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Woodley, Alison

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# **THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS: THE CASE OF THE CANADIAN PARKS AND WILDERNESS SOCIETY (CPAWS)**

**Alison Woodley and David W. Poulton**

## **Introduction**

Environmental non-governmental organizations play an important role in the establishment and management of parks and protected areas in Canada. In this paper we outline the roles that one organization, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), has played over its 45 year history in Canada, and explore some of the approaches and plans currently being advanced by CPAWS to achieve conservation goals.

CPAWS is a national non-governmental conservation organization that has focused on parks and protected areas since 1963. Over its 45 year history, CPAWS (which until 1986 was called the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada (NPPAC)), has helped to permanently protect over 400,000 sq km of land and water in parks and protected areas in Canada, and has worked to strengthen policy and legal frameworks for parks and conservation across the country.

CPAWS' niche among Canadian non-governmental conservation organizations is our specific focus on parks and protected areas on Canada's public lands. Our organizational structure is unique in that it includes a national CPAWS organization and 13 regional chapters – a structure which parallels Canada's land use decision-making structure where jurisdiction is divided between the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

In 1968, the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada co-hosted the Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow conference with the University of Calgary. At that time, the NPPAC was a young organization bringing forward for the first time a strong, nation-wide, organized public voice in support of protecting our national and provincial parks, and securing more lands and waters within these parks systems (Henderson, 1968).

In recent years CPAWS has broadened the scope of our work to address the growing evidence that a much larger scale of conservation action is required to protect healthy ecosystems in the long term. As a result, CPAWS is now focused on large land- and seascape scale conservation regimes.

To achieve this much larger-scale conservation effort we believe that all sectors and levels of government need to be engaged in the effort, along with many more Canadians than ever before. There is an urgent need to “mainstream” the idea of large land- and seascape conservation. NGOs like CPAWS have a critical role to play in educating Canadians about why a much bigger conservation vision is required, and how the public can engage in implementing such a vision on the ground. We need to bring forward the

evidence that protecting significantly more land and water is absolutely necessary to safeguard the life support system of the planet, and make a compelling case that achieving such an ambitious conservation goal is indeed possible.

This paper explores the role that CPAWS has played in establishing and managing protected areas in the past, and how we are embracing a bold, new vision and approach and working to embed a large land- and seascape-scale conservation vision into mainstream thinking and action in Canada.

### **CPAWS' beginnings – A political call for a public voice**

In 1960, the Honourable Alvin Hamilton, federal Minister responsible for National Parks lamented in the House of Commons:

*How can a minister stand up against the pressures of commercial interests who want to use the parks for mining, forestry, for every kind of honky-tonk device known to man, unless the people who love these parks are prepared to band together and support the minister by getting the facts out across the country?*

*(Henderson, 1968)*

Leading up to this Ministerial plea for help, the North American economy was booming, as was the population. The resultant increase in disposable income meant people were hitting the road and vacationing in our parks as never before. Visitation to national parks was growing by 10 to 15% per year and there was enormous pressure on governments to develop more major commercial tourism and recreational infrastructure to accommodate this growth. At the same time there was growing pressure to use the parks for more natural resource extraction. Yet there was no overall policy framework in place to guide national park management.

The Minister's plea was brought to the seminal 1961 "Resources for Tomorrow" conference<sup>1</sup> in Montreal where it was concluded that:

*There is a need for an informed, organized, non-government association to promote the interests of [new] park development and perform a watchdog role over those areas now reserved for park purposes.*

*(Henderson, 1968)*

In response, the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada (NPPAC) was formed in 1963 to fill this role. It is worth noting that the committee that was struck to create the NPPAC included representatives from existing conservation groups who recognized that a new organization was needed to work specifically on parks issues, and that this new group would complement the work of existing organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> This conference was organized to address growing concern about the status and future of Canada's natural resources in the face of growing demand, and in the absence of government policy frameworks. (Hodge and Robinson, 2001)

## **CPAWS' role in advancing conservation**

It is important to recognize that as an organization of civil society, CPAWS does not focus on goals that are primarily financial or power-based. While we are certainly concerned with finances and with influence, these are tools to move us towards our conservation goals.

In contrast to public servants who are charged with establishing and maintaining our parks, we are not bound by existing policy frameworks. As such we are free to advance ideas that may not yet have received the imprimatur of the political level of government.

Unlike politicians, we are not bound by the short time horizons or constraints of maintaining the broad base of political support necessary to get elected. Rather we represent a more unified segment of society joined together by a common belief that we need to do more to protect nature. While we certainly hope to reflect public sentiment, our mission focus allows us to, and prescribes that we should, weather occasional storms when our ideas are not in public favour. We can seek a firmer, longer term foundation in principle and sound science.

We are distinct from scientists in that we are not constrained by the necessity to maintain our objectivity, or even an aura of it. We can be passionate and proud of it. Drawing on the best science, we can mix it with passion and, hopefully, political smarts to create communication and advocacy that will see science given life in the substance of public policy and private behaviour.

We are positioned, then, to have greater flexibility in thought and strategy than other sectors with whom we work. This gives us the ability to explore new ideas and relationships, to provoke debate, and to engage the public in a manner which others may not feel free to. That freedom manifests itself in at least five roles.

### **1) Public outreach, education, and engagement**

Public concern with the environment is widespread and profound. Nevertheless, most individuals are not aware of the particulars of environmental challenges and potential solutions. In a non-partisan manner, CPAWS and other NGOs act to fill that void, communicating priority issues and proposed solutions to the public.

Recently, for example, CPAWS has sought to publicly demonstrate the plight of Canada's woodland caribou and the need to protect vast swaths of boreal forest habitat to protect this species at risk. We are also demonstrating how some of the best woodland caribou habitat in the country – the peat-rich boreal region -- is also a natural storehouse of vast amounts of carbon, which means that by protecting caribou, we also protect biologically sequestered carbon.

On another front, earlier this year we released a major report on marine protected areas to highlight to the public Canada's poor progress on marine protected areas, and provide a blueprint for moving forward.

CPAWS uses a suite of tools to communicate with the public on issues from site-specific conservation campaigns to broad policies that will support conservation across the country. The communications tools we use include such things as large public events with prominent speakers and performers, traditional print publications, school-based education programs, research reports, traditional earned and paid media, and, most recently, electronic networking through web-based communications.

## 2) Linking the public and decision-makers

Liberal democracy is based on the idea that broad public input gives rise to well-considered public policy. Rarely, however, do individuals feel equipped to approach government with their thoughts and concerns unless the way is paved for them in some way. CPAWS and other civil society groups can pave that way in a non-partisan manner. By defining issues, creating strategic opportunities for input, and, at times, the tools for input, we facilitate communications from the public to decision-makers. In the 1990's, for example, we empowered thousands of Canadians to express their concern with the commercialization and ecological degradation of Banff National Park. That expression contributed to a public and policy momentum to protect the ecological integrity of national parks that benefited the entire park system.

More recently, CPAWS' has been working with the Dehcho First Nations to promote the idea of expanding Nahanni National Park Reserve and World Heritage Site to protect the entire surrounding watershed. In the winter of 2005-2006 we travelled to 18 major cities across Canada with an evening slide show and presentation called "Nahanni Forever", partnering with Mountain Equipment Coop and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. We were fascinated to see that in places as far removed from the Nahanni as Halifax, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, hundreds of people came out on winter nights to hear about a place to which they obviously felt a connection. We were able to give that connection a voice and a cause. Since then thousands of Canadians have written to the federal government supporting the protection of the South Nahanni watershed. Last fall, when Parks Canada and the Dehcho First Nations conducted public consultations on new boundaries for Nahanni National Park Reserve, we were able to facilitate and encourage greater public engagement than had occurred for any previous national park establishment. Our public outreach complemented and enhanced Parks Canada's outreach and resulted in over 2500 responses to the consultation process. We believe that our work in bringing information to the public and in facilitating positive public feedback to government is helping create the political space for bold conservation action in the Nahanni.

As a civil society group, we also have the opportunity to meet directly with politicians and public servants to represent our constituents' interests in conservation. This is a necessary role that non-governmental organizations play in our political system where a

broad suite of interest groups meet regularly with public officials. Our presence brings an important balance of perspective and information to these decision-makers.

### 3) Setting the Agenda

By bringing together sound science, policy expertise, and public communications we can help to set the public policy agenda and encourage more visionary conservation policy than would otherwise be possible.

One way we achieve this is by winnowing down a mass of details to a discrete set of policy choices which can create a framework for debate and sound decision-making. Referring back to the development in parks issue, we believe that the efforts of CPAWS and others helped to crystallize a broad public discontent with the degradation of national parks into a clear policy direction.

We are also able to respond to the emerging findings of conservation biologists, and to translate this into proposals for new approaches to conservation. For example, as the importance of establishing large connected networks of protected areas at an ecosystem scale became clear, CPAWS and NGO partners brought forward a vision of connecting a network of protected lands throughout the entire Yellowstone to Yukon region. The Y2Y initiative has grown to engage hundreds of grassroots organizations in the region, has garnered international renown, and has since been emulated in other parts of the world. CPAWS has since incorporated this large land and seascape scale approach to conservation into our overall conservation vision and plan and to our other geographically based program areas, including the boreal forest, eastern woodlands and oceans and great freshwater lakes.

We are also exploring innovative mechanisms for achieving conservation. In the past year, CPAWS has engaged in international and national discussions regarding the quickly changing area of carbon trading and accounting mechanisms and rules. Our goals in these discussions are two-fold. First we want to ensure that conservation is adequately considered in the development of carbon trading rules to make sure that they do not result in harm to biodiversity and ecosystem health. And we also want to explore the potential of using carbon trading mechanisms to encourage the protection of intact forest ecosystems which would contribute to the conservation of biodiversity and at the same time prevent the loss of stored carbon.

### 4) Watchdog

Having contributed to the formulation of public policy, NGOs have a critical role to play in seeing that these policies are faithfully applied. Shifting political trends may result in still-valid policies falling into disfavour, such that they may be distorted or ignored. Or, in some cases, the simple passage of time, and the turnover of key personnel, can result in important policies simply being forgotten by officials. From early public campaigns in the 1960s and 70s that successfully opposed major commercial development at Lake Louise, and opposed damming the South Nahanni River in the NWT, to more recent

success in opposing the sell-off of lands in Mont Orford park in Quebec, playing a watchdog role has always comprised an important part of CPAWS' work.

Sometimes this is simply a matter of keeping the policy in front of decision-makers. Sometimes, where the policy has been given the status of law, it might require reference to the courts. CPAWS has never preferred litigation, but recognizes it as one of the legitimate tools of our work, to be used when called for. For example, in 1992, CPAWS successfully litigated to stop commercial logging in Wood Buffalo National Park.

In a slight variation on the watchdog role, we often act as a sounding board for decision-makers. Formally or informally, we are often consulted about decisions and policy directions while they are still being formulated. And we provide input to park management planning or other public consultation processes where possible and strategic.

## 5) Broadening the Tent

Historically Canadian society and its political and economic systems have seen differing mandates and roles in conflict and competition with each other. The seriousness and complexity of the environmental crisis we face, however, suggests that no one sector can effectively tackle the challenge alone. As individuals we are simply not smart enough, and as sectors and institutions our structures and incentives constrain our vision and options for acting. To move to a sustainable society, therefore, we must find the means by which differing mandates may be invoked to complement one another, with the ultimate goal of collaboration for the survival of a healthy planet. Broadening the tent to involve a range of interests in conservation is critical to our success.

In the past decade CPAWS has developed new alliances with other sectors of society in an effort to push the conservation agenda forward.

CPAWS is a founding member of the Boreal Leadership Council, which was created in 2003 and is comprised of leading conservation groups, First Nations, resource companies and financial institutions. Council members are all signatories to the Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, which is based on the best available principles of conservation biology and land use planning, and sets a goal of preserving at least half of the Boreal Forest in a network of large interconnected protected areas and supporting sustainable communities, world-leading ecosystem-based resource management practices and state-of-the-art stewardship practices in the remaining landscape.

Across the country CPAWS is working more closely than ever before with Aboriginal communities, finding common ground in a vision of protecting the land. We have, for example, collaborated closely with the Dehcho First Nations towards a shared vision of protecting the South Nahanni watershed, which has benefited the work of both parties and resulted in strong public and political support.

In a completely different vein CPAWS led a group of environmental organizations to work with Kinder Morgan Canada to modify the company's plan for the looping of a pipeline through Jasper National Park and Mount Robson Provincial Park in British Columbia with the goal of bringing a net positive enhancement to ecological functions within the two parks.

In each of these cases, we were able to stretch further, and to explore more options than government agencies would be able to in isolation.

### **Challenges facing the conservation community**

The work of conserving nature is not getting any easier. As our knowledge of ecosystems grows, we are learning that they are more fragile and more vulnerable to long term damage than we previously thought. The number of species at risk continues to increase in Canada, and habitat continues to be lost at a rapid rate as demand for resources places ecosystems under unprecedented pressure. Without attempting to be comprehensive we would like to catalogue some of the factors we see influencing our work in the years to come.

- 1) Current models for protected areas are inadequate – There is growing scientific evidence that protecting larger, interconnected landscapes and seascapes is required for the conservation of biodiversity. We need to expand the scale of our thinking of conservation.
- 2) Governance and jurisdictional issues on the land base are becoming increasingly complex. The federal-provincial/territorial split in jurisdiction over the environment requires better communication and co-operation to ensure an integrated conservation effort. The rights of First Nations are clearer, and are being more strongly asserted. As well, the commendable shift toward more consultation in decision-making means that protected areas establishment has slowed considerably. A Minister of the Crown can no longer create a national park overnight. Rather, protected areas are often taking decades to establish.
- 3) We have an increasingly diverse and urban Canadian population. Some of the cultural traditions represented in the population do not share the same connection to the concept of wild nature that has traditionally informed conservation in North America. It is important to note, however, that simply not sharing a common concept does not mean that a concern for the natural world is not present in the vast majority of cultures. Also, in this electronic age, people's direct experience of nature and wild landscapes is increasingly rare. Recent studies document the social cost of this "nature deficit disorder" (Louv, 2005). This disconnection from the natural world poses a huge challenge for the future of conservation as we seek to develop a stronger foundation of public and political support to enable the required scaling up of conservation efforts.



- 4) Modern means of communicating are transforming every aspect of our society, including the relationship among citizens and between the citizenship and decision-makers. Political discussions now rarely occur in a town-hall setting, and hard copy letters are becoming seen as formal and quaint. The internet, e-mail and social networking facilities have allowed people from around the world to become “friends” and allies. News and issue discussions (and misinformation and irrational incitement) can be dispersed globally within seconds. This presents both opportunities and challenges for conservation NGOs. On the one hand we can potentially access a massive audience with the click of a mouse, while on the other hand, it is more difficult than ever to stand out in the overwhelming amount of information with which most people are bombarded so that our message is received, processed and acted upon in an informed way.
- 5) Climate change, the most profound and universal environmental problem modern society has faced, poses huge and fundamental challenges to our economy and society. As we face those challenges, it is important that we not become so pre-occupied with the carbon debate that we lose sight of its connection to other aspects of environmental stewardship. While industrial and personal emissions are issues that absolutely need to be addressed, the conservation of biodiversity also needs to be a priority, and becomes all the more urgent as ecosystems face the additional stress of climate change. These two elements of the current environmental challenge are natural complements, as intact ecosystems are not only important for biodiversity conservation, they also provide an important mechanism for long-term storage of carbon.

### **Facing the future challenge: CPAWS bold vision**

It has become clear that ecosystems are continuing to decline at an accelerating rate and that current approaches are not adequate to conserve biodiversity and resilient, fully functioning ecosystems in perpetuity (Schmiegelow et al, 2006, Noss and Cooperrider, 1994).

Throughout the 1990s the widely cited 12% target that emerged from the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) motivated progress on protected areas in Canada through major campaigns like the Endangered Spaces campaign led by WWF Canada and CPAWS. However, although progress was made, only 10% of Canada’s lands are currently protected, and less than 1% of our marine environment.

While perspectives vary on how much area needs to be protected to achieve conservation goals, there are indications that to protect healthy functioning ecosystems for the long term, much more of Canada’s land and seas -- in the order of half -- will need protection; that individual protected areas will need to be much larger; and that more proactive conservation planning is needed (Schmiegelow et al, 2006; Wiersma and Nudds, 2006; Gurd et al, 2001).

We have a huge challenge ahead – one that will only be met through a fundamental paradigm shift in how we view and value conservation and ecosystem protection in Canada and internationally.

Recognizing the enormity of the challenge, in 2004 CPAWS initiated a thorough internal and external scan of our situation and capacity. The product of that scan was a new ten year conservation vision and strategy, which was approved by our Board of Trustees in the fall of 2005, and which guides our current work.

It starts with the assumption that an enormous challenge requires a bold vision.

CPAWS vision for the coming ten years is that:

*Canada will set a new and inspiring standard for the conservation of nature. We will protect the tapestry of life in the Canadian landscape and waterscape and establish a new global standard for protecting the integrity of the Canadian wilderness. At least one-half of Canada's public lands, freshwater and ocean environments will remain permanently wild for the public trust.*

CPAWS (2005)

CPAWS' vision of protecting at least half of Canada's public lands and waters is designed to shift thinking in Canada beyond the status quo, and in so doing, to set a new paradigm for "thinking big" in order to meet conservation goals.

To pursue CPAWS' vision, we have developed five broad program areas for our conservation work. These are:

- Boreal Forest
- Yellowstone to Yukon
- Eastern Woodlands
- Oceans and Freshwater Lakes
- Parks Forever – which deals with parks policy and management.

All of these program areas include large land and seascape scale conservation initiatives. While we will engage in the establishment of individual parks and protected areas site by site, we are striving to always keep our eye on the larger conservation vision.

To achieve success we believe one of our most critical challenges is to engage a much broader public to actively support a bold vision. The planning of our environmental and resource future cannot and will not be a closed debate, as it deals with the most fundamental public interest. We need to draw on the broad Canadian public, and make sure that this public, in turn, receives quality information and understands what is at stake.

As one tool to "mainstream" our big conservation vision, CPAWS, in partnership with Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), has unveiled *The Big Wild*, an exciting new program

to engage the Canadian public in protecting at least half of Canada's public lands and waters. Through a wide variety of activities across the country, and through an interactive internet-based hub at *TheBigWild.org*, we are inviting Canadians to engage in protecting Canada's wilderness, starting by reaching out to MEC's 2.9 million members.

We are informing Canadians about the wilderness protection challenge and vision, and inviting them to sign up in support of protecting at least half of Canada's public lands and waters. Participants in *The Big Wild* can share their experiences of the wilderness; connect with one another in a community of concern; dedicate a backcountry trip to *The Big Wild* including fundraising if desired; and learn how to become active in support of specific wilderness conservation initiatives. *The Big Wild* provides a new way for Canadians who care about our country's wilderness ecosystems to get involved in conservation initiatives.

Our goal, quite simply, is to mobilize a critical mass of citizen support for protecting much more of Canada's lands and waters than we have considered to date, thereby helping to set a much more ambitious nationwide policy agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Growth in the human population and demand for resources is placing nature under unprecedented pressure. We know that the need to protect functioning ecosystems is not simply a romantic or aesthetic notion, but a hard reality of maintaining the ecosystem services that sustain human communities, including clean air, water, and biodiversity. The protection of the environment is a fundamental need which our society must come to terms with.

As a society we have made some significant progress, but the scientific evidence is growing that protecting healthy ecosystems requires much more. We must protect more and bigger areas of land and water, and we must implement pro-active conservation planning to ensure the right areas are protected to achieve conservation goals.

The ambitious protection of functioning natural ecosystems is both critical and complex. It is also urgent, as opportunities are foregone every day, often irreversibly. However, this critical need for us to act comes at a time when action is fraught with complexity borne out of a diverse modern society, segmented jurisdiction on environmental matters, and complex political dynamics.

In this intersection of importance, urgency and complexity there is a need for players who can stay focused on policy goals and on-the-ground outcomes, and who are not invested in the status quo. Non-governmental organizations such as CPAWS are required to raise new ideas, to challenge comfortable orthodoxies, to push the policy debate forward, and to see that real benefits result on the land and on the water. Community organizers, provocateurs, lobbyists, bridge-builders, and educators – CPAWS and other NGOs will continue to play these and other roles in order to see that our vision – that of a healthy

ecosphere where people experience and respect natural ecosystems – comes steadily closer to reality.

*Alison Woodley, is Manager, National Protected Areas Program for CPAWS.*

*Dave Poulton is Executive Director of the Calgary/Banff Chapter of CPAWS and Chair of the Parks Forever Conservation Committee.*

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