



# GRASSLANDS

NATIONAL PARK OF CANADA

## STATE OF THE PARK REPORT 2007



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## CONTRIBUTORS

Pat Fargey	Species at Risk Biologist, Grasslands National Park of Canada (NPC)
Michael Fitzsimmons	Ecosystem Scientist, Grasslands NPC
Debbie Kilfoyle	Project Officer, Grasslands NPC
Kevin Lunn	Management Planner, Parks Canada Western and Northern Service Centre (W&NSC)
Maureen Peniuk	Planning Coordinator, W&NSC
Jim Rettie	Monitoring Ecologist, W&NSC
Elaine Rohatensky	Cultural Resource Management Advisor, Saskatchewan South Field Unit
Colin Schmidt	Client Services Supervisor, Grasslands NPC
Robert Sissons	Conservation Biologist, Grasslands NPC
Adrian Sturch	Resource Conservation Manager, Grasslands NPC
Sharon Thomson	Archaeologist, W&NSC
John Wilmshurst	Grasslands Ecologist, W&NSC

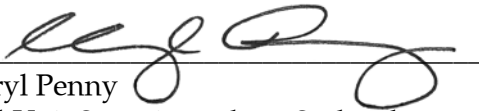
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20	W. Lynch
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Approved by:



Cheryl Penny  
Field Unit Superintendent, Saskatchewan South  
Parks Canada





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located in southwestern Saskatchewan, Grasslands National Park of Canada (NPC) was established in 1988 with the Federal-Provincial agreement to conserve, protect and present a portion of the Prairie Grasslands Natural Region within a proposed park area. In the dry hills, badlands and eroded river valleys of this corner of the prairies, a diversity of wildlife, including pronghorns, sage grouse, rattlesnakes and the only remaining black-tailed prairie dog colonies in Canada, can still be found. The park is also abundant with archaeological evidence of Northern Plains First Nations history that has been lost elsewhere from cultivation of the prairies (Parks Canada, 1997). Park visitors make a special choice to venture off the beaten path to this open expanse to witness and experience Grasslands NPC's unique natural and cultural values. During the last five years, between 6000 and 7000 individuals have probably visited Grasslands NPC each year. It is a challenge to get an accurate estimate of visits into the park because the Visitor Reception Centre is outside the park in Val Marie and there are many possible entry points into the park, all of which are unattended.

Since 1988, land for the park has been acquired by Parks Canada on a willing seller – willing buyer basis. The proposed park area is in two blocks (East and West) that covers 92,074 Ha. More than half of this land (50,227 Ha) has been purchased by Parks Canada in a patchwork of eight holdings ranging from three to 204 square kilometres that vary considerably in ecological restoration challenges and visitor experience opportunities. Some parcels of these holdings are undisturbed native prairie, ungrazed for as much as twenty years. Yet, other parcels have been cultivated for annual crops. Still others are infested with exotic, invasive plants. Some areas are accessible by vehicle and offer opportunities for day-use, while others must be explored in solitude on foot or by horse.

Parks Canada policy directs that a *State of* report must be completed for each national park every five years prior to a park's management plan review (Parks Canada, 2008). The *State of* report serves as a public record of the condition and trends of the national park in terms of its ecological integrity, people's connection with the place, the condition of its cultural and paleontological resources, and achievements in the park's management. This *Grasslands National Park of Canada State of the Park Report* assesses the condition and management effectiveness of the park since 2003 when the park management plan was approved by the Minister of Environment and Tabled in Parliament. The evaluation is based on *indicators* and *measures* either developed by Parks Canada for application at all national parks or those found in a similar bioregion, or chosen specifically for the park, and for which monitoring data or other information is available to rate park condition and management. The report is used to inform the Minister of Environment, Parks Canada and the public as to challenges, opportunities and possible park management actions to be considered in the management plan review.

Table A-1 summarizes the condition of Grasslands NPC as of 2007. The indicator ratings are a roll-up of ratings for the individual measures. Parks Canada is still in the process of developing some program-wide indicators and measures, notably for connection to place, and Grasslands NPC is in the process of completing a comprehensive monitoring framework that will guide long-term ecological condition rating for the park. Consequently, some indicators and measures used in this report are provisional and may change for the next State of the Park Report for Grasslands NPC.

Table A-2 summarizes the effectiveness of management actions that the park has been carrying out in the last four years. The ratings come from an assessment of the 2002 park management plan implementation undertaken by professionals in the areas of natural and cultural resource management and visitor services, who are external to Parks Canada or the park (Parks Canada 2007). There are some overlaps between condition and management effectiveness ratings (e.g. selected management practices indicators).

<b>Table A-1. Condition Ratings for Grasslands NPC.</b> The overall state of Grasslands NPC is considered Fair on the basis of the summary ratings for the four aspects of the park being assessed. Arrows identify a trend, when known, in condition as improving, worsening, or remaining stable.				
<b>Park Aspect</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Measure</b>	<b>Rating</b>
<b>Ecological Integrity</b> Fair Condition	Grasslands	Fair ↔	Burrowing Owl Productivity	Good ↔
			Black-tailed Prairie Dogs	Fair ↔
			Grassland Songbird Community	Fair
			Fire	Fair ↑
			Non-native Invasive Crested Wheatgrass	Poor↓
	Shrublands	<i>Insufficient Information</i>	Greater Sage Grouse	Poor ↓
	Forest	<i>Insufficient Information</i>	Invasive Non-native Leafy Spurge	Good ↔
	Aquatic	Fair ↔	Peak Flow rate	Fair ↔
			Number of Zero Flow Days	Fair ↔
	Riparian	Poor	Riparian Health Assessments	Poor
Badlands	<i>Insufficient Information</i>	<i>No measures in place</i>	<i>Insufficient Information</i>	
<b>Connection to Place</b> Fair Condition	Visitor Experience	Fair	Understanding Visitors	Fair
			Providing Visitor Experience Opportunities	Fair
			Offering Quality Service	Fair
			<i>Connecting with Place</i>	<i>Insufficient Information</i>
	Public Education and Understanding	Fair	Participating in Learning Opportunities	Good
			Understanding of Park Significance	Poor ↑



Park Aspect	Indicator	Indicator Rating	Measure	Measure Rating
<b>Cultural Resources</b> Fair Condition	Cultural Resource Condition	Good	Archaeological Sites	Good
			Archaeological Artifacts	Good
			<i>Historic Buildings and Structures</i>	<i>Insufficient Information</i>
			Oral Histories	Good
	Effectiveness of Communications	Poor	Message Identification and Delivery	Poor
			Message Effectiveness and Comprehension	Poor
	Selected Management Practices	Fair	Inventory and Evaluation	Poor ↑
Cultural Resource Management Strategy			Good	

<b>Paleo-ontological Resources</b> Poor Condition	Paleontological Resource Condition	<i>Insufficient Information</i>	<i>Paleontological (Fossil) Sites</i>	<i>Insufficient Information</i>
	Effectiveness of Communications	Poor	Message Identification and Delivery	Poor
			Message Effectiveness and Comprehension	<i>Insufficient Information</i>
	Selected Management Practices	Fair	Paleontological (Fossil) Sites	Poor

<b>Table A-2. Effectiveness of Management Actions Ratings for Grasslands NPC.</b> The management objectives and actions are from the 2002 park management plan (Parks Canada, 2002). On the basis of the proportion of Good, Fair and Poor ratings, overall effectiveness of management actions is rated Fair for Grasslands NPC. Good = The action is contributing to the objective, maintain current direction Fair = The action is somewhat contributing to the objective, but adjustment needed Poor = the action has not been implemented (take action), or is not contributing to the objective (replace).		
Management Objective	Management Action	Rating
To restore processes and plant communities of mixed prairie grassland within the park that are under-represented in the regional landscape.	▪ Grazing	Fair
	▪ Wildfire control	Good
	▪ Prescribed burning	Fair
	▪ Revegetation of native species	Fair
To maintain or enhance population levels and habitat requirements of native mixed-grass prairie Species at Risk	▪ Species at risk monitoring, recovery planning and implementation ▪ Reintroduction of bison	Good

<b>Management Objective</b>	<b>Management Action</b>	<b>Rating</b>
To improve the riparian health and water quality of the Frenchman River system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assess water quality of rivers and streams</li> <li>▪ Help develop partnered stewardship projects</li> </ul>	Fair
To protect and present cultural resources in the park	▪ Recent cultural resources (ranch and farm sites)	Poor
	▪ Aboriginal sites	Fair
	▪ Threatened sites	Good
	▪ Sites in high use areas	Poor
To protect and present paleontological resources in the park	▪ Work with experts to inventory resources and develop management plan	Poor
To integrate the management of cultural and natural resources and ensure their protection for future generations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inventory, monitor and report on both natural and cultural resources</li> <li>▪ Train staff in both ecosystem-based management and cultural resource management</li> </ul>	Fair
To ensure visitors can access information that enables them to find, enjoy, and learn about the park in a safe, efficient manner	▪ Provide visitor reception facilities	Good
	▪ Provide interpretation programs	Fair
To build constituencies of support and understanding	▪ With Park-adjacent communities, conservation and research communities, and Cooperating Association	Good
To build an awareness of the park as a destination, and to encourage visitation to the park and surrounding area	▪ Tourism partnerships	Fair
	▪ Signage, access, camping	Fair
	▪ Day-use sites, hiking trails	Good
To harmonize management goals and practices across the landscape through arrangements among landowners	▪ Consolidate park holdings	Good
	▪ Cooperate with neighbours to enable more freedom of movement of visitors in and out of the park	Fair
To have an effective consultative structure for the park	▪ Establish a park advisory committee	Good
To respond effectively and efficiently to existing and emerging needs as the park grows and matures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop facilities in support of resource management</li> <li>▪ Assess emerging requirements for visitor reception</li> <li>▪ Increase visitor services in the East Block</li> <li>▪ Update public safety plans</li> </ul>	Good

On the basis of the indicators, measures and ratings in Table A-1 and Table A-2, reported in detail in the main report, *Grasslands NPC State of the Park Report*, the condition of Grasslands NPC is summarized as:

- Overall State of the Park – Fair

- Ecological Integrity – Fair. Active park management continues to be needed to restore the mixed prairie grassland structure and processes, and some of its extirpated species.
- Connection to Place – Fair. Some improvements to the visitor service offer are needed to better enable people to learn from and experience the park.
- Cultural Resources – Fair. While many of the cultural resources themselves are in good condition, application of cultural resource management principles and practice need to be improved.
- Paleontological Resources – Poor. Not enough is known of the paleontological resources in the park to develop a program to protect and present them.
- Effectiveness of Management Actions – Fair. The 2002 park management plan provides solid direction for park management and is being implemented. There are facets of the plan that still need to be implemented (e.g., paleontological resources), and other areas were plan objectives, actions and targets need refinement.

The following represent major factors that could affect the state of the park and the ongoing management of the park, and will be considered in the review of the park management plan:

- Exotic and Invasive Species: More than fifty exotic plants currently found within the park, notably crested wheatgrass, smooth brome and yellow sweet clover, are of immediate concern to the restoration and sustainability of the native prairie ecosystem. Seventy-eight invasive plants not yet in the park have been identified in the region, including leafy spurge, which is a major concern to the regional economy and environment.
- Loss and Fragmentation of Habitat: Only 19% of Saskatchewan’s original mixed grass prairie ecosystem remains intact, and much is fragmented into small parcels. Portions of land within and neighbouring the proposed boundary of Grasslands NPC have been cultivated and more may be, should economic conditions support increased crop production in the region. Increased land under cultivation, as well as increased oil and gas and gravel exploration and extraction, could decrease and fragment suitable habitat for many native species, increase the probability of undesirable exotics invading, and isolate park populations of native species.
- Modified Disturbance Regime: Modified disturbance regimes, particularly wildfire, large herbivore grazing and flooding, are important processes to the functioning and biodiversity of the mixed grass prairie ecosystem. The park’s role in reintroducing these disturbance regimes (e.g. prescribed burning and grazing) and managing them in a manner that respects the concerns of park neighbours and regional interests is a major challenge for park management.
- Climate Change: Climate change has wide ranging implications on this semi-arid ecosystem. Prairie climate, including drought and windstorms, is predicted to extend much further north over the next 50-100 years. A north-south system of refuges and corridors may be essential to conserving species during rapid habitat shift. The Great Plains are severely fragmented; many species may have trouble dispersing to new habitats as biome boundaries shift.
- Species at Risk (SAR): Challenges with SAR include species reintroduction, reconciling need to identify and protect critical habitat for species at risk while still achieving broad ecosystem-management goals such as restoring disturbance regimes, and harmonizing SAR with park management and monitoring programs.

- **Park Operations:** As a relatively new national park, there are inadequate facilities and services for visitors. As well, there are evolving park research and management programs. As these are addressed, the potential for cumulative impacts of these facilities, services and activities on ecological integrity, cultural resources and visitor experiences is a concern.
- **Cultural Resource Management:** The park is without a Cultural Resources Value Statement for cultural heritage ranging from pre-contact Aboriginal sites to the recent ranching era, which is necessary to incorporate the inventory and evaluation of these resources and better consider them in park management decision-making and interpretation.
- **Paleontological Resources:** The park has not taken adequate measures to protect and present the paleontological resources.
- **Targeting Audiences:** The park knows its current visitors, but does not know its potential and evolving target markets. This is particularly relevant as the type of visitors to the park is shifting.
- **Learning Opportunities and Visitor Experiences:** There is an array of learning opportunities (including outreach) and interpretation programs that most visitors use. However, the 2003 park visitor survey suggests that visitors left with a less than satisfactory understanding of the park's significance. There are not ample learning opportunities and visitor experiences linked with the park's natural, cultural and paleontological themes.

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