

## **What We Heard: Consultation for the Development of the Elk Island National Park Management Plan June – December, 2021**

The purpose of this report is to present the highlights of the initial phase of consultation in the development of the draft management plan for Elk Island National Park. Parks Canada legislation requires consultation with Indigenous persons and the Canadian public in the development of park management plans. Ideas and perspectives from Indigenous communities and the public will help strengthen the plan, and increase the plan's relevance and support. All input received during consultation is considered during the development of the draft plan and final management plan.

National Park management plans must be reviewed every ten years, are approved by the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change and tabled in Parliament. The Elk Island National Park management plan is due for tabling in 2022. A draft plan is scheduled to be released in Spring 2022 for further consultation.

The purpose of this phase of consultation was threefold: 1) introduce the planning program; 2) identify opportunities for Indigenous communities and the public to be involved in shaping the management plan, and; 3) begin discussing topics of mutual interest that may help shape the draft plan. All meetings were held virtually due to COVID-19 health restrictions.

### **Meetings (Virtual) With Indigenous Representatives June 23 and November 4, 2021**

Indigenous participants from the June 23, 2021 session represented Onion Lake First Nation, the Métis Nation of Alberta, Beaver Lake Cree Nation, Cold Lake First Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Samson Cree Nation and Frog Lake First Nation. The November 4, 2021 session included participants from Alexander First Nation, the Métis Nation of Alberta, Beaver Lake Cree Nation, Sunchild First Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation and Whitefish Lake First Nation.

Feedback from attendees was positive and provided Parks Canada with insights and suggestions on the role of Indigenous communities in ongoing management planning consultation and park management. Three themes emerged: working together, connection to place and presence.

#### **Working Together**

Indigenous knowledge is an important perspective that has been lost and neglected. Management planning offers a critical opportunity to use Indigenous knowledge in park management. There is significant value in communicating and collaborating in this regard.

There is a strong desire to be involved in park management and operations, as follows:

- Indigenous representation is important within the park. There are many roles for Indigenous persons in many aspects of park management including: planning, delivering, monitoring and evaluation.
  - Such roles need to be supported by permanent mechanisms such as a forum, committee or advisory circle



- The relationship must be built on trust, with meaningful two-way exchanges that demonstrate respect and understanding of different knowledge.
- Management and legal systems are needed, with ongoing communication and relationship building.
- There are essential components for maintaining successful relationships between Parks Canada and Indigenous communities, including:
  - Making space for and integrating Indigenous ways of knowing in park operations and management, such as: utilizing Traditional Knowledge in conservation work, following cultural protocols, and incorporating ceremony
  - The value of meeting in person and on the land
  - Actively involving spiritual and community leaders in decision-making
  - Working with communities on an individual basis to reflect and meet distinct community needs and perspectives
- Recommendations and options for future park governance structures include:
  - Advisory forum, similar to Jasper National Park's Indigenous Forum
  - Cooperative management arrangements
  - Project-based advisory groups, committees or working groups

### **Connection to place**

The area that is now known as Elk Island National Park is the homeland of Indigenous peoples and has long been used as a resting, hunting and gathering place. Indigenous peoples have a spiritual, legal and historical relationship to the park. As such, Indigenous peoples' reconnection to the land, ability to access the park and involvement in park management should be priorities for Parks Canada. Topics identified include:

- Responsible harvesting to ensure equal and ongoing access to important resources (i.e. sage harvesting, animal harvesting)
- Opportunities for Indigenous youth (i.e. land-based learning opportunities, employment programs)
- Importance of having a cultural space for ceremony and land based teaching
- Participation in ungulate management (i.e. bison transfers to Indigenous communities)
- Participation in grassland management (i.e. prescribed fires)
- Participation in the management of invasive species (e.g. wild boar)

### **Presence**

It is important to demonstrate to the public the past and living Indigenous cultures to increase public awareness. There is a long and continuing history of Indigenous use in the area now occupied by the park. Indigenous cultures, both in past and present, should be better reflected and made more visible at Elk Island National Park

- Recommendations on how to increase the presence and public awareness of Indigenous of Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories at the park include:
  - Use of Indigenous languages and place names in park signage, with correct spelling
  - Increase content on the history of Parks Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples, including collaboration with individual communities and working groups
  - Training for Parks Canada staff in Indigenous cultures and history to increase awareness and increase the consideration of Indigenous cultures in their daily work

The meetings concluded with strong interest for ongoing discussion and collaboration. In person and in park meetings should be held when conditions allow. In the meantime, representatives asked that Parks Canada contact each community individually for further discussions.

## **Meeting (Virtual) With Tourism Stakeholders November 22, 2021**

Participants included representatives from Explore Edmonton and Travel Alberta.

Feedback from attendees provided Parks Canada with insights and suggestions on the role of tourism organizations in ongoing management planning consultation and park management. Three themes emerged from the consultation participant perspectives: strong support for tourism development, opportunities for product development and willingness to collaborate and partner

### **Strong support for tourism development**

- There is strong interest among tourism organizations many to further develop tourism in the Edmonton area and throughout Alberta
- Tourism organizations include local businesses, community organizations, festivals and events groups, and government tourism agencies
- Tourism has the potential to diversify Alberta's economy and strengthen Elk Island National Park's visitor experience offer

### **Opportunities for product development**

- Destination Tourism Organizations (DMOs) have expertise that can allow for mutually beneficial relationships between tourism organizations and Parks Canada
- There are opportunities to leverage resources and connections to markets, share information and enhance communication, which aligns tourism marketing activities with reaching larger audiences and attracting more visitors
- There is a need for development of year-round, bookable experiences at Elk Island National park that are available each year consistently, and with a level of certainty
- The following opportunities or considerations for product development were identified:
  - Indigenous tourism
  - Culture and heritage
  - Agritourism/culinary
  - Regenerative/ecotourism
  - Specialized accommodation
  - Increased accessibility
  - Transportation
  - The Learn-to Camp program

### **Willingness to collaborate and partner**

- Collaboration and partnership was acknowledged as a solution to help address some organizational constraints. Some of these constraints are:
  - Monetary pressures
  - Organizations working in isolation
  - Lack of overarching purpose or strategic planning
- There is a desire to organize tourism resources, expertise and capacity under an overarching framework that aligns with organizations' strategic plans and advances regional tourism in an efficient and coordinated manner

The meeting concluded with strong interest by tourism organizations and DMOs in a collaborative relationship with Parks Canada. Representatives from two tourism organizations indicated interest in reviewing the draft management plan when it is available.

## **Meeting (Virtual) With Regional Stakeholders November 24, 2021**

Participants included representatives who work with the Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve, namely Biosphere staff, Alberta Parks, Strathcona County, Friends of Elk Island, and CPAWS Northern Alberta.

Feedback from attendees provided Parks Canada with insights and suggestions on the role of local stakeholders in ongoing management planning consultation and park management. Four themes emerged from consultation participant perspectives: connectivity, collaboration, balance and innovation and leadership.

### **Connectivity**

Elk Island National Park is one of many locations that represent the region's interconnected habitats and vegetation patches which facilitate broader movements of plants, animals and natural processes. There is a need to pursue ecological and organizational connectivity, so that organizations and landscapes in the region remain adaptable and resilient to new and ongoing challenges.

To support regional connectivity, Parks Canada will need to:

- Work with landowners and regional organizations to connect the park to the larger conservation landscape
- Consider expanding the area of Elk Island National Park
- Connect diverse peoples to nature, particularly people from the Edmonton area, in ways that showcase the role of the park in the greater landscape
- Pursue organizational connectivity by collaborating cross-organizationally in regional conservation, planning, and development initiatives and activities

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration among Parks Canada and regional groups can help address organizational limitations (e.g. monetary pressures, organizational capacity), improve current and future ecological management (e.g. regional fragmentation, climate change, watershed management) and advance shared interests (e.g. Indigenous involvement, public awareness, engagement, and involvement).

Collaboration and inter-jurisdictional coordination are necessary to achieving connectivity within the Beaver Hills Biosphere.

Suggestions for collaborative priorities and frameworks include:

- Function-specific working groups (i.e. communication groups) with representatives from various organizations
- Regional coordination and leadership from specific organizations, to pursue shared interests
- Shared decision making or organizational support to explore Indigenous governance in protected areas



- Information and data sharing mechanisms between organizations
- Transforming organizationally focused groups into regionally focused groups (e.g. Friends of Elk Island into Friends of Beaver Hills Biosphere)

### **Balance**

It will be important for Parks Canada to find balance among many competing interests.

Very high levels of park visitation are a concern, and raise issues such as law enforcement capacity, negative ecological impact, diminished visitor experience and traffic congestion.

- Parks Canada could adopt or develop standardized tools to determine the limits of acceptable change and carrying capacity of the park's locations
- High visitation levels could be addressed by using adaptive management processes to provide a framework for managing the number of visitors
- Visitor management tools include using public transportation options (e.g. Parkbus), managing for seasonality and directing visitors to less utilized park areas

### **Innovation and Leadership**

Maintaining or improving ecological integrity in the region should continue to be the main priority for Parks Canada. There is also a desire for Parks Canada to play a regional leadership role in protected area management and research.

Specifically, Parks Canada is envisioned as providing leadership for ongoing and evolving ecological and conservation challenges and opportunities facing the region by:

- Determining, monitoring and sharing scientifically accepted reference points and metrics, data, technologies and management strategies that can be applied to other locations
- Establishing and maintaining benchmark research areas in the park to better understand the effects of ecosystem stressors both inside and outside the park
- Advancing climate change adaptation and resilience planning, ecological tourism, restoring natural disturbances and perturbations (i.e. fire), and re-establishing predator-prey dynamics

There is a high level of interest in a collaborative relationship with Parks Canada, and in reviewing the draft plan when it is available.