

# Ecological Integrity and National Narrative

## Cleaning Up Canada's National Parks

BY CATRIONA SANDILANDS

*Les parcs nationaux au Canada vivent actuellement une "crise" selon l'auteure qui déplore une certaine intégrité relevant d'une vision purifiée de l'histoire institutionnelle qui déplace les genres, les ethnies, les classes et autres relations de pouvoir engagés dans les conflits toujours présents quand il s'agit de représenter le Canada, sans oublier ses paysages grandioses.*

### Parks in crisis? The discourse of integrity

Canada's national parks have been much in the news in recent months. During 1999 and 2000, a federally-appointed Panel on Ecological Integrity visited the parks, consulted with park staff, and pored over scientific studies with the agenda of providing the federal government with a series of system-wide recommendations for ecological management in the parks. The Panel presented some of its results to a group of wilderness preservationists and Parks Canada staff in fall of 1999, and released its final report in the spring of 2000; its conclusions were, to quote the *Globe and Mail*, that "Canada's national parks are in deep trouble from sea to sea, and the federal department charged with keeping them healthy is not up to the task" (Mitchell A1) of doing so.

This "crisis" situation is not news for either Parks Canada staff or preservationists. Resource extractive, agricultural, and development activities impinge on many parks from outside, in some cases involving intensive resource use right up to park borders. In addition, and particularly in more the popular tourist areas of Southern Canada, many parks are ecologically stressed from within as a result of roads, recreational and other services, and even the sheer numbers of visitors who are, in the words of one commentator, "loving the parks to death." These impacts are not new, nor are they confined to particularly high-profile places such as Banff; according to the Panel, all but one of the parks are under some form of ecological pressure.

From an environmental perspective, it is about time that the federal government should recognize that there are inherent conflicts between ecological integrity and resource extraction or international tourism in the national parks, a problem only exacerbated by pressures to become financially self-sustaining in the face of the considerable federal funding cutbacks that have faced the parks over the last ten-plus years.

So the crisis isn't a surprise, and one might applaud the work of the Panel in making the terms of the crisis so abundantly clear. What is surprising is the degree to which all of the parties involved, including Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, seem to accept the premise that Canada's national parks are, or should be, primarily oriented to ecological preservation. Viewed through a historical lens, this orientation is really quite new. Many of Canada's national parks were created for reasons that have precious little to do with ecological preservation; Rocky Mountains Park (now Banff), created in 1885 as a tourist resort around a hot spring, is the system's originating example, and economic or political arguments have been at least as important in determining park locations as ecological ones for most of the intervening 115 years. Indeed, it was only through 1988 amendments to the *National Parks Act* that Parks Canada's tripartite mandate of preservation, education, and recreation was ordered to put preservation solidly first.

This more conflictual history, however, tends to be overlooked in the rather unidimensional public discourse currently circulating about the parks. Although Canada's national parks have a fascinating variety of social, political, and economic meanings—ranging from economic development for local communities to ideological ammunition in federalist political agendas—such diversity is eclipsed by this story that retroactively produces all of the parks as equivalent subjects of a singular ecological telos. Despite the fact that the parks are really a fairly haphazard collection of sites that perform a variety of local roles, in this singular story parks are understood to have always been, in their essence, about nature preservation. For example, the *1994 Parks Canada Guiding Principles and Operational Policies* states that "for more than a century, the Government of Canada has been involved in protecting outstanding natural areas.... This extensive experience has enabled Canada to be recognized, internationally, as a world leader in the management of heritage" (Ministry of Canadian Heritage 9).

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Aside from the hypocrisy of this claim—the words were written in the middle of deep federal cutbacks—one can see that the Ecological Integrity Panel is as much a part of this story as a challenge to it. The problem with the parks, according to the reports of the Panel's findings, is not so much that there are conflicting desires or meanings for the lands, species, and cultures that are contained within them, but more that their obvious and primary ecological purpose has been badly maintained or, at worst, temporarily

obscured at the hands of ill-informed staff or politicians. Thus, with the benefit of the Panel's much-heralded ecological expertise, Parks Canada can now simply bring on-the-ground practices more closely in line with its ongoing historical desires, namely, preservation; the crisis is thus not a crisis of purpose, but simply a crisis of management.

#### **A national heritage and a commercial history**

I dwell on the Ecological Integrity Panel not because I find the critical tenor of its report especially problematic, but because I see its work as exemplifying an interesting dynamic in the parks' current representation of nature. To put it plainly, the retrospective re-signification of the parks as "instances" of a single and systemic ecological telos bespeaks not just a preservationist desire, but a nationalist one. Indeed, there is an apparent "naturalness" to the linkage of the two: ecological management of the parks is protecting national heritage. This may seem obvious—the Panel will present its report, after all, to the same Sheila Copps who distributes millions of flags on July 1—but I think it is worth examining the connection a bit more closely with a view to unpacking the representational significance of Canada's national parks, and of the ideological import of the Ecological Integrity Panel.

As I have argued, it would be a considerable mistake to suggest that preservation has always been the primary motive for the formation of national parks, but it would be equally incorrect to suggest that all of the parks were created for overtly nationalist reasons. Indeed, as Leslie Bella has suggested, profit has often been the primary motive behind the development of the parks, beginning with Banff.

The story leading up to the 1885 creation of Rocky Mountains Park is actually quite sordid, but in brief, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was granted monopoly use of a stretch of land surrounding the hot springs now known as the Cave and Basin. Noted one of the spring's supposed discoverers,

in a flare of vision we felt that this place would become one of the most famous resorts for both health and pleasure for people from every part of the continent as well as people from every part of the world. (Cardell qtd. in Bella 11)

Here, the draw for tourists was not so much the rude grandeur of a protected wilderness, but the small bastion of comfort and privilege that the CPR had built with some help from the Dominion government of Sir John A. MacDonald.

It is, however, important to note that Rocky Mountains Park was inscribed simultaneously with desires for tourist profit and with desires for a nation. Although Sir John A. was beholden to the CPR for its role in fulfilling his "national dream," he understood very well that even if the CPR were going to be the one to profit from tourism, it fell on the nation to hold and administer the land itself in the public trust. Thus, in 1886, the land around the hot springs was surveyed not by the CPR but by the Dominion Government; thus, MacDonald and a number of Members of Parliament took the train to Banff and beyond in order both to impress confederation on the land, and to represent the land in confederation (Lothian). Stated Donald Smith, one of MacDonald's MP companions, to the House of Commons in 1886: "anyone who has gone to Banff ... and not felt himself elevated and proud of all that is part of the Dominion, cannot be a true Canadian" (qtd. in Lothian 22).

Even at this very early stage, one can see that there is a certain representational tension in the landscape. On the one hand, the park is a particular place, distinctive and remarkable because of its exceptional scenic grandeur and, of course, because of its site-defining hot springs. These features were organized and augmented, through the development of quite an elaborate visitor infrastructure and advertising campaign, into a tourist experience that relied on a projection of sublime uniqueness: how else to get visitors to travel thousands of miles on the CPR to go to what was, for the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, the middle of nowhere? Thus, the park became a destination, a place unlike any other the world; the particular segment of the Rockies that is "Banff" has taken on a significance that relies on continually emphasizing the specificity of the locale in relation to the surrounding region.

On the other hand, even before Rocky Mountains Park was joined by Yoho and others that gave flesh to the idea of a national parks system, its destinational specificity was partly effected by its status as a national park. In a sense, there was always something in Banff more than Banff itself; its national park status gave it a burden of significance that distinguished it from other merely tourist sites, notably from Niagara Falls, and linked it instead to an overarching narrative of nation-building. Thus, the Banff visitor was not simply going to the mountains; s/he was going to witness the essence of the Dominion in all of its

glory, crafted from a combination of colonial civility and imposing wilderness. The nature of the park was, and is, overdetermined by its location in a narrative of nationhood.

To varying degrees depending on the park or historical moment in question, all of the parks are shaped by this tension. On the one hand, parks are “localities,” both in the sense of being particular sites of complex negotiation among varied cultural and natural processes, and in the sense, emphasized by sociologists such as John Urry, of being particular destinations that must market their local specificity as such to a potentially visiting audience. On the other hand, part of that very specificity is the fact that the “emparked” local space has been designated and produced as a site of national significance and, in the course of being developed and provisioned as a federal signifying space, has taken on the pedagogical task of representing the nation.

### National parks, state subjects, global consumers

When I began my research, I imagined that the parks would demonstrate their national significance in fairly obvious ways, ranging from strategic representations of maple leaves and beavers to a shared interpretive focus on, perhaps, nation-building in the wilderness. By and large, however, this is not the case, and few parks can claim, along with Banff, to be so obviously and iconically “Canadian” as to be already saturated with national meaning. I once joked that the only way you know you’re in a *national* park is because the signs are brown and yellow; this is actually not far off the mark, as the parks largely show their national collectivity by being commonly organized according to federal administrative dictates.

Parks Canada has tight design criteria for trails and campsites in addition to phenomenally detailed signage requirements, and individual parks are required to adhere to zoning criteria that organize park space in very predictable—and very disciplinary—ways. Permanent institutions of nature interpretation, while varied in content, also collectively regulate the visitor’s experience; not only do signposts tell us where to walk—with trail design showing us how—but instructive contents reveal to us what we should be learning about nature in carefully spaced and digestible bites along the way. In a nutshell, the end result of this primarily regulatory pedagogical experience is that the visitor comes to know “Canada” by participating in the parks as a willing and obedient subject of the federal state.

One might continue the joke: how typically *Canadian* to rely so strongly on an experience of the state to incite in us the sensibility of a nation. But there is also an interesting twist: parks are nature-spaces, and it is no accident that we find in them an articulation of the disciplinary authority of the state with a powerful discourse of natural law or, more benevolently, environmental citizenship. I will re-

turn to this theme presently; for now, it is important to note that, in the parks, the state speaks frequently as nature, with cartoon fish telling us about the perils of using phosphate soap and trees, like needy wardens, asking us to stay on the state-designed trails.

As the early experience of Banff has shown us, however, national park spaces are only partly organized by their insertion into national—or state—discourses. It is equally important to understand that the demarcation of a park-space also represents a particular insertion of a landscape into relations of international capital. In many instances, dreams of local economic development have fuelled agitation for park creation, especially in economically depressed areas. Although most of these dreams have not actually been realized, there is a lasting effect; the constitution of a national park landscape as a site for consumption—and as a site to be itself consumed—creates out of the landscape a local spectacle-object for what Urry calls the global tourist gaze. In this tourist-oriented generation of the park as a unique and consumable “locality,” the national relevance of the space recedes into the background behind a more globalized network of distinctive local sites.

The most famous example of this in Canada is, I think, Prince Edward Island National Park which almost everyone knows better as the home of *Anne of Green Gables*. Although the park is actually a nature-park and not just the “Green Gables” site—it tries to protect dune ecosystems, for example—the hundreds of thousands of international visitors who go there every year are not there for the beach. Rather, the park includes the childhood home of *Anne of Green Gables* author Lucy Maud Montgomery; the Cavendish site is presented to evoke as much of the *Anne* books as possible in both the house and surrounding landscape, including a fascinating presentation of the local flora and fauna through Montgomery’s novels and journals, and a concerted attempt to portray certain outdoor sites as if they were the places described in the *Anne* books themselves.

Leaving aside the fact that *Anne of Green Gables* is a work of fiction and may be rather problematic as the organizing narrative of a national *historic* site, it is quite clear that PEI National Park is inserted into a global web of tourist relations that has no particular investment in the park’s “national” status. Rather, *Anne* has an international currency that has resulted in her insertion—and thus, the insertion of *Green Gables*—into a remarkably lucrative tourist trade that is carried along a corridor linking a very specific (simulacral) locality directly to

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consumers in, especially, Japan.

Although PEI is, perhaps, an extreme example, it is abundantly clear that the cultivation of local specificity for an international market is part of the constitution of many national parks; in this, one must also point to the fact that nature is, increasingly, a desired visual consumer object in its own right. In fact, the increasing understanding of nature as a spectacle for visual consumption—think of iconic representations of snow-covered mountains and

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“charismatic megafauna”—allows the parks to take up places in a variety of different cultural discourses of nature. At the same time, there is a general weakening of the ties binding park nature to the soil of the nation.

In their re-signification as spectacles for a wider variety of nature discourses, however, an interesting homogenization occurs. To put it, perhaps, over-simply: parks, as international destinations, need to resemble the pictures that tourists have seen in the brochures that invited them. In this relation, nature becomes a series of photo-opportunities; the tourist has truly “experienced” nature when she has

the pictures of it to take home, and these pictures should resemble the ones that she saw before she came, for example, on the biscuit tins in the duty-free shop at the airport. In this commoditizing move, the specificity of the landscape is organized to the facilitation of particular kinds of views—distance, vista, breathtaking grandeur, wildlife, etc. Thus, although “locality” is the draw, it might be an illusion.

Indeed, although I don’t want to sound like a technological determinist, photography has had an inordinate influence both on the particular organization of parks and on the commodification of nature as a whole. Most broadly, as Urry argues, the pervasive organization of tourism through desires for visual consumption has “increased the demand to travel to and record landscapes which are free from various kinds of visible pollution” (176). Of course, this involves a contradiction. At the same time as the desire for the unpolluted has increased public attention on preservation—environmentalism is partly a consumer movement—it has also, in turn, “increased the numbers and concentration of visitors all seeking to capture particularly memorable views” (176).

**Ecological integrity as sanitary nationalism**

To sum up the preceding argument: Canadian national parks are perched on a representational tension between

their national and their local-global networks of meaning. Although both elements have been present since the origins of the Canadian national parks system—indeed, one could argue that the very idea of a national park is enabled by their combination—there are particular contours to their dynamics at the present moment. On the one hand, the national representation of the parks tends to be state- rather than nation-focused. In opposition, say, to a linking and organizing narrative that ideologically ties nature to nation, what we have in the parks is a common investment in the disciplinary authority of the state. This authority is often represented as nature. On the other hand, the overt representational content of the parks tends to concentrate on local distinctiveness and specificity; in part, this is due to the fact that the national parks system is a rather haphazard collection of sites, but more importantly, the insertion of parks into global tourist relations demands a presentation of locality that, especially in the current global market, transcends national meanings. This set of representations relies on the constitution of nature as a commodity whose meaning is not necessarily tied to narratives of the nation.

In this context, the generation of a narrative resignifying the national parks as essentially preservationist sites represents an attempt to re-nationalize the presence and meaning of the parks. On the one hand, the narrative draws on a continuation of the linkage of the federal state with the authority and space of nature; on the other, it also draws on the aesthetic desire for an unspoiled wilderness that Urry describes as a significant dimension of nature in the global tourist gaze. What is added, in the current retrospective preservationist narrative, is a more overtly nationalist orientation that helps to articulate the other two elements; this is the idea that national parks are, and have always been, about the protection of Canada’s ecological heritage.

In the first place, it must be recognized that the current focus by the Ecological Integrity Panel and others on ecosystem management involves a highly particular understanding of nature. Indeed, part of the Panel’s power lies in its ability to claim a fuller grasp of this “new” knowledge than was present in earlier, apparently misinformed park management practices. The reinscription of the parks as “ecosystems”—as opposed, say, to sites of human history—involves a particular scientization of nature in which the essential value of the park is determined, not by the local (and especially aboriginal) communities who may have interacted with the landscape in various ways in both the past and the present, but by trained park experts.

In light of the multiplicity of discourses in which the parks are currently elements—from global *Anne of Green Gables* fetishism to the local histories of resource-based and/or aboriginal communities—the strong assertion of an essential “ecosystem” telos thus suggests a form of epistemological discipline. Re-reading the history of the

parks as a more-or-less continuous narrative of preservationist intent by the federal government creates a new essence for park nature, and that essence—which can, it seems, only be fully understood by ecologists—centralizes interpretive and managerial authority in the state. By appointing, internally, an expert panel and admitting, in a very limited way, a lack of ecological awareness in its past practices, the state thus reasserts a commitment to the parks that is understood to have arisen at the moment of the founding of the system. Not only are the trees the bearers of federal discipline, but the state, in its new green cloak, can now be seen as the benevolent protector of the essence of the trees, as if the two sets of interests were naturally tied.

In addition to a reassertion of the state's authority in the parks, however, the discourse of ecosystem management also enables a new narrative of the nation. Specifically, each of the parks is currently understood as "representing" one of Canada's 39 ecological regions, and the current plan is for Parks Canada to establish one park in each region (the original idea was that this would be before the year 2000). Not only does this aura of "representation" obscure the fact that, historically, park sites have not been chosen with this criterion in mind—there are five parks in the Rocky Mountains natural region and none in the Interior Dry Plateau—but it also has the effect of systematizing the parks in ways that contribute to a rather homogenizing Canadian nationalist agenda.

Specifically, there is a logic of enumeration at work that reorganizes our understanding of Canadian national nature from an iconic model to a mosaic model. Whereas, in the past, sites such as Banff—or, perhaps, the Group of Seven's Georgian Bay—could singly "represent" some essence of Canada, the understanding of the nation as a collection of natural regions suggests that this essence is now distributed across the map of the country.

Each park, as a representative of the part rather than the whole, is resignified to become merely one link in a chain of meaning that can only be apprehended through the whole, which is, of course, the national parks system. To put it differently, the sign value of each park is removed from the local—and from the linkage of that local to other, potentially globalizing networks of meaning—and redistributed to the system; individual parks become mere instances of a national territorial logic that transcends and shapes them all equally.

There are, of course, distinct echoes of official multiculturalism in this representation; if Canada is an ethnic mosaic, then why not a natural one, too? The problem with enumerative natural regions lies not, however, in their nod to geographic diversity. The problem lies in the fact that natural diversity is understood only in terms of the scientized categories of ecosystems. Here, ecosystems are understood as essential landscape categories that derive only from geological, topographical, and other "natural" facts. These facts are understood to pre-

cede and take priority over any human activities or meanings; thus, ecological diversity is understood as an inherent and original feature of the land that comprises the political territory of Canada. Represent that diversity and you have represented the sum total of Canadian nature. This diversity is not only determined by the categories of ecological science alone—again, a practice heavily centralized in the state—but it delegitimizes any notion that different cultural understandings of nature might be at least as important to Canadian heritage as a representation of ecosystems. Thus, the equation of ecosystems with national heritage is a disciplinary manoeuvre; diversity can, after all, be captured, protected, and represented in a single, national narrative.

Despite the fact that I actually admire some of the work of the Ecological Integrity Panel, and despite the fact that I, as somewhat of a left-nationalist, tend to applaud the desire to reinscribe Canada's national parks with a discourse less obviously concerned with global tourist spectacle, I find in the current park discourse more than a little reason to be uncomfortable. Quite apart from the fact that the ecologi-

cal concern of the federal government is otherwise quite doubtful, I see, in the move to tie heritage with ecology in a system-wide preservationist push, a disturbing desire to create a naturalized narrative of the Canadian nation.

In this over-determining move, we lose the richness of the parks as conflictual localities, as sites of interaction both historically and currently among global, local and different national meanings; we also ignore that they are sites where human presence was and is felt in a variety of ways—I have really only alluded to the gendered, class and racialized erasures involved in the desire for parks to be "unspoiled" places. But, perhaps more importantly, what we get is an official heritage story that tells us, ideally, that our natural-national "origins" must be enumerated and preserved from the past to the future as if we were never there. The current "crisis" facing the parks, in these terms, concerns the degree to which we wish to erase the fact that the messy and frequently unecological history of the nation is as much a part of our heritage as any other aspect of the parks. And a singular focus on so-called integrity, in this context, invokes a sanitized institutional history that displaces the racial, gendered, class and other power relations involved in the ongoing struggle for the representation of Canada, including its natural landscapes.

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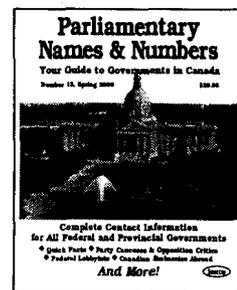
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