



Is the park you visit this summer . . .



WE NEED A LAW THAT PROTECTS OUR PARKS

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, LOCAL CITIZENS and conservation groups in Ontario have had to jump to the defence of our provincial parks and conservation reserves again and again. From proposals to develop an international tournament-scale golf course in Bronte Creek Provincial Park to the ongoing dispute over mining in the Mellon Lake Conservation Reserve, our parks and protected areas have been threatened by one ill-considered development proposal after another. Places we thought were protected for future generations have instead been targeted for roads, recreational developments and even mining and logging.

Why is this happening? Simply put, we do not have a strong park law that rules out destructive uses and protects these special places for our kids and their kids. In fact, a recent report produced by the University of Victoria ranked Ontario last among all provinces and territories for the legal protection of parks and protected areas. The study pointed out that Ontario does not have strong limitations on development in parks and that our parks system does not have a clear mandate to make the protection of species and ecosystems the top priority in parks management.

still going to be there next year?



WILDLANDS LEAGUE
A chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

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Roads are wilderness destroyers. From left: Gravel pit and Highway 60 in Algonquin Park; Lake Superior Provincial Park

We need a law that protects our parks

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Our understanding of the role that parks play in protecting our environment, securing habitat for species — including endangered animals and plants — protecting sources of clean water and helping to purify our air has changed dramatically since the Ontario parks system was formed in 1954 with just eight parks. Today, Ontario can boast more than 600 protected areas, but we still do not have a law that protects these wild areas from incompatible uses, including:

↳ expanded motorized recreation, including snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use. Today's snowmobiles can travel at very high speeds and snowmobile trails are often as wide and hard packed as a municipal road. ATV use, meanwhile, is growing rapidly thanks to aggressive marketing by manufacturers. Use of these machines can lead to erosion, soil compaction, habitat destruction and disturbance of sensitive wildlife, particularly during nesting season. Recently, there have been increasing demands to build new snowmobile and ATV trails in our parks.

↳ How divided a natural area is by roads is now widely recognized as a key indicator of how healthy the area's ecosystems are likely to be. Roads break apart the large habitat areas required by many species into smaller, less useful fragments, increase dust, noise and heat in surrounding areas, lead to erosion and pollution problems in waterways and pave the way for illegal access by poachers and others. Developers continue to push for new roads in parks and conser-



vation reserves and our weak legislation means Ministry of Natural Resources staff must consider these proposals.

↳ recreational development, including golf courses, theatres and entertainment complexes that are increasingly being proposed as ways of raising revenues to offset park budget cuts. Golf courses replace rich and diverse habitats with areas that require intensive watering, fertilization and pesticide use. Entertainment centres, water parks and other recreational developments also displace valuable natural habitat and increase traffic, noise and disturbances for wildlife.

↳ mine staking, despite a recent decision by the government to stop new claim staking in parks, remains a threat particularly if the government ever decides to make a policy reversal. At particular risk are 23 of our most important parks, including such wilderness areas as Wabakimi, Woodland Caribou and Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater, where mining claim staking could still be permitted at the discretion of the Minister of Natural Resources.

How weak is the current protection for our parks?

> Today, whole parks can be eliminated at a meeting of the provincial cabinet. The boundaries of our parks are

Mining at Mellon Lake – Blasting a hole in the parks system

The repeated attempts by an Ontario mining company to develop a mine in the Mellon Lake Conservation Reserve near Kingston have drawn attention to the threat posed by mining to our parks and conservation reserves. Mellon has long been designated an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest due to the unusual species, such as the eastern prickly pear cactus, that populate its open rock ridges. This recognition led to the area being chosen as a new Conservation Reserve in 1999. But that hasn't

stopped miners from trying to extract granite in this new protected area.



Aerial view of Mellon Lake mine site

Conservation groups, local citizens and cottagers have put enormous time and resources into fighting this destructive proposal and it just keeps coming back — under the *Aggregate Resources Act* there is no limit on how many times the mining company can re-apply for a permit. All of our parks should be declared off-limits to mining once and for all.

Is the park you visit this summer still going to be there next year?

not set out in law, so sections of parks can (and have been) deleted. The cabinet also has almost unlimited authority to allow any use it sees fit in a park or reserve, including logging and mining.

- > There are no requirements to manage parks to protect habitat, even for endangered species.
- > The majority of our parks do not even have current management plans, which means they have no plans for protecting species and ecosystems.



The future for all wild species in our parks is not secure

Most recently, the official recommendations presented to the provincial government at the conclusion of the Lands for Life land-use planning process also called for better legal protection for our parks system. Again, a key recommendation was that we formally recognize that the purpose of parks is to protect and preserve nature, not to accommodate development.

How can we better protect our parks?

Ontario's parks and protected-areas system today consists of 634 parks and conservation reserves covering more than 9.4 million hectares. We have made enormous progress over the past decade toward our goal of representing all of Ontario's natural regions in our protected-areas system and we now have a clear plan for completing this critically important task in the northern and central parts of the province. But our efforts could be severely undermined if we do not ensure that this irreplaceable natural legacy is protected for future generations.

Over the past two decades, a number of provincial committees and advisory bodies have pointed to the need to give Ontario's parks and protected-areas system

better legal protection. In 1992, for example, the Ministry of Natural Resources recommended revising parks legislation to recognize the key ecological role of parks and to better ensure their long-term protection. In a discussion paper on parks legislation, the ministry noted that "the preservation of natural heritage cannot be achieved without a strong legislative framework."

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The current government has acknowledged that our parks system needs better protection and has made a commitment to drafting new parks legislation. CPAWS-Wildlands League has been encouraging the government to take action on this promise. With a team of 20 experts, we have drafted a detailed proposal and recommendations for a process to develop a new *Parks Act*.

To ensure a healthy future for our protected areas, we believe Ontario needs a park law that makes the ecological protection of parks and conservation reserves the first priority in parks planning and management. We need a law that:

- ✓ legislates the boundaries of parks and conservation reserves so that they cannot be arbitrarily changed
- ✓ makes the development of management plans focused on maintaining the ecological health of our protected areas mandatory

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Exploring nature in Lake Superior Provincial Park



Algonquin's majestic old-growth pine stands have all but disappeared

Algonquin – Ontario's flagship suffers the unkindest cut

More than 75% of Algonquin Park is open to logging and the impacts on the supposedly protected ecosystems and species inside the park are far ranging and severe. A number of important tree species, including white and red pine, yellow birch and red oak, are known to be regenerating poorly in the park either due to poor re-growth after logging or wildfire suppression (also linked to logging). The skyscraping white pines that once soared above the rest of the forest canopy have almost all disappeared from the park, taking with them important nesting sites for hawks and eagles and refuges for bears. And logging activities directly disturb sensitive creatures.

The still-expanding road network built to facilitate logging in the park stretches for more than 2,000 kilometres – that's enough road to join the park to St. John's, Nfld. as the crow flies. Algonquin is the only park in Ontario where logging still occurs. As part of a new parks law, we should adopt an economically sustainable phase-out plan for logging in the park such as the one outlined in the Wildlands League report *Restoring Nature's Place*.





Roads – wilderness destroyers

In Temagami, a protected area near Obabika Lake may soon be divided by a new logging road. The MNR is proposing to turn an old trail into a full-scale road, despite prohibitions against building logging roads in provincial Conservation Reserve policy.

The fact is, we know that roads are wilderness destroyers. Studies have shown that species like lynx and black bears are less common in areas with many roads. Woodland caribou were once found as far south as Algonquin in Ontario but with the spread of roads and development have now retreated to remote forest areas north of Lake Superior.

The problems created by roads are equally severe for small animals like frogs, salamanders and turtles that may not be able to cross roads or will die trying. Roads are often built along the floodplain beside rivers and streams, which can lead directly to deteriorating water quality as sand, gravel and toxic contaminants wash off roads into waterways. And roads can dramatically increase hunting and fishing pressure in previously hard-to-reach areas. We need tight restrictions on road building as part of improved ecological management of parks.

Rare habitat built over and mown down

In Southern Ontario, most of the region's rich forests, prairies, savannas and wetlands have long since been cleared, drained or built over. And that makes the few surviving natural areas that can still be found around the southern Great Lakes all that much more important. Yet instead of doing everything we can to protect and restore ecosystems in southern parks like Rondeau and Turkey Point, we are using these natural areas for cottaging areas and golf courses. Close to 300 private residences have been built in Rondeau's rare oak savanna and oak woodland habitat. Many have become substantial summer homes that dominate the landscape. Now there is pressure to actually sell the lots these houses sit on (currently leased from the park) to the homeowners. The tenuous protection that our park lands



A residential home in Rondeau Park.

are currently given helps make such privatization of public lands a real possibility. Meanwhile, Turkey Point Provincial Park, which encompasses one of the best remaining examples of oak savanna and natural shoreline in Ontario, is under pressure from cottagers who want to cut and mow native beach grasses and uproot wetland species. We should be actively restoring natural areas in our parks, not developing them for private benefit.



We need a law that protects our parks

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- ✓ puts maintaining natural values and intact wild areas ahead of other uses in parks management
- ✓ strictly limits development, including roads and intensive recreational facilities, in these valuable areas
- ✓ requires regular public reports on the state of the parks system's health and action plans for addressing ecological threats

The need to protect, maintain and restore the natural features, wildlife, waters and lands within our existing provincial parks and reserves is no less urgent than the need to complete the system itself. Internal and external pressures on our parks system will only continue to increase as a result of human population growth, air and water pollution, climate change and the further fragmentation and development of the landscape

outside of protected areas. We need to act today to ensure that our parks have strong legal protection – now and forever.

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- tell me about threats to parks in my region
- send me a copy of the citizen's guide to new park establishment
- send me a copy of your *Parks Act* discussion paper

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