



# **What We Heard: Elk Island National Park Management Plan Consultation 2023 – Phase 2**

## Introduction

The management planning process is carried out on a ten-year cycle for all Parks Canada protected places. Management plans are high-level, strategic plans that set out a vision, objectives and targets for the park to achieve in the coming decade. For Elk Island National Park, Parks Canada conducted two phases of consultation: the first phase was conducted prior to development of the draft plan and a second review phase of consultation after the draft plan was released. All feedback from the consultation of the draft plan is considered and the draft plan revised as appropriate. From there, the plan is internally approved and tabled in Parliament. Consultation is a key component of the management planning process as it helps to ensure accountability to Indigenous partners, park stakeholders, and the public. The management plan for Elk Island National Park concluded phase 2 of consultation, and Parks Canada will aim to table the final plan in Parliament by the end of 2023.

## Overview of Consultation

Phase 1 Consultation for the Elk Island National Park Management Plan was initially slated to take place in 2020 but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consultation resumed with Indigenous partners and park stakeholders throughout 2021 and 2022. Parks Canada held virtual group meetings with environmental and tourism stakeholders in November 2021 and with Indigenous partners in June and November 2021. By request, Indigenous partners were also invited to bilateral virtual consultation sessions in January and February 2022 and a day on the land session at the park in June 2022, once public health restrictions allowed in-person gatherings to happen safely.

Phase 2 Consultation began with the public release of the draft plan for a six-week consultation period from February 3, 2023, to March 17, 2023, with an additional four weeks set aside for consultation with Indigenous partners. Parks Canada provided Canadians with various ways to have their say on the plan both virtually and in-person to reduce barriers to participation.

In-person activities included outreach booths at events, postsecondary institutions and community centres across Edmonton and the surrounding area as well as attendance at the Beaver Hills Biosphere Open House to promote the plan with stakeholders.

The primary tool used for consultation was the online survey. The survey asked individuals to rank their support for the proposed park vision, zoning and objectives connected to each of the 5 key strategies. Survey-takers had the option to provide feedback on the desired future of Elk Island National Park. The public also had the opportunity to participate in a virtual open house hosted on Facebook Live. Parks Canada team members walked viewers through the 5 key strategies and associated objectives in the plan and answered audience questions from the comments. The video was posted to the Elk Island Facebook Page so it could be viewed and shared after the live event.

Canadians were also encouraged to provide feedback by phone, letter, or by email. The many ways to participate in the management planning process were promoted on the Elk Island Facebook and Twitter pages and through media stories and interviews with local news outlets.

Parks Canada notified local elected officials, stakeholders, and public organizations by email regarding the draft plan release and encourage feedback. Neighbouring residents were also

notified by a post card mail-out campaign with QR codes linking to the website and online survey. Indigenous partners were invited to bilateral meetings to ensure the draft captured the ideas in Phase 1 of consultation. Meetings were held either in-person or virtually by choice of the nation.

### Who We Heard From

Elk Island National Park would like to thank all those who took the time to give input on the draft management plan. The many thoughtful responses received throughout the consultation process are a testament to the importance of the natural and cultural heritage of this special place.

#### *Indigenous Partners*

Throughout the management planning process, invitations to consult on the Elk Island National Park Draft Management Plan have been open to all Treaty 6 nations located in Alberta, as well as the Métis Nation of Alberta. Parks Canada met with the following six Indigenous communities through individual virtual and in-person meetings throughout March and April 2023: Enoch Cree Nation, Samson Cree Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Montana First Nation, Louis Bull Tribe and Metis Nation of Alberta, Region 4.

#### *Public and Stakeholders*

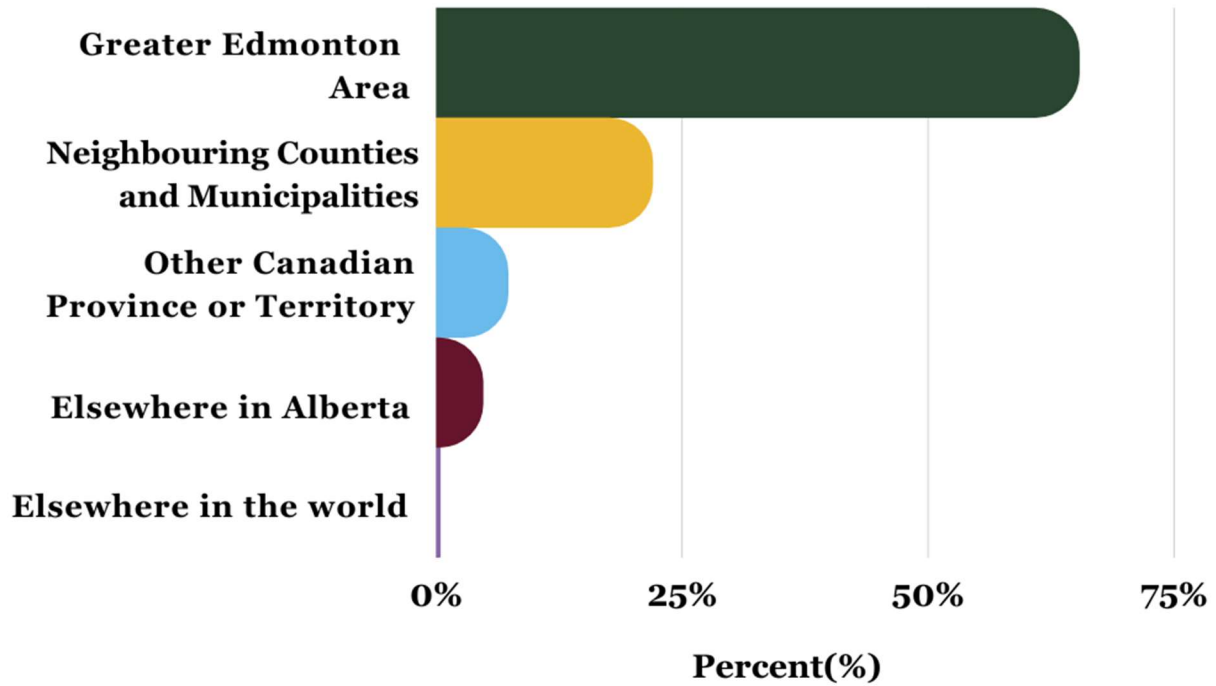
Comments for phase two of the consultation were encouraged from February 3 to March 17, 2023, through various means, such as social media, including a Facebook Live Event, public outreach booths at stakeholder and community events across Edmonton and surrounding area and an online survey. Canadians also submitted feedback via email and phone. In total, Parks Canada received approximately 8419 responses to our request for input. This included, along with other key highlights:

- 2306 incoming emails from Canadians, stakeholders and public interest organizations
- Approximately 5298 contacts at public outreach booths across the Edmonton area including 115 postsecondary students and more than 100 stakeholders
- 809 online survey responses
- More than 1000 visits to the Elk Island draft plan webpage throughout the consultation period
- More than 2000 neighbouring residents reached through the QR code postcard mail-out

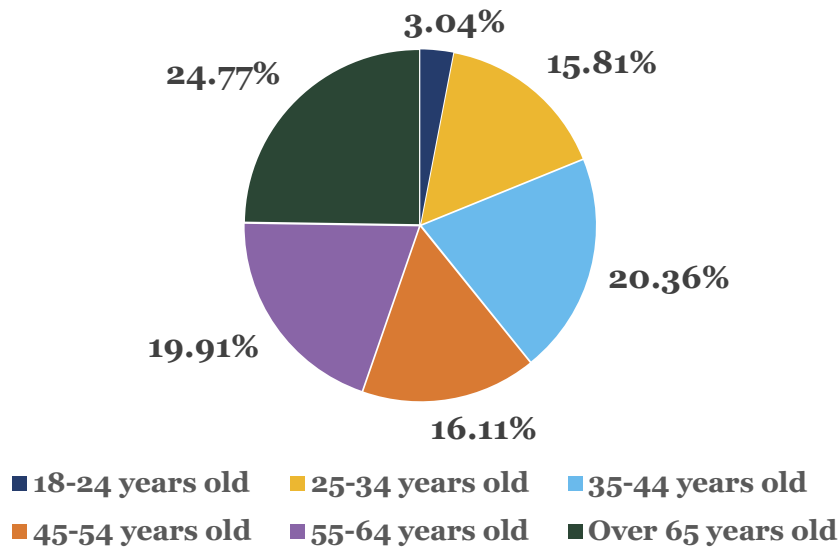


Parks Canada also acknowledges the many comments, questions and messages received through social media and by phone and acknowledge those that took the time to view the Facebook Live video recording after the live event.

Postal code data provided voluntarily from the online survey indicated that more than 99% of participants were Canadian, with more than 95% reporting they were from Alberta and more than 75% identifying as a regional resident (Figure 1). Survey respondents most frequently indicated that they used the park for hiking, camping, stargazing and paddling. People of all age groups responded to the survey consultation (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Geographic location of online survey respondents (n = 809)



**Figure 2.** Ages of online survey respondents (n=809)

## **What We heard From Indigenous People**

Overall, feedback from Indigenous attendees of Phase 2 consultation meetings was positive and there was support for the key strategies included in the draft plan. Many of the ideas heard in phase 1 of consultation were revisited in greater depth. The major themes that emerged from the conversations are as follows:

### **Working in collaboration towards ecological integrity:**

Many Indigenous representatives expressed concern that protected areas are becoming increasingly isolated and fractured by industry development. Parks Canada heard that to maintain and/or increase connectivity between protected areas, Elk Island National Park will need to look at the bigger picture and work collaboratively and communicate openly with Indigenous groups in the area as well as with other levels of governments and NGOs such as the Beaver Hills Biosphere.

Parks Canada heard support for the conservation efforts in the park, such as grassland restoration efforts including returning fire to the landscape and the bison conservation program. The nations consulted expressed a need for Parks Canada to increase capacity for support and resources for nations that are receiving bison transfers. Indigenous Nations also expressed interest in inclusion in conversations about research happening in the park and how Indigenous knowledge and teachings can be incorporated into conservation.

It is important that Parks Canada continues to recognize the rights of Indigenous people to harvest medicines and other plants within the park. However, with changing climate and potential reductions in available areas to harvest within the province, Parks Canada will need to work collaboratively with Indigenous people on sustainable medicinal harvesting.

**Taking steps towards increasing Indigenous governance:** Parks Canada heard support for the creation of an Indigenous advisory circle and the movement towards increased Indigenous influence in decision making. The creation of an Indigenous forum and all collaborative endeavours should be compensated fairly.

**Connection and presence on the land:** Parks Canada heard support for the continuation of the cultural use area within the park as a place for ceremony. Opportunities should also be created to spend time and use the land in the park as a whole.

Indigenous tourism opportunities are a chance for socioeconomic benefits to Indigenous communities as well as to share Indigenous culture, history, and values with park visitors to foster an appreciation for the connection that Indigenous people have to the landscape. In creating Indigenous tourism opportunities, Parks Canada will need to ensure that tourism opportunities are sustainable, respectful and balance both First Nation and Metis perspectives to reflect the diversity of Indigenous' points of view. It is also important that Indigenous stories are told by Indigenous people and incorporate their languages and dialects, and that there is recognition that Indigenous history began before colonization and the signing of treaty.

- Parks Canada also heard that there is a need to create more opportunities for Parks staff to educate themselves on the history and culture of Indigenous people

## What We Heard from the Public and Stakeholders Responses

Overall, the feedback received during the consultation period indicated that there was support for the vision, strategies and objectives of the draft management plan.

The online survey asked respondents to indicate their level of support for the park vision and proposed zoning on a five-point scale of “Strongly Support” to “Strongly Oppose”. More than 85% of respondents indicated support for the vision, and more than 90% indicated support for the proposed zoning (Figure 3).

Survey-takers were also asked to rate the level of importance for each management plan objective on a scale of: “Extremely important”, “Very important”, “Important”, “Not important” to “No opinion”. The graph below displays the percentage of responses that ranked the objectives as either “Extremely Important” “Very Important”, or “Important” averaged by key strategy. Each individual objective was ranked as important by 75% or more of respondents.

The major themes that emerged from the qualitative responses are as follows:

### **Visitor experience**

Survey responses indicated that there are a range of perspectives about Elk Island National Park, both positive and negative. Elk Island National Park is appreciated for its scenery, wildlife and dark sky viewing opportunities in close proximity to the city of Edmonton.

### **Visitor use management**

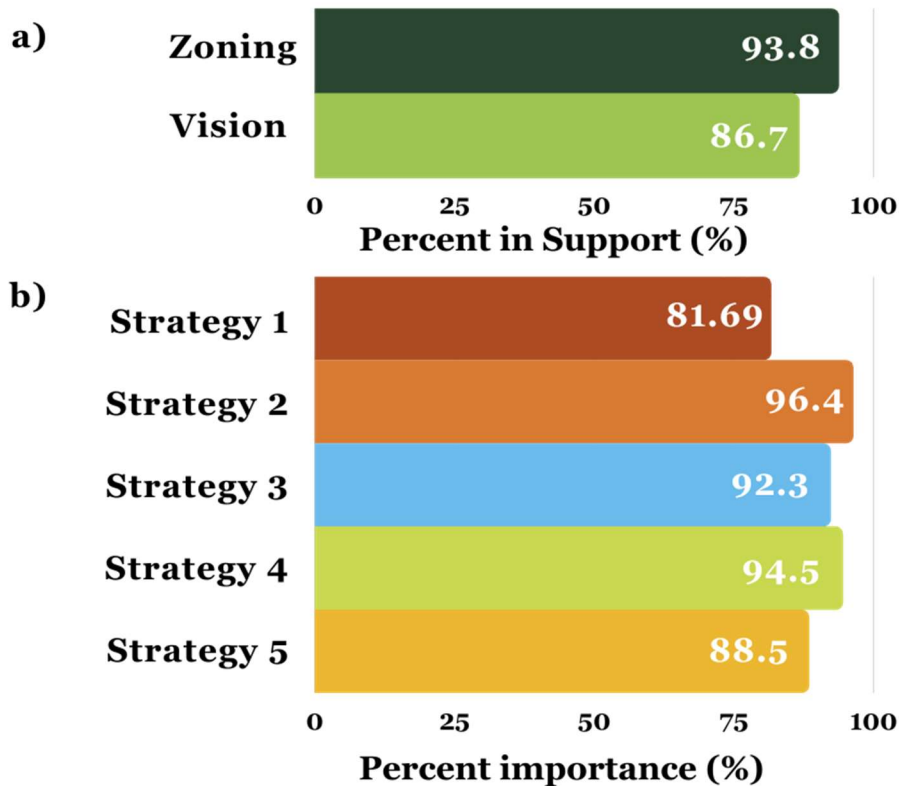
The park is often too busy or becoming overcrowded, especially in summer at popular day-use areas, such as the Astotin Lake Recreation Area and on certain trails. There is great support for enhancing year-round visitor experiences at the park. Parks Canada needs to find a balance between quality visitor experiences and ecological integrity.

Parks Canada should more actively manage visitors and limit visitor numbers. The ecological and social carrying capacity of the park should be evaluated and visitor and traffic use management strategies developed. The management of nighttime traffic for visitors coming to experience the northern lights in the dark sky preserve were highlighted as a key area of concern.

More Parks Canada staff and resources are also needed to manage wildlife issues, check permits, ensure compliance with park rules and carry out maintenance.

### **Visitor education**

Parks Canada should provide more information to visitors about how to behave around wildlife, wilderness etiquette, driving safely in the park and responsible use of the park. Meaningful personal interactions with Parks Canada staff, park-operated education programs and increased responsibilities for tourism operators are the best ways to educate visitors. Elk Island is located close to a major urban centre which gives the park unique opportunities to provide outreach and education to new Canadians.



**Figure 3. a)** Percentage of online survey respondents in support of the Elk Island National Park draft management plan proposed vision and zoning. **b)** Percentage of online survey respondents that ranked objectives as “important” “very important” or “extremely important” averaged by key strategy. Strategy 1: Strengthening Relationships with Indigenous Peoples in the Spirit of Reconciliation, Strategy 2: Working Towards Ecological Integrity in the Park, Strategy 3: Working with Others in Support of Ecological Sustainability on the Broader Landscape, Strategy 4: Creating Connections and Inspiring People, Strategy 5: Responding and Adapting to Climate Change (n=809).

### Affordability and accessibility

There is a lack of accessibility at Elk Island National Park, preventing some Canadians from enjoying the park. Respondents indicated that they greatly support increasing the accessibility of trails and the provision of certain services in the park.

Parks Canada should implement transportation systems such as public transit or bike paths to ease congestion, improve access and reduce carbon outputs.



## **Forest health and wildfire**

Fire is a natural process in the park's ecosystem. Prescribed fire is a preferred tool for reducing forest fuels and restoring vegetation communities. There is a desire to see Indigenous involvement in returning fire to the landscape.

## **Bison**

Parks Canada needs to continue its role in advancing bison conservation through the bison transfer program to conservation initiatives and Indigenous communities. The health of the herds should be protected through disease prevention and improving the health of the grasslands. The park should educate the public on the history of bison and bison conservation, especially the important connections that Indigenous communities hold with bison.

## **Wildlife**

Wildlife habituation and the impact of human activities on park ecosystems are key concerns, particularly on ungulate populations. Parks Canada should be attentive to wildlife displacement and habitat connectivity / fragmentation. Parks Canada should collect more data on human-wildlife conflicts and include human-wildlife conflict reporting and mitigation in the management plan. Wildlife would benefit from more wildlife management staff, greater enforcement of park rules, and periodic trail or area closures to maintain wildlife corridors or secure habitat. Monitoring and preventing the spread of invasive species should be a key priority in the restoration of the health of the grasslands.

## **Regional Connectivity**

Regional connectivity was a recurring theme. Ecological integrity should be the first priority in park management but cannot be accomplished without the involvement of regional partners. The importance of working with partners, expanding the park, and playing a key role in the Beaver Hills Biosphere and Dark Sky Preserve to augment regional ecological integrity and educate the public were topics that were communicated during consultation. There are concerns with the effects of industrial development and activities on lands adjacent to the park, invasive species, pollutants in waterways, other aquatic issues, species-at-risk, and the management of rare or sensitive ecological areas. There is support for expansion of the park to protect the surrounding area and increase connectivity across the landscape.

## **Development**

Development should be carefully managed, especially large commercial developments, in order to maintain ecological integrity. Upgrading facilities or making better use of existing spaces is preferable to expanding or building new facilities. More emphasis should be placed on low-impact, nature and culture-based activities instead of infrastructure-based activities. Parks Canada should consider adding some facilities to the park, particularly accommodations (e.g., more campsites, campgrounds, backcountry lodges). Parks Canada should encourage tourism development in gateway communities instead of in the park.

## **Indigenous Relations**

Indigenous peoples should be better represented in all aspects of the park, including the public workforce, educational programming, management of the park and in art and culture.

Indigenous place names should be acknowledged and used on signs and other communication materials.

The plan should include employment opportunities for youth and cultural awareness training as well as opportunities for Indigenous peoples to be involved in conservation efforts. The park needs more resources dedicated to ensure the cultural area is accessible and welcoming to Indigenous peoples to engage in traditional practices and connect with the land.

The plan should better address the cultures, histories and significance of the area to specific Indigenous groups with strong historical and present-day connections to the area and commit to interpretive programming and general communications that explain the role and importance of specific Nations in the settlement and use of the area by non-Indigenous people.

## **Climate Change**

Environmental stewardship should be part and parcel of Parks Canada's commitment to protect natural heritage; Parks Canada should take action to become a leader in green initiatives, especially around fossil fuel use. Planning Park management should consider climate change, how to mitigate its effects, and how to make the park more energy efficient and operationally sustainable in the face of a changing environment throughout the plan. Parks Canada has a role to play in engaging and educating the public on climate change.

## **Next Steps**

Parks Canada is currently reviewing the feedback collected in Phase 2 of consultation. All feedback will be considered in revising the draft plan and integrated as appropriate. Over the coming months, your comments and feedback will help the final version of the plan take shape. Parks Canada will aim to have the completed management plan tabled in Parliament by the end of the year. The final plan will be available on the Parks Canada website in an accessible format in both official languages, and the release will be promoted through media and Parks Canada's official social media channels.

The conclusion of the management planning process is only the beginning of the conversation. Elk Island National Park will continue to remain accountable to its stakeholders and Indigenous partners, as well as to past, present, and future visitors. Over the coming decade, the high-level targets and objectives set out in the management plan will guide the decision making on the ground in the park. The commitments made to fostering greater connections with stakeholders and Indigenous partners, as well as all Canadians will inspire new collaborative projects that will help the park to balance responsible and sustainable visitor use with conservation of a unique Canadian landscape.