

CPAWS-OV Position Statement on Gatineau Park

Overview:

Gatineau Park is the jewel of the national capital region. With over 2.7 million visitors each year, the park is (on a per capita basis) the most heavily visited park in North America. The park provides year-round opportunities for enjoying a wide range of outdoor activities. It also has a positive economic impact on the region, and it has been reported in Parliament that Gatineau Park generates \$25 million in annual economic spinoffs and is a source of more than 400 jobs.

Gatineau Park's 361 square kilometers are home to 118 rare or endangered species and 50 lakes, and its ecosystems are some of the most diverse in Canada.

The park also has a long human history involving Aboriginal peoples, French explorers, fur-traders, and English and French-speaking settlers. Evidence of this history can be seen throughout the park.

Gatineau Park is a "park" in name only. Although most of Gatineau Park belongs to the federal government and the National Capital Commission (NCC) manages the land, it does not have the permanent legal protection provided to "real" national parks. Without the same governing legislation and full parliamentary oversight as our Canadian national parks, threats to its integrity such as the sale of land for housing development and the creation of new roads jeopardize the park's future.

The Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) has been calling for the legislative protection of Gatineau Park for over 45 years. Gatineau Park was to be the first national park east of the Rockies, but the dream was never realized. Although there has been support for increasing the park's protection from the public and elected officials from all parties, no proposed legislation has ever been adopted.

In order to ensure that the park remains intact for future generations,

CPAWS-OV recommends that Gatineau Park be granted legislated protection equivalent to that of a national park (IUCN Category II protected area), with boundaries protected in law.

The following outlines the detail of our recommendation, derived from years of policy and scientific analyses, consultation with stakeholder groups, and lessons learned from past attempts at legislation.

Three pillars of legislation:

Many attempts have been made at passing legislation regarding Gatineau Park's protection, mostly in the form of amendments to the National Capital Act. Previous (widely supported) bills drafted with the objective of ensuring true protection of the park included a number of key elements, the following of which CPAWS-OV recommends being included in renewed attempts:

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

Key Issues:

The aforementioned conditions of legislation are derived from lengthy discussion between legislators, environmental/conservation experts (including CPAWS-OV) and various other stakeholders on certain key issues. The key issues regarding the legal protection of Gatineau Park are as follows:

1. Management of the Park / Ecological Integrity
In the absence of protective legislation, the park's proximity to a large urban area and high levels of visitation threaten the park's ecological integrity. The location of Gatineau Park on the junction of two ecozones (the boreal shield and mixed plains) creates the environmental conditions for rich and diverse ecosystems and abundant wildlife. It's likely that no other park in Canada of comparable size is so rich with flora and fauna. To secure the future of these diverse ecosystems, Gatineau Park must be managed with a greater ecosystem approach, including comprehensive regional planning with supportive zoning, including buffer zones and ecological corridors, and that this management priority be included in proposed legislation. This essential need is highlighted in the NCC's Gatineau Park Ecosystem Conservation Plan (2010).
2. Private Property
One of the challenges with making Gatineau Park a national park (under the National Parks Act) is that approximately 2% of the park's area is privately

owned property. In order for this land to be included inside the park, either expropriation would need to be invoked, or the federal government would need to purchase privately held properties, raising issues of artificially inflated sale prices. A further option is to create enclaves of privately held lands surrounded by park land (such as the communities in Gros Morne National Park). None have been popular ideas in parliamentary debate. While we believe that private property inside the Park is not compatible with maintaining and restoring the Park's ecological integrity, CPAWS does not call for expropriation of private property.

3. Enshrined Boundaries

Currently the park manager, the National Capital Commission (NCC), has the ability to dispose of park land without the approval of Parliament. In years past, portions of the park have been sold, reducing the area of the park and fragmenting ecological corridors. If Gatineau Park is to be protected for generations to come, changes to the park's boundaries must receive transparent review and approval via parliamentary governance. The boundaries of the park have been documented, and are available for inclusion in proposals for legislation.

In Conclusion:

Gatineau Park is under threat. Without legislative protection, we are at risk of losing this beacon of environmental diversity, Canadian heritage, and recreational opportunity.

In the December 2015 edition of National Geographic magazine, writer Florence Williams documented the global recognition of the impact of parks on human health. Living near and visiting parks reduces stress, improves creativity, increases happiness, inhibits disease and provides a further variety of health benefits. We benefit immensely as a community by having this park available to us.

By securing protection for Gatineau Park, we benefit our local communities and economies, and we honour our history. We provide recreational opportunities in a natural environment, and we ensure that the diverse and complex ecosystems of our region are protected into the distant future, including the endangered species that depend on our leadership.

Protecting Gatineau Park is an easy decision.

Please contact CPAWS-OV for further information.