

How our national parks evolved

From Grey Owl to Chrétien and beyond, 100 years of Parks Canada



View of Banff from Tunnel Mountain, William J. Oliver, Library and Archives Canada/ PA-057241

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Canada's first national park, Banff, was established by an 1885 decision to set aside 26 square kilometres around the hot springs of Sulphur Mountain in today's Alberta, but it took more than a quarter-century before an actual national park system was established.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier's government passed the Dominion Forest Reserves and Parks Act in 1911, which created the Dominion Parks Branch. The legislation reflected more a need for bureaucratic efficiency in the Department of the Interior than any philosophy of conservation. However, the Parks Branch was the first service of its kind in the world, and under the leadership of its pioneering commissioner, James B. Harkin, the park system would become a source of pride for Canadians and a symbol of the country. Milestones in the service's history include:

- 1911**
The Dominion Parks Branch, the world's first national park system, is created.
- 1920**
Fort Anne in Nova Scotia is designated as a national historic site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board. It remains Parks Canada's longest operating historic site.
- 1930**
The National Parks Act declares that Canada's national parks "are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment ... and will be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for ... future generations."
- 1931**
The Parks Branch recruits wilderness apostle Grey Owl (Archibald Belaney), along with his two charismatic orphaned beavers, to work as a naturalist in Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba and, later, Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan.
- 1950s**
The Parks Branch phases out "predator control" policies that entailed the killing of wolves, cougars, coyotes and other carnivores in national parks.
- 1964**
The government's first comprehensive National Parks Policy stresses the preservation of significant natural features as the Parks Branch's "most fundamental and important obligation."
- 1970**
The National Park System Plan divides Canada into 39 natural regions and calls for the expansion of the park system to protect the characteristic physical, biological and geographic features of each region. Among these is the East Coast Boreal Region, the easternmost extent of the Canadian Shield, which includes [Labrador's Mealy Mountains](#).
- 1976**
While flying over Baffin Island with his wife Aline, an awestruck Jean Chrétien resolves to make a park here for her. Chrétien later explained, "When I returned to my office ... I consulted the Minister of Indian Affairs, who was myself, consulted the Minister of Northern Affairs, who was myself, and consulted the minister responsible for parks, who was myself, and they all agreed on the matter." As a result, Auyuittuq National Park is created.
- 1976**
Nahanni National Park Reserve in the Northwest Territories is designated a World Heritage Site by unesco.
- 1979**
Signifying a further shift from recreation to preservation, the National Parks Policy is revised to make "ecological integrity" the parks' guiding principle.
- 1987**
Reflecting growing concern about marine ecosystems, Canada's first national marine park, Fathom Five in Ontario, is established.
- 1992-2007**
In a flurry of activity, 10 new national parks and marine conservation areas are created: Aulavik, Vuntut, Wapusk, Tuktu Nogait, Saguenay-St. Lawrence, Similk, Gulf Islands, Ukkusiksalik, Torngat Mountains and Lake Superior.
- 2008**
In a controversial decision, the federal government approves plans to arm park wardens in national parks.
- 2011**
Parks Canada embarks on a year-long celebration of its centennial.

A proud perch

In the foreword to a book on Canada's national parks, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau wrote, "I know a man whose school could never teach him patriotism but who acquired that virtue when he felt in his bones the vastness of his land."

Indeed, that vastness is one reason roughly 280,000 people immigrate to Canada every year. Most take their oath of citizenship in a major city, but in the spring of 2009, five dozen soon-to-be Canadians participated in a citizenship ceremony on the summit of Sulphur Mountain in Banff National Park. Citizenship and Immigration Canada came up with the idea as a unique way to introduce newcomers to some of what Canada has to offer.

After riding the gondola to the summit, the new Canadians participated in a ceremony presided over by Calgary Citizenship Judge Joy Dirks. Park staff, tourists and media joined in as well. Following this event's success, similar ceremonies have been held on the shores of Banff's Lake Minnewanka and at Point Pelee National Park. Parks Canada, which is exploring "new ways to connect with, engage and respond to ... new immigrants and ethno-cultural communities," hopes the ceremonies will encourage more people to visit national parks and perhaps, in the process, learn a little bit more about what it means to be Canadian.