled by the Pontiac-Kitigan Zibi Member of Parliament in the last 2 years demonstrating broad public support for increased protection for the park.

Public opinion research conducted by our organization in the autumn of 2025 demonstrates 89% of respondents living in the Outaouais region support government action to protect biodiversity through increased protected areas and of these respondents 89% supported the goal of protecting at least 30% of regional lands and waters by 2030.

Recommended Amendments

CPAWS-OV recommends the following amendments to the text of the bill.

10.2 Ecological Integrity be amended to read as follows: Maintenance of ecological integrity through the protection **and restoration** of natural resources and natural processes shall be the first priority when considering all aspects of the management of Gatineau Park.

Rationale: Ecological Integrity as the first priority should be embedded in the National Capital Act as witnessed in other federal park legislations (Canada National Parks Act 2000; Rouge National Urban Park 2017). In the current context of accelerated climate change and biodiversity loss, the protection of ecosystems is not sufficient, efforts must also be made to restore degraded ecosystems to their original, functioning, conditions. This work should be grounded in both Indigenous knowledge and western science and will create meaningful jobs.

10.6 (2) Prohibition on disposing of public land (Authority to dispose) be amended by adding the following after 10.06 (2) b. New section 10.6 (2) (c): If public lands are deemed to be necessary for an Algonquin Anishinabeg organization or a federal, provincial or municipal authority for the purpose of installing or maintaining public healthcare establishments or other public infrastructure, the Commission must engage in meaningful Indigenous and public consultation, outline the reason only Gatineau Park land is suitable for such project and be required to acquire

additional lands of equal or greater size and ecological value to those being lost to compensate for the development of park lands for public infrastructure to ensure no net loss of natural resources.

Rationale: CPAWS-OV understands that given the park’s geographic location, it may be necessary to make use of park lands for public infrastructure projects, should this be the case, land of equal or greater ecological value must be added to the park to ensure there is no net loss of natural areas, even if the land being developed remains within the park.

10.7 Interdiction – use of public lands – be amended as follows: Subject to regulations made under subsection 20(1.1), no person shall use or occupy public lands in Gatineau Park.

Rationale: CPAWS-OV feels the wording of this clause is too broad and provides too much latitude to the Commission to authorize potentially incompatible uses of park land and could undermine the intention of the bill if it is left to the sole discretion of the Commission to determine whether a proposed occupation is compatible or not with the vocation of the park.

10.1 Maintenance and conservation work be amended as follows: The Commission shall call upon the services of businesses and workers from the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation for part of Gatineau Park’s maintenance and conservation work.

Rationale: The current wording is too broad and vague, by removing “must also consider”, the Commission is compelled to engage members of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation who have, for too long, been excluded from meaningful employment in the park. CPAWS-OV further recommends the Commission be given a target of at least 25% Indigenous employment in the park by 2032 as an eventual step toward Indigenous co-management of Gatineau Park. Recent National Parks agreements (e.g. Thaidene Nene, NT; Torngat Mountains, NL) include clauses for local Indigenous hiring, training, and business contracting which could be used as a model for Gatineau Park.

About the Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

Established in 1969 by concerned citizens inspired to take action after secret plans for widespread development in Gatineau Park became known, the organization has remained true to its roots, advocating for stronger environmental protection laws, helping to establish and expand protected areas and getting people involved with stewarding nature in their communities. Thanks to the hard work of volunteers and a small staff team, CPAWS-OV is directly responsible for the establishment and subsequent protection of over 8,700 square kilometers of land in the Ottawa River watershed, an area larger than Prince Edward Island! This includes some of the largest new protected areas in generations, like the Dumoine River Aquatic Reserve in Quebec and the Noire and Coulonge Rivers Biodiversity Reserve.

Today, CPAWS-OV is working to ensure the federal and provincial governments meet their pledges to protect 30% of our lands and waters by 2030 through a network of parks and other types of protected areas that are representative of the rich biodiversity and landscapes of the Ottawa River watershed. In 2024-2025, we proposed 5647 km² of new protected areas to the government of Québec, which when designated would bring the total area protected in the Outaouais region to 17.5%.

CPAWS-OV is working towards a healthy and resilient ecosphere where people can experience the many benefits of natural ecosystems equipped with the knowledge of how to respect and protect it.

This will be achieved by:

- protecting Canada’s wild ecosystems in parks and other wild spaces, preserving the full diversity of habitats and the many species found within;
- promoting awareness and understanding of ecological principles and the inherent values of wilderness through education, appreciation and experience;
- encouraging individual action and a sense of community in working together to accomplish these goals;
- working co-operatively with government, First Nations, business, other organizations and individuals in a consensus-seeking manner, wherever possible.

CPAWS-OV believes that by ensuring the health of the parts, we ensure the health of the whole, which is our health too.

You may learn more about our active campaigns and projects by visiting our website at cpaws-ov-vo.org.

Contact information:

For further information regarding this brief, please contact:

John McDonnell

Executive Director

CPAWS Ottawa Valley

jmcdonnell@cpaws.org

819-209-5178

CPAWS Ottawa Valley

276, boulevard Saint-Joseph, Suite 200

Gatineau (Québec) J8Y 3Z3

www.cpaws-ov-ov.org