

## **The Future of our National Parks and Reserves: Protected Ecosystem, Stockpiled Resources or Natural Disneyland?**

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Every year thousands of visitors flock to our nation's national and provincial parks, refuges and reserves to escape the city and experience a little bit of wilderness. I remember, as a child, my father packing the family car full of camping equipment. Tents, sleeping bags, coolers and the familiar smell of bug spray flooded the vehicle as we set out on the six-hour trip to our favourite provincial park. While there, we would hike the park's trails, fish from the parks' waters and swim off the park's sandy beaches. It was a time to experience nature, escape into the wild and relax in a familiar recreational setting.

We have all come to know our parks and reserves as recreational areas. These are places that have been set-aside for the residents of the province or nation to enjoy. Parks and reserves are also known as places that are protected and preserved to maintain a variety of ecosystems. Somewhere between recreation and protection there is a conflict of interest. How can a place be used by thousands of people a year and at the same time be protected and preserved in a natural state?

Prince Edward Island National Park is one of the main tourist attractions on the small island province of Prince Edward Island and is one of the most visited national parks in Canada. This park offers some of the most beautiful beaches in all of Canada located on the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The park protects a portion of the Maritime Plain Natural Region, which is characterized by sand dunes, barrier islands and beaches, sandspits, and associated wetlands. The roots and rhizomes of the marram grass plant hold sand dunes together. Protection of the marram grass is vital to the protection of the sand dunes. However, when visitors to the park want to relax on the beach's warm, red sand, they must cross over the sand dunes. Studies have shown that it can take as few as 10 footsteps through the same area to destroy a marram grass colony. Once the grass is gone, the wind blows away the exposed sand and carves small depressions into giant holes called blowouts. Blowouts turn stable dunes into constantly shifting hills, unable to support vegetation or wildlife. Even though research on the effect of trampling on vegetation is a major priority for the Park, there is a direct conflict between the recreational values of the park and the ecological values of protection.

Another conflict of values is occurring in the United States where some parts of the United States government would like to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). This oil-drilling project would affect the calving grounds of over 120,000 caribou of the porcupine caribou herd. ANWR was set aside to protect three different ecosystems and to preserve unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values. The U.S. government now wants to jeopardize its preservation values in exchange for the economic value of the oil to be drilled. A decision must be made whether or not to keep the wilderness as wild, or to change the wilderness to suit human resource needs.

If there is a conflict of values in our parks and reserves, confusion can result among members of the public. Visitors to Prince Edward Island National Park are asked to be careful of where they walk in the park, but the paths they take to their favourite beach areas cross over the most fragile of environments. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a place to protect the wilderness and its resources, but if the economic values of the resource outweigh the ecological values of the resource, conflict arises between stakeholders. Only until we can fully define our goals for parks and refuges will we be able to avoid political and scientific conflict in these protected areas.