



National Treasures

by **AMANDA LESLIE** // EAC Volunteer

PHOTO: Amanda Leslie

Sixteen years after the confederation of Canada, three railway workers stumbled upon an incredible find on the lower slopes of Sulphur Mountain in Alberta: a series of mineral-rich pools, their emerald waters radiating heat. Long revered as a sacred healing site by Indigenous peoples, these hot springs, later known as Cave and Basin, inspired the creation of Banff, Canada's first national park. In the century that followed, our park system has grown considerably.

Today, there are 47 national parks and reserves in Canada, each one helping to protect a distinct natural region. They account for roughly three percent of the total landmass in the country and contain a diverse collection of species, including many that are considered at risk. From mountains and prairies to forests and oceans, it is almost impossible to picture Canada without thinking about the vast array of natural treasures contained within its national parks.

Fourteen and a half million people visited the national parks last year. I am one of them. Every summer, my family travels to Fundy National Park in New Brunswick. It is a beautiful place and I have been lucky enough to spend countless days wandering its many trails and beaches. More recently, my work as a journalist has taken me to national parks in many other provinces across Canada and I plan to visit more in the coming months. There is so much to see and do in our park system. I have snorkeled with Atlantic salmon, explored glaciers, observed meteor showers, paddled across lakes, slept in a snow-covered yurt, hiked in the mountains, swam in waterfalls, and toured a fjord. One of my most memorable experiences was camping with Syrian refugees as part of the Learn-to-Camp program last summer in Kejimikujik park.

TAKE ACTION

Ecology Action Centre is working with others to encourage the protection of important ecosystems across Nova Scotia, and advocate for a large wilderness park near Halifax at Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes. Add your voice to the conversation by writing to your MLA that you support more protected spaces!

This year, Canada marks its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of confederation. As part of the celebration, Parks Canada will be offering free admission to all of their sites. That means there has never been a better time to visit the national parks. There are nine to choose from in Atlantic Canada, including some of the newest additions to our park system, like the Sable Island National Park Reserve off the coast of Nova Scotia and the Torngat Mountains National Park in northern Labrador. More than 6 million people have already ordered their complimentary park passes, which also grants them access to national historic sites and marine conservation areas for the duration of the year. As Canadians from coast to coast prepare to explore our park system, we should consider not only the beauty of the national parks, but also their fragility.

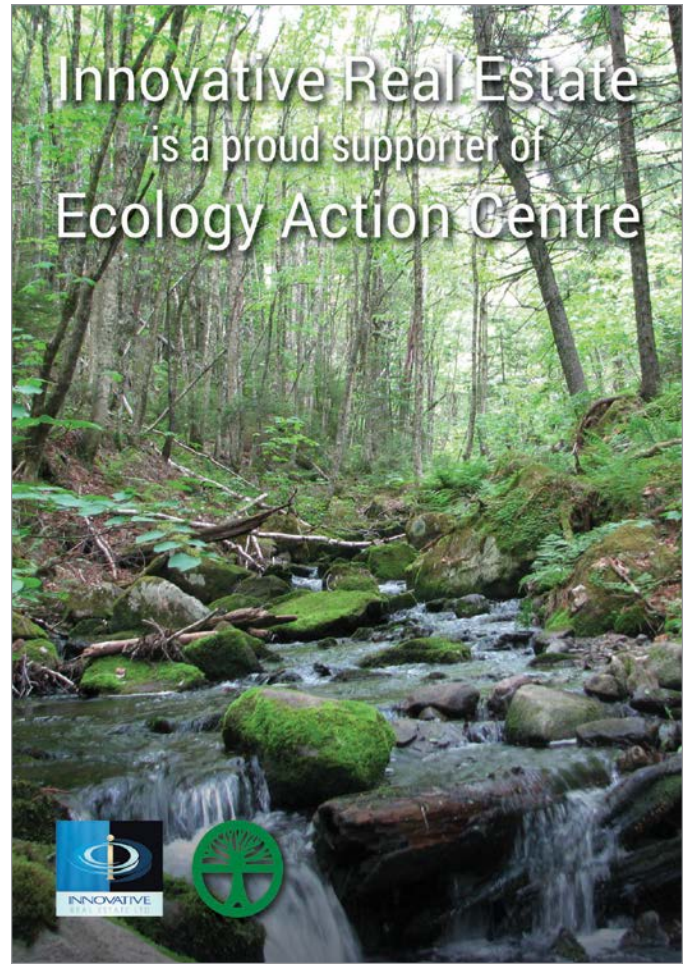
Several months ago, Parks Canada released its most recent State of the Parks report, which revealed that 46% of park ecosystems are in fair or poor condition. That is an alarming number. There are many factors that can impact the ecological integrity of a park; everything from urban development and climate change to transportation and high levels of human use. The last one is probably the most difficult to swallow. I first learned about the effect that visitors can have on the health of the national parks when I was very young. Parks Canada interpreters taught me the importance of leaving the park undisturbed by carrying my garbage out of the forest when hiking and not taking shells or rocks from the beach. My parents told me to stay on designated trails to keep plants intact and avoid feeding the wildlife, which could become dependent on visitors for food. I followed their instructions, determined to do my part, but I remember being deeply uncomfortable at the thought that I could be contributing to the gradual decline of something I cared about as much as the national parks.

Since the beginning of Canada's park system, we have struggled to find a balance between our protection and enjoyment of the national parks. This year, free park passes have heightened the discussion, with some ecologists raising concerns about the number of people that are expected to visit the national parks, citing the impact it could have on park ecosystems. Their points are valid, but with careful planning and education, I believe the benefits of raising awareness about our park system will outweigh the risks.

There are no easy answers when it comes to park management, but making people aware of the challenges is a pretty good place to start. In Banff and Jasper, for instance, a free shuttle service will be offered to try to reduce vehicle traffic during the peak visitor season. These are the kind of programs we need to help manage the increase in attendance, allowing more people to experience the parks while ensuring that we do our best to protect them.

J.B. Harkin, the first commissioner for the Dominion Parks Branch, noted that national parks exist for the people. "All the wealth of beauty and opportunity for enjoyment that they offer are yours by right of heritage because you are a Canadian," he wrote in a promotional brochure in 1914. His words still ring true. The national parks do belong to everyone who calls Canada home, but I would argue that they are the responsibility of all of us too. Now is the time to reflect on what we can do to ensure that the park system in this country thrives for generations to come. With pressures on our wilderness growing, creating more parks and ensuring existing ones are well-funded and protected is more important than ever. So let's get out there and see firsthand why these natural treasures deserve our continued support.

Amanda Leslie is a journalist, Maritimer, and aspiring photographer. She is currently travelling around the country to work on her first book about Canada's national parks.



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