

## Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900-1935

John Sandlos

Volume 16, numéro 1, 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/015735ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/015735ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Sandlos, J. (2005). Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900-1935. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 16(1), 293-318. <https://doi.org/10.7202/015735ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Souvent, le déplacement historique du peuple autochtone et non amérindien des parcs nationaux et des zones de conservation naturelles était analysé comme une imposition délibérée de l'autorité de l'état sur le peuple régionale vivant dans des régions rurales et d'hinterland. Durant le tôt vingtième siècle, les cas du Point Pelée et des parcs nationaux des îles de la baie Géorgienne indiquaient que le peuple régional avait une influence considérable sur les politiques d'emplacement ainsi que la gestion des parcs et des sites protégés. Pendant cette période, le gouvernement fédéral avait essayé d'expulser ou de sévèrement raccourcir la récolte de la faune par les autochtones et les non autochtones vivant dans les parcs nationaux. Souvent, ces politiques étaient le résultat d'incitations des groupes locaux de conservation avec l'intention de sauver les populations de faune ou par les promoteurs d'entreprise espérant de stimuler l'économie de tourisme locale par la création d'une terre publique plaisante. Cet article soutient que les cadres de gestion gouvernant le Point Pelée et les parcs nationaux des îles de la baie Géorgienne n'étaient pas le produit d'intérêts étroits de l'état, mais plutôt d'une politique communautaire beaucoup plus large composée des protagonistes locaux et de l'état espérant de former un environnement dans les parcs convenant à leurs propres priorités politiques.

# Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900-1935

John Sandlos

## **Abstract**

*The historical displacement of indigenous and non-Native people from national parks and nature preserves has often been analyzed as a deliberate imposition of state authority over local people living in rural and hinterland regions. The cases of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks indicate that local people had considerable influence over the siting and management policies applied to parks and protected areas in the early twentieth century. Although the federal government did attempt to either expel or severely curtail the wildlife harvesting activities of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals living within the national parks during this period, such policies were often the result of lobbying from local conservation groups intent on saving threatened wildlife populations or business promoters hoping to stimulate the local tourist economy through the creation of a public pleasuring ground. This paper argues that the management frameworks governing Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks were not the product of narrow state interests, but of a much broader policy community composed of local and state actors hoping to shape the park environments to suit their own political priorities.*

## **Résumé**

*Souvent, le déplacement historique du peuple autochtone et non amérindien des parcs nationaux et des zones de conservation naturelles était analysé comme une imposition délibérée de l'autorité de l'état sur le peuple régionale vivant dans des régions rurales et d'hinterland. Durant le tôt vingtième siècle, les cas du Point Pelée et des parcs nationaux des îles de la baie Géorgienne indiquaient que le peuple régional avait une influence considérable sur les politiques d'emplacement ainsi que la gestion des parcs et des sites protégés. Pendant cette période, le gouvernement fédéral avait essayé d'expulser ou de sévèrement raccourcir la récolte de la faune par les aborigènes et les non aborigènes vivant dans les parcs nationaux. Souvent, ces politiques étaient le*

*résultat d'incitations des groupes locaux de conservation avec l'intention de sauver les populations de faune ou par les promoteurs d'entreprise espérant de stimuler l'économie de tourisme locale par la création d'une terre publique plaisante. Cet article soutient que les cadres de gestion gouvernant le Point Pelée et les parcs nationaux des îles de la baie Géorgienne n'étaient pas le produit d'intérêts étroits de l'état, mais plutôt d'une politique communautaire beaucoup plus large composée des protagonistes locaux et de l'état espérant de former un environnement dans les parcs convenant à leurs propres priorités politiques.*

AT A NATIONAL CONFERENCE on wildlife conservation held in Ottawa in 1919, federal and provincial government delegates expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the development of local conservation activism in many parts of Canada. Following an address from a member of the Essex County Wild Life Association titled, "The Need and Value of Local Organizations," the conference delegates approved formal resolution suggesting that "one of the best means of promoting the conservation of these animals is the promotion of local game and wild life protective associations." Governments at all levels, the resolution declared, should "make special efforts to promote ... and to assist in the maintenance of such organizations."<sup>1</sup> The National Parks Commissioner James Harkin echoed these sentiments, arguing in his address that, though local people living adjacent to wildlife sanctuaries and national parks might initially be hostile toward new restrictions on hunting and trapping, most eventually adopted an attitude that was "thoroughly sympathetic" to the goals of wildlife conservation. According to Harkin, "even the Indians" living near the borders of the national parks had become supporters of the sanctuary ideal; the "small minority" that failed to appreciate the sanctity of the sanctuaries had instead developed "a healthy respect for the strong arm of the law."<sup>2</sup>

In some respects, the comments of Harkin and the other conference delegates painted an overly sanguine picture of the attitude local people displayed toward national parks and other wildlife conservation initiatives in Canada during the early decades of the twentieth century. Recent historical scholarship in both Canada and the United States strongly suggests that local opposition to the implementation of various national, provincial and state parks was not restricted to the vocal grievances of an intransigent minority. According to several recent studies, the earliest efforts of the U.S. government to protect the

---

1 S. Harris, "The Need and Value of Local Associations," *National Conference on Conservation of Game, Fur-Bearing Animals and Other Wild Life* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1919), 141-5.

2 James Harkin, "Wild Life Sanctuaries," *National Conference on Conservation of Game, Fur-Bearing Animals and Other Wild Life*, 46-50.

fading wilderness character of the western frontier in the late nineteenth century resulted in the expulsion and alienation of Indigenous people and non-Native squatters from iconic parks such as Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Grand Canyon, a policy regime that elicited responses ranging from angry letter writing campaigns to the instigation of violent conflict between poachers and state authorities.<sup>3</sup> In Canada, a similar exclusionary policy was implemented throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in now famous national and provincial parks such as Rocky Mountains (i.e., Banff), Algonquin, Riding Mountain, Prince Albert, and Quetico.<sup>4</sup> In addition, both the federal government and provincial authorities in Canada created and managed their respective parks as means to promote tourism in remote regions of the country and to impose rational schemes of state control over exploitable natural resources such as coal, timber, and minerals.<sup>5</sup> The interests of local people liv-

3 See Philip Burnham, *Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington: Island Press, 2000); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 2001); Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999). For a particularly valuable discussion of conflict over wildlife parks in upstate New York, see Karl Jacoby, "Class and Environmental History: Lessons from the 'War in the Adirondacks,'" *Environmental History* 2, no.3 (July 1997): 324-42.

4 The research on the exclusion of local people from the national parks is not nearly as comprehensive in Canada as it is in the United States. For very brief discussion of the exclusion of the Stoney Indians from Rocky Mountains National Park, see Janet Foster, *Working for Wildlife: The Beginnings of Preservation in Canada*, Second Edition, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 30, 84. For the removal of Aboriginal people from Quetico Provincial Park in 1913, see David T. McNab, *Circles of Time: Aboriginal Land Rights and Resistance in Ontario* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999), 89-100. The removal of the Golden Lake band from Algonquin Park in 1893 is discussed in Gerald Killan, *Protected Places: A History of Ontario's Provincial Parks System* (Toronto: Dundurn Press and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, 1993), 14-5. The removal of the Montreal Lake Indians from former hunting grounds in Prince Albert National Park in 1927 is outlined briefly in William Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground: A History of Prince Albert National Park* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1989), 40-1. Finally, the removal of the encampments of the Keeseekowenin Indian Reserve at Clear and Battle Lakes in Riding Mountain National Park by 1936 is discussed in D.T. Tabulenas, *A Narrative Human History of Riding Mountain National Park and Area: Prehistory to 1980* (Parks Canada, Unpublished Manuscript, 1983), 70-1.

5 For a discussion of the 'doctrine of usefulness' that was applied to Canada's National Parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Robert Craig Brown, "The Doctrine of Usefulness: Natural Resources and National Parks Policy in Canada, 1887-1914," in *The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow*, vol. 1, eds. J.G. Nelson, and R.C. Scace (Calgary: National and Provincial Parks Association and the University of Calgary, 1969), 94-110; Leslie Bella, *Parks for Profit* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1986); Lucy Alderson and John Marsh, "J.B. Harkin, National Parks and Roads," *Park News* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 9-16; R.D. Turner and W.E. Rees, "A Comparative Study of Parks Policy in Canada and the United States," *Nature Canada* 2, no. 1 (1973): 31-6. For the emphasis on resource extraction and

ing near the parks held little importance in the face of such profiteering; the few people living in and near the remote wilderness parks generally faced an indifferent and unresponsive conservation bureaucracy when they attempted to press their objections to the enclosure of land for park purposes.

The emerging subaltern historical interpretation of the early conservation movement in North America as a broad conflict involving remote state conservation authorities intent on appropriating the natural resource base of relatively powerless subsistence hunters, trappers, and squatters has constituted one of the most important revisions of several overly laudatory early histories of the conservation movement in North America.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the recurring narrative of an autocratic conservation bureaucracy trampling upon the interests of local people may itself turn out to be an oversimplification that requires further reassessment in response to the complex historical circumstances surrounding the creation of parks and protected areas in relatively well populated areas. Recent scholarship from the field of policy studies has suggested that the outcome of environmental conflicts are determined not solely by the heavy hand of state management but through the complex interaction of diverse actors within a policy community that often includes discordant local interests such as resource harvesters, conservationists, and tourism operators.<sup>7</sup> By the early twentieth century, local people had become intimately involved in the policy community surrounding the process of establishing national parks in Canada, with some factions opposed to parks that interfered with subsistence harvesting activities, but with others lobbying intensely for the creation of national parks close to their communities.

There was a host of factors responsible for the increasingly favourable local sentiment toward national parks: the immense popularity of the western national parks as a tourist destination, the emergence of a popular 'back to nature' movement throughout Canada, and a growing awareness of the obvious economic benefits associated with national parks. Most importantly, perhaps, was the fact that the National Parks Branch began in the early decades of the twentieth century to create parks outside the sparsely settled mountainous areas of western Canada. Increasingly, new parks were located in the relatively well settled areas of central and eastern Canada, a policy shift that stimulated furious lobbying from local conservation groups, recreational organizations and commercial interests intent on realizing the advantages associated with the national (and in

---

tourism within Ontario provincial parks during the same period, see Killan, *Protected Places*, 1-73, and George Warecki, *Protecting Ontario's Wilderness: A History of Changing Ideas and Preservation Politics, 1927-1973* (New York Peter Lang, 2000), 17-50.

6 For extremely positive early assessments of the wilderness protection movements in Canada and the United States, see, for example, Foster, *Working for Wildlife*, and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Third Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

7 For an overview, see Melody Hessing and Michael Howlett, *Canadian Natural Resource and Environmental Policy: Political Economy and Public Policy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

some cases international) profile that federal parks could bring to local conservation projects and tourism development initiatives.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these local interest groups were often able to assert a much more direct influence over the policies governing individual parks than the politically powerless squatters and Native hunters that lived near the western parks. At the behest of local lobbyists in the late 1930s, for example, golf courses and hotel developments were constructed in the earliest national parks in Atlantic Canada such as Cape Breton Highlands and Prince Edward Island. Although local landowners were expelled from these parks in a manner similar to Indigenous people in western Canada, the expropriation of the land often occurred with significant support from local park boosters who wanted particular sites to be secured as pleasuring grounds for middle class tourists. In many cases, the exclusionary policy regime that pervaded the wilderness protection movement during this period was not simply a result of increasing state interventionism in the rural periphery; it was also a product of factional rivalries among interest groups over who would retain control over nature within newly designated protected areas.<sup>9</sup>

Point Pelee National Park and Georgian Bay Islands National Park provide two of the earliest illustrations of the local influence over national parks policy in central Canada. In broad terms, these parks were created not as the product of a coherent federal plan for a representative national parks system, but were instead inspired by the growth of locally based conservation initiatives and a burgeoning tourism industry within Ontario during the early decades of the twentieth century. Point Pelee was designated a national park in 1918 after incessant lobbying from a local sport hunting and conservation group known as the Essex County Wild Life Association. The privileged position afforded to this hunting club resulted in a policy whereby local muskrat trappers were expelled from the park while the ‘gentlemanly’ middle and upper class sportsmen of nearby Leamington were allowed to continue killing waterfowl. In a similar manner, several long-term residents of Georgian Bay Islands National Parks were expelled from their homesteads after the park was created in 1929, in part due to political pressure from local elites who hoped to replace subsistence farms and homesteads with expansive recreational facilities such as boating docks, playgrounds, and youth summer camps.<sup>10</sup> These early examples suggest that the practice of excluding subsistence hunters, trappers, and agri-

8 For a brief overview of the individual circumstances leading up the creation of national parks in Canada prior to the early 1970s, see W.F. Lothian, *A History of Canada's National Park*, Volume I (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1976).

9 For a comprehensive overview, see Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

10 For a brief overview of the policy developments that led to the creation of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks, see Dennis Carter-Edwards, "The History of National Parks in Ontario," in *Changing Parks: the History, Future and Cultural Context of Parks and Heritage Landscapes*, eds. John S. Marsh and Bruce Hodgins (Toronto: Natural History Inc., 1998), 94-106.

culturalists from Ontario's national parks was not solely a policy initiative of the federal parks bureaucracy, but was the result of complex interactions among local factional interests that manifested themselves through conflicts over access to a shrinking public land base in central Canada, and as part of a much broader culture of race and class prejudice within the Canadian wildlife conservation movement.

### **The People's Parks**

There can be little doubt that the designation of Point Pelee as a national park was at least partly a response to the federal government's broader national and international conservation objectives. The dramatic impact of the continent-wide slaughter of birds for plumage to adorn women's hats had prompted the federal conservation bureaucracy to identify migratory bird conservation as a priority throughout the 1910s, calling for the creation of more bird sanctuaries and pushing through the Migratory Birds Treaty with the United States in 1917. In keeping with this conservation priority, the respected conservationist and ornithologist with the National Museum of Canada, Percy Taverner, reported in his biological survey of 1915 that Point Pelee was an important stop-over ground on a major flyway for migratory birds and recommended that the entire area be set aside as a national park. Taverner also cautioned that the leasing of wetlands in Point Pelee to sport hunting groups had resulted in indiscriminate shooting of waterfowl, and thus "an ideal breeding ground for water fowl [had become] now nearly deserted." The most positive outcome of designating the point as a national park, reasoned Taverner, would be a cessation of duck hunting within the point's critical wetland habitat.<sup>11</sup>

It was neither Taverner's report, however, nor the general concerns over bird conservation that provided the primary political and bureaucratic momentum to create a wildlife sanctuary on Point Pelee. Instead, it was the lobbying efforts of local people in Essex County that successfully brought about the creation of a national park in May of 1918. On May 10th, 1917, members of two local sport hunting and conservation groups, the Essex County Game Protective Association and the Essex County Wild Life Association (ECWLA), successfully argued before the federal Advisory Board on Wild Life Protection that

---

11 For federal reports on the need for further game bird conservation, see C. Gordon Hewitt, "Conservation of Birds and Mammals in Canada," in Commission of Conservation Canada, Committee on Fisheries, Game and Fur-Bearing Animals, *Conservation of Fish, Birds and Game: Proceedings at a Meeting of the Committee, Nov. 1 and 2, 1915* (Toronto: Methodist Book and Publishing Company, 1916), 141-5; C. Gordon Hewitt, *Conservation of Wild Life in Canada in 1917: A Review*, Reprinted from the Ninth Annual Report of the Commission of Conservation, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1917), 13-19. Taverner's Report is contained in Commission of Conservation Canada, *Report of Sixth Annual Meeting* (Toronto: Bryant Press, 1915), 304-7. The comment about sport hunting is found on p. 306.

Point Pelee should be set aside as a sanctuary for migratory birds. The text of the resolution suggests that the proposal was heeded in part because it reflected the popular will of local residents and also because the two conservation organizations contained “the chief sportsmen and public men of the region.”<sup>12</sup>

These sport hunters, particularly the members of the Essex County Wild Life Association, were able to exert a tremendous amount of influence over the regulations governing the establishment and management of Point Pelee National Park. They successfully convinced the Advisory Board to recommend that the usual prohibitions on killing wildlife in a national park be modified so that the annual tradition of a limited fall duck hunting season could continue throughout the Point Pelee marshes. In spite of Taverner’s warnings, senior conservation officials such as Dominion Entomologist C. Gordon Hewitt and the Parks Commissioner James Harkin endorsed the idea of allowing duck hunting to continue at Point Pelee. A provision for a short hunting season under special permit was thus included in the order-in-council that formally established the park.<sup>13</sup> The interests of the ECWLA were also furthered by the fact that the first Superintendent of Point Pelee National Park, the prominent sport hunter Forest H. Conover, was also the President of the ECWLA.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the association’s secretary, E.R. Kerr, became a stalwart lobbyist on behalf of his fellow club members, writing constantly – often once each day – to Harkin with policy recommendations that conformed to the interests of the ECWLA. Although there were limits to the ability of the ECWLA to influence management decisions in Point Pelee National Park – Hewitt and Harkin rejected, for example, the association’s proposal to control the issue of permits for the fall duck hunt because such a policy might effectively turn the park into the club’s private shooting reserve – it was clear from the very beginning that the ECWLA had been granted a degree of influence over the development of wildlife policy within Point Pelee National Park.<sup>15</sup>

How do we account for such an unprecedented level of local involvement in the management of a national park? To an extent, the willingness of federal officials to embrace the ECWLA as a management partner in Point Pelee National Park reflects a much broader attempt on the part of government officials to encourage local conservation activism in Ontario and more broadly throughout

12 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. The text of the resolution appears in a letter from board member and Dominion Entomologist C. Gordon Hewitt to Deputy Minister of the Interior W.W. Cory, 30 May 1917.

13 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. Hewitt to Harkin, 23 March 1918. LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. Harkin to Cory, 6 May 1918. A copy of the order-in-council creating the park, dated 29 May 1918, was found in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1.

14 For an overview of Conover’s career as a well-known trap-shooter and respected sport hunter, see Forest H. Conover, “Twenty-Six Years of Trap-Shooting,” *Rod and Gun*, Special Issue (1904): i-ii.

15 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. Hewitt to Harkin, 15 February 1918.



the nation during the early decades of the twentieth century. Senior wildlife officials within both the federal and provincial governments hoped that local wildlife associations might be able to rally support to the cause of wildlife conservation much more effectively than government education programs. The growth of non-governmental wildlife conservation groups might also, it was thought, serve a practical law enforcement function as local hunters became motivated to report on the depredations of the 'game hogs' who insisted on breaking hunting and trapping legislation.<sup>16</sup> Allowing a local hunting group to shape wildlife policy within a national park – even to the point where the superintendent of the park and the president of the association were one and the same – thus likely seemed a small price for federal officials to pay. Moreover, the ECWLA provided the federal government with a particularly credible ally on the issue of migratory bird conservation. One of the ECWLA's most prominent members, the Vice-President Jack Miner, was quite famous in conservation circles for his efforts to maintain a private bird sanctuary on his farm in Kingsville. The unusually high profile associated with Miner's private conservation initiatives most likely contributed to a feeling among federal officials that the ECWLA was a natural ally in the government's efforts to protect migratory birds.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the ECWLA was not simply a disinterested conservation ally of the federal government that was intent on preserving the intrinsic value of migratory birds; it also represented one pole of a factional dispute that had festered between sport hunters and squatters on Point Pelee for almost forty years before the creation of the park. Prior to 1918, the federal government had managed much of the Point Pelee land base as a naval reserve. However, in 1881 the federal government recognized the claim of thirteen families of squatters who had inhabited the region as far back as the 1820s to 560 acres of the point's land base. The Ordnance and Admiralty Lands Branch granted the Point Pelee residents formal title over this land ten years later.<sup>18</sup> Although the squatters had been granted secure tenure over their land, the government also offered up addi-

---

16 See, "Address given by A. Kelly Evans at a meeting called at McConkey's, Toronto, June 7th, 1905 to Form an Association for the Better Protection of the Game and Fish of the Country and Printed as Possibly Being of use to Persons Interested in the Formation of Branch Associations," CIHM 80831. Evans was an avid sport hunter who was soon to become Ontario's Game and Fisheries Commissioner. See also Harris, "The Need and Value," 43-5, 141-5. See also "Protection of Game and Fish," *Conservation* 9, no. 4 (April 1920): 15. (This periodical was a publication of the federal government's Commission of Conservation.)

17 Miner was invited to speak at the Commission of Conservation's National Conference on Wildlife Conservation in 1919. See Jack Miner, "Attracting Wild Fowl," *National Conference on Conservation of Game, Fur-Bearing Animals and Other Wild Life*, 82-91.

18 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. Survey Conducted by Alex Baird of the Dominion Land Survey in the Autumn of 1881. (The squatters' claims were recognized and demarcated in this survey). Baird's instructions for the survey are contained in a letter from the Surveyor-General to Baird, 10 September 1881. See also LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1.

tional naval reserve lands for lease in 1885. A precursor to the ECWLA, the South Essex Gun Club successfully won a competitive bid for a twenty-one year lease over 505 acres of dry land and (more importantly for the club's duck hunters) 2685 acres of the point's prime marshland that was to be managed as a private game preserve.<sup>19</sup> The impact of the gun club lease was devastating for the squatters on the point who based much of their livelihood on muskrat trapping and other wildlife harvesting within the marsh. According to Peter Conover, the government's caretaker at the Naval Reserve (and Forest Conover's father), the squatters on the Point were very poor and claimed that the lease of the marsh had "reduced their livelihood considerable [sic]," and "deprived greatly from support for their families."<sup>20</sup> The archival record contains no accounts of poaching or of direct conflict between Point Pelee's squatters and the members of the gun club, but there are voluminous official reports from Conover that highlight the intense local opposition to his efforts to curb illegal timber cutting on the point between 1881 and 1896. Although Conover claimed that he had won over local sentiment to the cause of timber protection by the end of his tenure as caretaker, noting in his final reports that the "general beauty" of the point has been enhanced over the years due to successful forest regeneration, he also admitted that his early efforts to curb timber cutting on the point "did cause me a sea of hardship accompanied by threats of bodily harm."<sup>21</sup> Clearly the question of who controlled the access to the marshes and forests of Point Pelee had already become a source of intense conflict between local sport hunters and local homesteaders well before the creation of the national park in 1918.

The establishment of the park prompted a further escalation of this local dispute over access to the marshes as the 'chief sport hunters and public men' in Leamington, Kingsville, and other surrounding communities successfully lobbied to maintain their own duck hunting privileges in the park while at the

---

"Squatters' Holdings as per Plan by Baird, D.L.S." Letters of patent were not issued for the lots until further survey work was completed in 1891. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. Letters forwarded from the Assistant Secretary of the Ordnance and Admiralty Lands Branch, Department of the Interior to Peter Conover, Caretaker of Ordnance Lands, 12 December 1891.

19 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. John J. McGee, Clerk, Privy Council, "Certified Copy of a Report of a Committee of the Honorable the Privy Council, approved by his Excellency the Governor General in Council, on the 6th April, 1885."

20 Conover's comments are contained in two of his regular reports dated. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. Conover, Superintendent's Report, 28 December 1885 and 24 November 1886. The squatters had originally opposed the lease when it was first rumoured in 1881. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. J. Clausen to Sir John Macdonald, Minister of the Interior, 29 June 1881.

21 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 478, File 1509, pt. 1. Conover to A.H. Clark, M.P., 19 January 1906. Reports of timber theft and Conover's efforts to curb this practice are found throughout LAC, RG 84, Col. 478, File 1509, pt. 3.

same time arguing that the harvesting activities of local muskrat trappers should be excluded throughout the Point Pelee marshes. On the latter point the sport hunters initially received a sympathetic ear from federal conservation officials. The National Parks Branch did not ever seriously consider the idea of expropriating properties on the point for park purposes, in part because the federal government had granted patents to the squatters less than three decades before the creation of the park but also because, in Harkin's words, "the department is anxious to avoid any conflict with the people at Point Pelee."<sup>22</sup> The Parks Commissioner nevertheless entered an agreement in September 1918 with Donald McDonald, the Ontario Game and Fisheries Minister, to designate the alienated lands adjacent to the national park a provincial game sanctuary where Dominion Parks regulations were in force.<sup>23</sup> This arrangement carried dire consequences for the Point Pelee trappers: the prohibitions against hunting and trapping in the national park and the new game sanctuary meant they could no longer catch muskrat in any portion of the Point Pelee marshes, not even on their own property.

The trappers responded to the new restrictions on their harvesting activities with anger and resentment. In January 1919, local residents from Point Pelee and several surrounding communities forwarded two petitions to Harkin with signatures of close to seventy local citizens opposed to the cancellation of the spring muskrat trapping season. The preambles to the petitions contained a wide range of arguments in support of their position, including the general abundance of muskrat in the marshes, the fact that muskrat trapping did not interfere with the park's central mandate of migratory bird conservation, the importance of fur income for farmers destined to till the "light" and unproductive soils on Point Pelee, and finally the tendency of the muskrat to damage the numerous dykes and embankments that prevented flooding on reclaimed farmland.<sup>24</sup> In addition to formal protests, there is some indication that local bitterness toward the new game regulations had intensified to the point where at least some residents of the point had issued threats to the life and property of Superintendent Conover. Several of Kerr's correspondences contain oblique references to local residents having threatened to dynamite Conover's home.<sup>25</sup>

---

22 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. Harkin to Conover, 21 September 1918..

23 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 1700, File P2, pt. 1. Harkin to Donald McDonald, 25 September 1918. (The arrangement between the province and federal government regarding the patented lands on Point Pelee is summarized in this letter).

24 Both petitions were found in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. One petition was forwarded to Harkin by Albert Girardin on 4 January 1919; a second by W.N. Langell on 9 January 1919.

25 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. Kerr to Wallace Tilden, 13 May 1919, and Kerr to Harkin, 28 April 1919.

The sport hunters of the Essex County Wild Life Association were also thoroughly strident in their support of the new restrictions on muskrat trapping. They claimed first and foremost that muskrat trapping represented a grave threat to the productive potential of the marshes as a waterfowl habitat. Conover and Kerr argued repeatedly to Harkin that the muskrat population performed a valuable ecological service by using blue flag iris and blue-joint to construct their dwellings, thus preventing this 'noxious' growth from taking over the marsh and reducing the amount of open water available to ducks. According to Conover and Kerr, the muskrat also churned up the potentially stagnant and anoxic layers of mud at the bottom of the marsh ponds, allowing the influx of oxygen and sunlight that was a precondition for the growth of wild duck foods such as wild rice, sago plant, wampole, and potomogentien.<sup>26</sup> According to the prevailing ECWLA orthodoxy, a fur harvest that in any way depleted the muskrat population represented a direct threat to migratory waterfowl at Point Pelee, and also to the interests of the men who hunted these animals for sport.

The ECWLA did not restrict its arguments against muskrat trapping to the issue of ecological change in the marsh, but also employed the language of class prejudice as a means to discredit the hunting ethics and conservation sensibility of their opponents. Expressions of disdain among upper class sportsmen for the 'pot hunting' tendencies of the rural poor were common in the early twentieth century. In his seminal 1913 volume, *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, one of North America's most famous wildlife conservationists, William Temple Hornaday, railed against the 'enemies of wildlife' and 'agents of destruction' whose ranks were disproportionately represented by poor white farmers, African Americans, and Italian immigrants.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Point Pelee, the secretary of the ECWLA, E.R. Kerr, was particularly prone to use class and race-based arguments in order to justify the apparent contradictions in the wildlife policy that was applied to the national park. In a letter to the naturalist W.E. Saunders penned in May 1919, Kerr defended the policy of allowing duck hunting in the park based on the fact that waterfowl killed during the hunt did not reside permanently on Point Pelee, and thus "it would be very unwise to deprive the sportsmen of Ontario in favor of negroes and other gunners of countries to which our birds migrate."<sup>28</sup> Kerr applied a similar analysis to the controversy over muskrat trapping in Point Pelee, arguing continually that game hunting in Essex County was the proper preserve of the enlightened sportsman rather than the 'pot hunters' and 'game hogs' who did not share the

26 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. Conover to Harkin, 22 January 1919., and Kerr to Harkin, 16 January 1919.

27 William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife: Its Extermination and Preservation* (New York: New York Zoological Society, 1913).

28 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 202, File P 174-4, pt. 1. Kerr to W.E. Saunders, 14 May 1919.

conservation priorities of the ECWLA. In one of his frequent correspondences to Harkin written in July 1918, for example, he wrote that the members of the ECWLA “feel deeply the burden of responsibility [for the park] transferred to us as an organization of clean sportsmen and citizens,” and went on to suggest that the Parks Branch’s efforts to set aside Point Pelee as a park were tantamount to “rescuing from the bar-room whisky soaked classification of sportdom the wild life that frequents its many haunts.”<sup>29</sup> On the issue of muskrat trapping, Kerr continually referred to the Point Pelee residents as the “enemies of wildlife” and the “guerillas of destruction” in his correspondences to Harkin. They were, Kerr proclaimed “a class of citizens unworthy of consideration insofar as their present demands are concerned.”<sup>30</sup> Conover similarly referred to the Point Pelee residents and their supporters as a “class of pothunting [sic] wolves who think the old days of murderous work should go on.”<sup>31</sup>

Although the federal government initially sided with the ECWLA in the muskrat and duck hunting dispute in Point Pelee National Park, by the spring of 1919 federal officials such as Harkin had become increasingly irritated by Kerr’s stridency and somewhat more sympathetic to the point of view of the Point Pelee trappers. In March 1919, C. Gordon Hewitt wrote an angry letter to Kerr suggesting that the protestations of the muskrat hunters were perfectly justified given the special shooting privileges that had been afforded to duck hunters. He further emphasized that Point Pelee was a public park and not the private preserve of the ECWLA.<sup>32</sup> That same month, Harkin sent R.M. Anderson, a zoologist with the Biological Division of the Geological Survey of Canada, to Point Pelee to investigate the conflict between muskrat trappers and duck hunters in the park environs. The final report on the investigation was not favourably disposed towards the sport hunters. Anderson emphasized that the special privileges afforded to sport hunters were the source of much of the local anger directed at the park as local residents could “allege unjust discrimination, special privileges to wealthy sportsmen, and general undemocratic administration.” He thus recommended the cancellation of the duck hunting season as a way of garnering broader local support for the park’s conservation objectives. Anderson also suggested that if the stagnant conditions in the marshes and poor wild rice crops failed to improve after two additional closed muskrat trapping seasons then the principal argument for restricting muskrat trapping would be removed.<sup>33</sup>

29 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. Kerr to Harkin, 26 July 1918.

30 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. Kerr to Harkin, 27 March 1919.

31 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Conover to Harkin, 1 March 1920.

32 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. Hewitt to Kerr, 28 March 1919.

33 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. R.M. Anderson. Report on Investigations in Regard to the Muskrat Situation at Point Pelee Park, Essex County, Ontario, March 12th to 19th, 1919 (Unpublished Report).

Although Harkin did not cancel the duck hunting season in Point Pelee National Park in response to Anderson's recommendations, he did defuse local tensions somewhat by permitting muskrat trapping in the park during the month of March 1920. Conover's annual report for 1919 estimated that the muskrat population in the Pelee marshes had increased to twelve thousand animals; senior parks officials subsequently became convinced that a harvest limited to the surplus of three thousand animals was desirable that year to prevent rapid growth in the number of muskrats from becoming a nuisance to property owners living adjacent to the park.<sup>34</sup> There are some indications that high fur prices were also a motivating factor in the government's decision to open the muskrat season. The Minister of the Interior had in fact expressed great enthusiasm for the revenue generating potential of the Point Pelee marshes after the price for muskrat skins had nearly doubled to almost five dollars per pelt in 1920. Harkin did reject as politically reckless a proposal from Conover to have the Parks Branch maximize financial returns on muskrat trapping by hiring 'outside men' to trap the marshes as wage labourers, but local trappers were nevertheless required to pay a twenty-five per cent royalty to the government on any furs sold out of Point Pelee National Park.<sup>35</sup>

The opponents of muskrat hunting responded initially with a surprising degree of equanimity to the commencement of trapping operations in the park. Perhaps hoping to repair frayed relations with the Parks Branch, Kerr suggested that a harvest of the surplus muskrat 'crop' on Point Pelee "will be in the best interests of all."<sup>36</sup> Conover struck a similar conciliatory tone, noting that the reinstatement of trapping privileges in the park might "have the tendency in mollifying antagonism against the regulations of the park."<sup>37</sup> It is nevertheless doubtful that there was a great deal of sincerity attached to Kerr and Conover's newfound sympathy for muskrat trappers. Kerr in fact recanted his support for the new trapping policy in October 1920, arguing that the previous spring's open season on muskrat had constituted a grave error because 'noxious' vegetation still dominated the plant community in the marsh. Two months later, Conover reported that an unduly harsh winter and low water levels in the marsh had reduced the muskrat population to the point where an open season on the species could no longer be justified. In January, Harkin acceded to Conover's

34 Harkin notified Conover of the policy change on 1 March 1920. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Harkin to Conover, 1 March 1920. For the rationale behind the policy change, see LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. J.E. Spero to Harkin, 15 January 1920.

35 Harkin quotes the Minister of the Interior in one letter as suggesting that the Department should carry out the trapping operations at Point Pelee as a revenue generation scheme. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Harkin to W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 26 February 1920. The royalty system is described in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Conover to Harkin, 15 April 1920.

36 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Kerr to Harkin, 10 March 1920.

37 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Conover to Harkin, 15 April 1920.

recommendation and refused to issue permits for the March 1921 muskrat season.<sup>38</sup> It is not clear whether the reports of Kerr and Conover represented an accurate assessment of ecological conditions in the Point Pelee marshes or were simply an attempt to curtail an economic activity that the sport hunting constituency in the ECWLA opposed in principle.<sup>39</sup> In any case, Conover's subsequent reports of low water levels, an increase in noxious plant growth, and a depressed muskrat population prevented any restitution of muskrat trapping in the 1922 and 1923 seasons.<sup>40</sup>

As in previous years, the residents of Point Pelee objected strenuously to the cancellation of muskrat trapping privileges in park. Conover reported in March 1922 that several trappers were threatening to "invade" the park's marshlands and kill muskrat under the cover of darkness.<sup>41</sup> Later the same

---

38 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Kerr's criticisms of the trapping that took place in 1919 are contained in a letter to Harkin dated 23 October 1920. Conover's report on the adverse conditions affecting the muskrat population was contained in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Conover to Harkin, 27 December 1920. Harkin notified Conover of his decision to cancel the trapping season in January 1921. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 2. Harkin to Conover, 7 January 1921.

39 The conflict over ecological conditions in the marsh can be interpreted, along the lines of James Scott's work, as the imposition of a state system of knowing nature on local patterns of ecological knowledge. However, the case is not as simple as this. Kerr was not, in fact, a state agent at all and Conover's allegiances always seemed most firmly tied to the local sport hunting constituency in Essex County. Furthermore, as discussed previously, the most obvious representative of state supported scientific knowledge to enter this narrative, Dr. R.M. Anderson, minimized the potential ecological damage coincident with muskrat trapping in the park and expressed a great deal of sympathy for the plight of the muskrat trappers within his report on the conflict. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 1. R.M. Anderson, Report on Investigations in Regard to the Muskrat Situation at Point Pelee Park, Essex County, Ontario, March 12th to 19th, 1919. For Scott's work on state and local systems of ecological knowledge, see his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). For studies that suggest that the dialogue between state and local systems of ecological knowledge was more nuanced and complex than Scott has argued, with state actors at times expressing sympathy for local methods of managing nature, see K. Sivaramakrishnan, "The Politics of Fire and Forest Regeneration in Colonial Bengal," *Environment and History* 2 (1996): 145-94; Satpal Sangwan, "From Gentlemen Amateurs to Professionals: Reassessing the Natural Science Tradition in Colonial India, 1780-1840," in *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran, Satpal Sangwan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 209-36; Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1997).

40 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Conover's reports to Harkin dated 11 November 1921, 9 January 1922, and 9 October 1922. See also LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. "Extract from Mr. Conover's Report for 1923."

41 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Conover to Harkin 6 March 1922.

month, the Park Superintendent reported that “rat vandals” were stealing timber and “pilfering the marshes” on an almost daily basis. The park’s lone warden, George Finlayson, further raised the ire of local residents by laying several charges for muskrat poaching in the park. Conover thus reiterated to Harkin his contention that any future trapping should be carried out by outside wage labourers; the residents of Point Pelee he dismissed as “willfully devilish and vicious low down and mean [sic].”<sup>42</sup> In spite of Conover’s colourful rhetoric, the Point Pelee residents once again adopted very conventional forms of pressing their grievances against the park administration. In May 1923, for example, a petition containing thirty-eight signatures was forwarded to the local Member of Parliament, George P. Graham. The petitioners argued that trapping would not reduce the number of muskrats in the park because the population had reached its natural upper limit, and that Conover was hypocritical for wanting to retain the muskrat to root up the marsh beds while at the same targeting carp for destruction because they disturb the bottoms of the park’s wetlands. They suggested that “the true reason ... he wants to keep us trappers off the marsh in the spring of the year [is] for fear we may disturb his ducks.”<sup>43</sup> Taken together, all of these protests created enough political pressure for the Parks Branch to yield to the demands of the muskrat trappers. Harkin decided to allow a harvest of up to 2000 muskrats in March 1924 “as a result of much agitation on the part of the local people.”<sup>44</sup> A harvest of 1000 was once again approved in 1925, a policy decision that Conover labeled as a “disappointing surprise” given “the barren condition of the marsh.”<sup>45</sup>

Conover’s frustration with his superiors proved to be futile. The annual spring muskrat hunt became a fixture of Point Pelee National Park’s wildlife policy until the late 1950s when local interest petered out due to low fur prices.<sup>46</sup> The fall duck hunting season also remained an annual event within the marshes of Point Pelee until the federal Environment Minister Lucien Bouchard ended the practice in 1989.<sup>47</sup> With both sides of the dispute over ducks and muskrats now able to pursue their interests within Point Pelee National Park, the local controversy between the two factions became much less fractious by the end of the 1920s. It is nevertheless remarkable that a local dispute over access to natural resources had become a primary determinant of wildlife policy within a

42 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Conover to Harkin 21 March 1922.

43 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Petition to George P. Graham, MP and Minister of Militia, 4 May 1923.

44 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Harkin to W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 28 January 1925.

45 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 16, File P300, pt. 3. Conover to Harkin, 2 March 1925.

46 For an overview see J.G. Battin and J.G. Nelson, *Man’s Impact on Point Pelee* (Toronto: National and Provincial Parks Association, 1978), 104-11.

47 See “Duck Hunting Banned at Pelee National Park,” *Toronto Star* (7 June 1989): A12.



national park during a period when the federal government routinely dismissed the concerns of resident people living in or near the national parks. Although the park administration initially became embroiled in the conflict due to a desire to align themselves with the conservationists within the ECWLA, federal officials quickly became critical of the self-interest associated with the sport hunters' agenda and softened their stance toward the claims of injustice brought forward by the Point Pelee trappers. In both cases, a population of local resource harvesters was able to effectively lobby the government in an effort to place their somewhat parochial concerns at the forefront of the Point Pelee National Park policy agenda in a way that would not have been possible for the Stoney Indians who were excluded from Rocky Mountains National Park after 1885 or the Ojibwa trappers who were expelled from Quetico Provincial Park in 1913. If Point Pelee's role as a migratory bird sanctuary was meant to symbolize the international dimension of wildlife conservation, the early history of the park suggests that it was local people who shaped the much of the wildlife policy agenda in Canada's southernmost protected area.

There were three additional national parks established in Canada during the eleven years that separated the creation of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks: Kootenay in 1920, Wood Buffalo in 1922, and Prince Albert in 1927. The first two of these parks were created as a response not to local campaigning or political pressure but to the federal government's own conservation and tourism development priorities. Kootenay National Park, for example, was born out of a financial deal with the provincial government of British Columbia that offered the federal government an opportunity to expand the land base of the extremely popular Banff-Jasper-Yoho mountain parks complex. In 1916 the British Columbia government offered their federal counterparts the opportunity to obtain new park land south of Yoho and Banff National Parks in exchange for funding to complete a highway through the Vermilion Pass connecting Banff with the Windermere region. A formal agreement on road construction was signed in 1919 and Kootenay National Park was established one year later on a site that encompassed ten miles on either side of the highway right of way.<sup>48</sup> Two years later, Wood Buffalo National Park was founded south of Great Slave Lake and west of the Slave River in order to fulfill a more overt conservation objective: the preservation of North America's last free roaming herd of wood bison. The absolute restrictions on trapping that accompanied the creation of the massive park inspired not local support, however, but intense hostility from Native and non-Native trappers living in the Fort Smith region. As a compromise, Treaty Indians were permitted to hunt and trap in the park subject to regulations that included an absolute ban on killing wood bison. All other hunters and trappers were restricted from accessing the

---

48 See Lothian, *A History* Vol. I, 58-61.

park, a policy initiative that provoked a great deal of anger among local people who were expelled from their homesteads and trapping areas.<sup>49</sup> Prince Albert National Park, in contrast, was created partly as a response to the appeals of local commercial interests hoping to develop a tourist attraction in the northern prairie regions of Saskatchewan. The Prince Albert Board of Trade had forwarded proposals for the development of a game park north of their townsite in 1921 and again in 1925, but in both cases Harkin objected to the establishment of a national park in a flat area with few scenic attractions. Political events, however, offered new life to the park proposal. After the liberal leader Mackenzie King lost his seat in the 1925 federal election, he chose to run in a by-election in Prince Albert so he could assume the role of Prime Minister in a coalition government with the Progressives. As recompense for receiving the local nomination, the local riding association in Prince Albert presented an inventory of community projects for King to consider, a wish list that included the local establishment of a national park. After King's election victory in February 1926, the park proposal for Prince Albert became less the product of a local campaign and more a personal project of the Prime Minister. In May 1926 he pushed the approval of the park through cabinet against the wishes of the Parks Branch bureaucracy and Prince Albert National Park was finally created by order-in-council on March 1927.<sup>50</sup>

Taken together, all these examples suggest that, save for the initial lobbying efforts of the Prince Albert Board of Trade, local involvement in the creation of national parks in western Canada was distinctly limited prior in the 1920s. Certainly it would be a mistake to declare that local enthusiasm for the creation of national parks was strictly confined to eastern and central Canada. The establishment of Riding Mountain National Park in December 1929, for instance, was the result of a long and very public campaign that originated in the settled townships of western Manitoba. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that many of the other national park sites in western Canada lacked a significant population of middle class nature enthusiasts to rally around the twin causes of wilderness protection and tourism promotion.<sup>51</sup> Although we have

---

49 See John Sandlos, "Northern Wildlife, Northern People: Native Hunters and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories, 1894-1970," (Ph.D. Dissertation, York University, 2004).

50 See Waiser, *Saskatchewan's Playground*, 25-35. The intrusion of partisan politics in the creation of national parks was not nearly as blatant in other cases during this period. In the cases of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks, the sites were selected primarily through dialogue between local people and the national parks bureaucracy. There is no evidence of lobbying from elected cabinet ministers or Members of Parliament hoping to secure election in the constituencies surrounding the two parks

51 For the case of Riding Mountain National Park, see D.T. Tabulenas, *A Narrative Human History of Riding Mountain National Park and Area: Prehistory to 1980*, 204-14. See also John Sandlos, "Not Wanted in the Boundary: the Expulsion of the Keeseekowenin Ojibway Band from Riding Mountain National Park," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, York University (31 May 2006).

few examples to draw on for comparison, the two parks created in Ontario in 1918 and 1929 suggest that citizen involvement in the process of national park establishment was more of a rule and less an exception in the well settled areas of Ontario, a process that was repeated throughout the 1930s and 1940s in Atlantic Canada.<sup>52</sup>

Certainly the creation of a national park in the expansive Thirty Thousand Islands archipelago of Ontario's Georgian Bay in 1929 was no less a product of political pressure from local citizens than Point Pelee National Park had been eleven years earlier. The campaign to create a public park out of the relatively large Beausoleil Island north of Penetanguishene was focused not on the political priorities of wildlife enthusiasts and sport shooters, however, but was instead meant to be a catalyst for the development of the local tourist industry.<sup>53</sup> Beausoleil and several other smaller islands in southeastern Georgian Bay had been under the control of the federal government since June 5th, 1856, when the Ojibwa people who eventually settled on the Christian Island, Rama, and Georgina Island Reserves surrendered Beausoleil and several other small islands in southeastern Georgian Bay to be sold for their benefit.<sup>54</sup> By 1914, the islands had still not been sold and the town of Penetanguishene first approached the Department of Indian Affairs with the idea of turning Beausoleil Island into a public park that would act as a magnet for tourists in the same manner as the popular St. Lawrence Island National Park further to the south.<sup>55</sup> It is not entirely clear why this first attempt at creating a park failed – undoubtedly the First World War turned the attention of the federal government to more pressing matters overseas – but the campaign to create a public pleasuring ground in southern Georgian Bay gained renewed momentum in 1920 as the idea of creating a park on Beausoleil Island continued to garner public support from

---

52 A detailed study of the third early national park in Ontario, St. Lawrence Islands, is beyond the scope and length limitations of this paper, but secondary material suggests that there was a significant groundswell of local support for designating several of the Thousand Islands as a public park as early as 1873. Although there were some local people in the Gananoque area who favoured private development on the islands, extensive local support for the creation of a national park in the archipelago resulted in the reservation of nine islands for park purposes in 1904 and the formal designation of St. Lawrence Islands National Park in 1914. See Carter-Edwards, "The History of National Parks in Ontario," 95-7, and Lothian, *A History*, 76-9. For Atlantic Canada, see MacEachern, *Natural Selections*.

53 For an overview of the push to develop the tourism industry in the Georgian Bay Region in the early twentieth century, see Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 86-95.

54 For details of the surrender, see LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89B. Hayter Reed, Deputy Superintendent General, Indian Affairs, to Aubrey White, Asst. Commissioner of Crown Lands, 25 February 1897.

55 Penetanguishene's early interest in the park is discussed in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Undated report from A.A. Pinard, National Parks Branch.

citizens and ratepayers associations in the surrounding communities of Midland and Penetanguishene.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the broad base of local support for the park idea, the most important proponents of the Beausoleil Island park in the 1920s were two individuals by the name of R.B. Orr, a cottage owner in the local area and the Director of Public Education at the Royal Ontario Museum, and W.H. Bennett, a federal senator from nearby Midland. In September 1920, Orr urged Harkin to create a park called “Huronian” on Beausoleil Island as “a great resort for tourists and summer residences for wealthy neighbours.”<sup>57</sup> Four months later, Orr drew Harkin’s attention to a potential historic site on Beausoleil Island containing stone foundations known as “the chimneys.” According to local legend, these stone ruins were the remnants of stoves or fortifications built by the Huron and the Jesuit missionaries as a refuge after their defeat at the battle of St. Louis in 1649. Orr suggested to Harkin that the chimneys had the potential to become a tourist draw and an historic site of national significance.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Orr managed to galvanize local support for the park, successfully persuading the ratepayers association for his cottage district to pass a resolution in January 1921 calling for the creation of a national park on Beausoleil Island.<sup>59</sup> Senator Bennett mentioned the historic value of Beausoleil Island in his arguments for the park, but he was also a much more pragmatic booster of the park as a boon to the tourist industry in the region. In one letter sent to Harkin on 21 August 1921, Bennett highlighted several “natural advantages” associated with Beausoleil Island: its close proximity by rail from Toronto, the relative ease of boat access from major ports in southern Georgian Bay, and the fact that three hotels were already located nearby. He also noted the suitability of the island for swimming, horseback riding, golf, and the construction of “beautifully wooded” driveways for motorists.<sup>60</sup> Bennett later claimed that the success of a boys and girls camp on Beausoleil Island proved that the camping industry

---

56 The popular support for the park in Midland and Penetanguishene is mentioned in the following undated document: LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2, pt. 3. “Position Paper on Beausoleil.” Harkin also refers to a supportive resolution of the Penetanguishene Ratepayers Association. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 488, File GB 11325-9-6. Harkin to W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 5 January 1923.

57 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. R.B. Orr to James Harkin, 22 September 1920.

58 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Orr to Harkin, 31 January 1921. Harkin first expressed interest in the site in July 1921. See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Harkin to W.B. Bennett, 20 July 1921. He also sent out many letters to local residents in Penetanguishene asking for photos of the site and information about its historical origins. For one reply with particularly good descriptive material on the chimneys, see LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. J.C. Osborne to Harkin, 27 July 1921.

59 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89A. Orr to Duncan Campbell Scott, 1 September 1921.

60 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Bennett to Harkin, 21 August 1921.

could flourish “on a fairly big basis” if the area were retained as a public playground. The park might also serve, he suggested, as a logical end point for American boaters to dock their boats after finishing a journey through the recently completed Trent-Severn Waterway. Underlying all of these arguments was Bennett’s rather blunt assessment of the proposed park’s ultimate purpose. “What we want,” he wrote to Harkin, “is tourists and their money from the United States and this is the way to get it.”<sup>61</sup>

The Parks Branch responded with great enthusiasm to Orr’s and Bennett’s proposals. Almost immediately after Orr first corresponded with Harkin on the park proposal, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, Roy A. Gibson, sent to the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, an inquiry regarding the legal status of Beausoleil Island and a suggestion that it be converted to a national park.<sup>62</sup> In December 1920, a Parks Branch employee, A.A. Pinard, produced an extremely favourable report on the proposed park after meeting with Orr in Toronto.<sup>63</sup> In December 1922, Pinard wrote a second report that supported Orr’s and Bennett’s contentions regarding the historical value and tourism potential associated with the site. Pinard also suggested that the addition of another park in Ontario might serve a broader national purpose by providing a key link in the chain of parks that increasingly extended from western to eastern Canada.<sup>64</sup> Harkin’s subsequent report to his Deputy Minister, W.W. Cory, highlighted all of these issues – tourism promotion, the historical significance of the site, the opportunity to create more eastern parks, and the local support for the park – as a basis for recommending that his department purchase Beausoleil Island for the fair market value of \$25,000 that had been demanded by Indian Affairs.<sup>65</sup> The Minister of the Interior, Charles Stewart, approved the purchase only six days after Harkin had sent his report.<sup>66</sup> The general administrative enthusiasm for the proposed new park did not produce the necessary funds, however, and the department was unable to complete the purchase until July 1929, when Beausoleil and twenty-eight smaller islands in the surrounding area were acquired for \$30,205. The islands were officially designated as Georgian Bay Islands National Park on December 28th, 1929.<sup>67</sup>

61 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Bennett to Harkin, 20 December 1921. For a further explication of Bennett’s thoughts on the importance of the Trent-Severn Waterway, see LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. Bennett to J.B. Harkin, 10 December 1922.

62 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89A. Gibson to Scott, 1 October 1921.

63 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2 (U325-9-9), pt. 2. A.A. Pinard, “Excerpt from Report Dated the 11th Dec. 1920.”

64 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 488, File GB11325-9-6. Pinard to Harkin, 21 December 1922.

65 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 488, File GB11325-9-6. Harkin to Cory 5 January 1923.

66 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89A. See Cory to Scott, 11 January 1923.

67 See LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89A. K.R. Daly, Acting Deputy Minister of the Interior to D.C. Scott, 19 July 1929. See also order-in-council P.C. 2512, 28 December 1929, in *Canada Gazette*, 15 February 1930.

The creation of the new park appears to have satisfied all the local interests that had supported its creation. Local tourism operators such as lodge and hotel owners were likely pleased with the publicity that was generated immediately after the creation of this new recreational playground (though the actual number of visitors to the park remained small in the first years after its creation). Certainly press reaction to the tourism potential of the new site was extremely favourable throughout Ontario.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the Native people of Rama, Georgina Island, and Christian Island finally received at least some financial benefit from the lands they had surrendered seventy-three years earlier, though they would have preferred an immediate cash payout of half the total purchase price of the land rather than the yearly allotment of interest from their capital account that was arranged by the Department of Indian Affairs.<sup>69</sup>

There was nevertheless at least one local constituency for whom the park represented only a source of disruption and upheaval in their lives. During the negotiations leading up to the sale of the island in 1929, the Department of the Interior had insisted that Indian Affairs remove three families of squatters from their homesteads on Beausoleil Island. Two of these families, the Tonches and the Tobeyes, were non-Treaty Indians who lived at two separate locations on the eastern shore of the island; the French Canadian Joseph Corbier lived with his family further to the north. All of them eked out a subsistence livelihood by raising small numbers of chickens and livestock, gardening in the summers, cutting wood on the island, repairing boats (in Corbier's case), and trapping, hunting, and fishing throughout the year. They had also clearly established deep roots on the island. Each of the homesteads contained permanent structures such as houses, barns, and workshops. Peter Tonch's ancestors had inhabited the site of his homestead since the 1840s, while Corbier had married a woman from Christian Island Band and lived "practically all his life on the island."<sup>70</sup> A forced removal from Beausoleil Island thus represented no passing matter for these families. Indeed, on an inspection tour of Beausoleil Island in August 1929, the Parks Branch's Superintendent of Wildlife Hoyes Lloyd reported that

---

68 Clippings with laudatory articles from various January 1930 editions of the *Morning Post*, the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, the *Stratford Beacon-Herald*, the *Oshawa Times*, the *Brockville Record*, and the *Toronto Globe* were found in LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB2, pt. 3. A reference to low visitorship in the park during its early years was found in an interview with the first park warden, George Lynn. See Arlene Yaworsky, "Preserving the History of Georgian Bay Islands National Park," Unpublished Report, Georgian Bay Islands National Park (1 June 1976), 319. For a record of the large number of lodges and hotels in the vicinity of the park, see pp. 251-54 of Yaworsky's report.

69 The Department of Indian Affairs insisted on the annuity arrangement because it was a condition of the original surrender in 1856. See LAC, RG10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89A. Scott to Indian Agent Eade, 24 January 1930.

70 For a description of the three families and their homesteads, see LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176, 296-89B. Thomas McGookin, Inspector, DIA, to D.C. Scott, 26 May 1930.

Corbier and Tobey were “not agreeable” to the idea of moving from the island.<sup>71</sup> That same month, a Midland lawyer, A.J. Donnelly, sent a letter to the Department of the Interior claiming that Indian Affairs had granted Tonch assurances that his family would never be uprooted from their site on Beausoleil Island and requesting cash compensation in the event of a move.<sup>72</sup>

Despite such objections, the Indian Affairs Inspector, Thomas McGookin, was sent in April 1930 to negotiate terms of departure with the park squatters. In May McGookin reported to Scott that discussions with the squatters had proceeded in “a friendly way,” and each of the Beausoleil Island families were “quite satisfied” with the cash compensation he had offered to them (\$225 for Peter Tonch’s large homestead and \$50 each for Corbier’s and Tobey’s smaller holdings). McGookin also informed his superior that “definite arrangements” had been made to remove the three families from the island by June 4th to suitable locations on the mainland, with thirty extra days granted for the removal of buildings from within the park.<sup>73</sup>

McGookin’s portrayal of his negotiations with the Beausoleil Island squatters as fair and amicable likely did not reflect the attitude of the squatters, however, as the available records at least insinuate that Tonch and Corbier continued to disapprove of and resist their forced relocation from the new park.<sup>74</sup> When a scow arrived at the Tonch’s homestead on the previously arranged date in early June 1930 to move the family and their goods, the owner of the boat reported that “there wasn’t a thing ready and no help, so my man had to turn in and help to draw stuff down to shore and load.”<sup>75</sup> Corbier apparently stayed on the island well past the departure deadline. His plight somehow managed to attract the attention of W.F. Finlayson, the Ontario Minister of Lands and Forests, who wrote to the Minister of the Interior to request that Corbier be given more time to remove his personal belongings from Beausoleil Island.<sup>76</sup> The Parks Branch was agreeable to a brief extension of time, but officials were

71 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2. Lloyd to F.H.H. Williamson, 7 August 1929.

72 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2864, File 176, 296-89A. A.J. Donnelly to the Department of the Interior, 25 August 1929. The assurances were received from Indian Affairs after the Christian Island Band Council passed a resolution demanding that Tonch be left “unmolested” on his present homestead.

73 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176, 296-89B. McGookin to D.C. Scott, 26 May 1930.

74 Ibid. Each of the squatters did sign an agreement to surrender their holdings on Beausoleil Island. They are contained in LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89B and each is dated 21 May 1930.

75 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89B. G.E. Grise to Indian Agent, Christian Island, 2 June 1930.

76 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,296-89B. W.M. Finlayson to Thomas G. Murphy, Minister of the Interior, 22 August 1930. There is some confusion on this point in the archival record. A separate report from the Park Branch employee J.E. Spero stated that Corbier’s buildings had been removed from the island by early July See LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2, pt. 3. Memo to W.W. Cory, 8 September 1930.

adamant that no homesteaders should be left in Georgian Bay Islands National Park at the end of the winter of 1931.<sup>77</sup>

Why were federal administrators within the Department of the Interior so insistent that the squatters leave Beausoleil Island? On a very basic level, the federal government acted so decisively on the issue simply because the law allowed them to do so. The Corbiers, Tonches, and Tobey's lacked the formal legal patents to their land that had prevented the expulsion of squatters from Point Pelee National Park. They also had none of the legal guarantees of a right to hunt and trap that prevented the outright eviction of Treaty Indians from Wood Buffalo National Park in 1922. There is also some indication that Parks Branch officials regarded the Beausoleil Island squatters as a threat to local wildlife populations. In his report on Beausoleil Island in the summer of 1929, Hoyes Lloyd suggested that the island was an important breeding area for deer, but "at present it is pretty well depleted by the Indians." Lloyd argued further that "it would be a splendid thing for the country to have this large island set aside as a sanctuary where the game could secure protection as all the balance of the lands of the district are open for hunting."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps the most plausible explanation for the opposition among senior Parks Branch officials to the continuing presence of the homesteads is that they believed such dwellings would conflict with the image of a recreational paradise they were trying to construct in the park. In May 1930, Harkin urged Scott to make a "special effort" to proceed with an early removal of the squatters because the Parks Branch had proposed carrying out "certain developments" on Beausoleil Island during the early summer.<sup>79</sup> Harkin did not provide details on these projects, but the area around the Tobey homestead soon became the park headquarters, complete with campsites, staff residences, extensive lawns, a twenty-one foot high stone sign depicting the park's moniker, and a registration booth welcoming visitors to "the island of sunshine and happiness." By 1935 a trail network and several campsites in more distant areas of the island had been constructed, including one near the site of Joe Corbier's homestead on Frying Pan Bay.<sup>80</sup> In addition to the development of public facilities, private organizations were encouraged to construct recreational youth camps in the park as a means to attract visitors to the area. Although the YMCA camp that had leased a site on the island since 1920 was allowed to remain partly because Indian Affairs demanded that the Parks Branch honour an existing lease, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, W.W. Cory, confirmed in a letter that "it is the policy of this department to encourage enterprises of this nature."<sup>81</sup> By 1937,

77 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2, pt. 3. Cory to Harkin, 5 September 1930.

78 LAC, RG 84, Vol. 487, File GB 2, pt. 3. Hoyes Lloyd to F.H.H. Williamson, 7 August 1929.

79 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2865, File 176,286-89B. Harkin to Scott, 2 May 1930.

80 For details on the construction of facilities in the park, see Yaworsky, "Preserving the History of Georgian Bay Islands National Park," 69-75, 332-35.

81 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2864, File 176, 296-89A. Cory to Scott, 7 August 1929.



there were seven camps for youth and adults in the national park representing established groups such as the YMCA and Boy Scouts and also an artists' retreat on Island 95.<sup>82</sup> For senior parks officials, a human presence was thus desirable in the park, but only if it furthered the development of tourism and recreation opportunities in Georgian Bay Islands National Park.

The expulsion of the Beausoleil Island squatters from Beausoleil Island appears at first glance to replay a familiar story from the early history of the North American conservation movement: the exclusion a powerless local people from a park or protected area by a heavy-handed conservation bureaucracy bent on appropriating land for state purposes. Certainly, the federal Parks Branch pursued the policy of expelling local residents from Georgian Bay Islands National Park with vigour, but it is clear that other local priorities – the development of tourism and recreation opportunities most notably – also shaped the response of senior parks officials to the squatter 'problem' in Georgian Bay Islands National Park. Certainly, there is little evidence to suggest a vindictive local campaign to remove the residents of Beausoleil Island. In fact, some local people attempted to provide assistance to the families who were excluded from the park. A group of cottagers, for example, granted Joe Corbier a lot on Tomahawk Point after his expulsion from the park, while the Midland lawyer A.J. Donnelly suggested to the department that Peter Tonch be appointed to the position of park caretaker after he had moved to Robert's Island (a position that Tonch eventually held from 1931 to 1947).<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, the much more important political priority in the regions was to use the park as a lure to bring wealthy foreign tourists and residents of Toronto to their near northern playground; the pursuit of subsistence livelihoods no longer had any place in the increasingly modern economy of the southern Georgian Bay region. The people of Midland and Penetanguishene had opened their local area to the "tourist gaze;" that which could not be put on display now had no place in historical monuments and recreational paradises such as Georgian Bay Islands National Park.<sup>84</sup>

---

82 Yaworsky, "Preserving the History of Georgian Bay Islands National Park," 86-100.

83 For the suggestion that Tonch become park caretaker, see LAC, RG 10, Vol. 2864, File 176, 296-89A. A.J. Donnelly to the Department of the Interior, 25 August 1929. For the granting of the lot to Corbier, see LAC, RG 10, vol. 2865, file 176,296-89B. W.M. Finlayson to Thomas G. Murphy, Minister of the Interior, 22 August 1930. Tomahawk Point was located across a narrow waterway from Corbier's old homestead.

84 The transformation of rural and hinterland landscapes from centres of localized subsistence production to spaces dominated by the commercial imperatives of the travel industry is a global phenomenon that has occurred in many regions of the globe since the rise of mass tourism in the early nineteenth century. John Urry has argued that natural environments are most readily appropriated as commodities when consumed as visual objects or recreational sites. See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990). For a broad collection of essays, several of which deal specifically with natural environments, see John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995).

### **Conclusion: State Actors, Local People, and National Parks Policy**

In the 1950s, scholars often characterized the natural resource policy process as the product of an iron-clad alliance between state and productive interests.<sup>85</sup> In Canada, the participation of large corporations such as the Canadian Pacific Railway in the process of commercializing the earliest national parks as tourist attractions or as sites for industrial resource exploitation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests that this state–business nexus was a feature even of the seemingly non-productive sphere of park management. But by the early twentieth century, the state and the business community were not the only actors driving the early parks policy agenda in Canada. Indeed, the cases of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks suggest that a variety of local interest groups, ranging from tourism promoters to conservation groups and gun clubs, all played critical roles in establishing and managing two of the first national parks to be created in the settled areas of central Canada. Clearly the local advocates of national parks in Point Pelee and Georgian Bay were motivated by very different priorities: tourism was the overriding concern for local people living near the recreational ‘paradise’ of the Thirty Thousand Islands; the sport hunters of Essex Country were concerned more with the preservation of their own privileged access to the Point Pelee marshes than with providing opportunities for sport hunters from abroad to share in the fall duck harvest. There were also sharp differences between the marginalized members of the policy communities surrounding each of the two parks. In the case of Point Pelee, protests from large numbers of residents opposed to the trapping ban in the marshes senior national park and the obvious injustice associated with the granting of hunting privileges to only one local interest group prompted parks officials to accommodate the interests of the muskrat trappers that some local conservationists had declared to be the ‘enemies of wildlife.’ In contrast, the Beausoleil Island squatters were too few in number and too powerless, lacking any formal legal status as landowners or as Treaty Indians that might have prevented their expulsion from the park. Yet in spite of all these differences, the federal government clearly allowed the disparate and sometime irreconcilable interests of local power brokers and resource harvesters an almost unprecedented degree of influence over the policy framework governing Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks. The two parks, though dedicated broadly to the use and enjoyment of the Canadian people, were also shaped by the voices of those who hoped to preserve historical patterns of local resource use, or reap bountiful new harvests as their local landscape was transformed into a marketable good for a new tourist economy.

---

85 For an overview, see Melody Hessing and Michael Howlett, *Canadian Natural Resource and Environmental Policy: Political Economy and Public Policy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 75.

Perhaps, then, a more useful analytical tool with which to understand the formation of policy in Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks is that of the previously mentioned policy community, a flexible concept that accounts for the contributions of non-state and non-productive interests to the management of a particular natural resource.<sup>86</sup> Although the diverse local interests that influenced the policy process in Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks were not in any way harmonious, they are nevertheless suggestive of a policy community where state *and* local actors shaped the regulatory regime of the two parks through dynamic interaction with one another. This model contrasts sharply with the image of a rigid and closed system – one where the state simply militates against the interests of local people – that so many historians have recently depicted in their narratives accounts of the first parks and protected areas in North America. The cases of Point Pelee and Georgian Bay Islands National Parks reveal instead a process whereby local conflict, local politics, and local conceptions of the human place in nature shaped the policy within the parks as much as any state-driven agenda.

*The research for this paper was conducted with the assistance of a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My thanks are extended to Alan MacEachern for providing insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Special thanks goes to Wendy McMaster at Georgian Bay Islands National Park for arranging access to historical reports and documents held at the park headquarters.*

\* \* \*

**JOHN SANDLOS** is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Department of History at the University of Western Ontario, where he is studying the relationship between local people and national parks in the first decades of the twentieth century. He is beginning a faculty position in history at Memorial University of Newfoundland in the summer of 2006.

**JOHN SANDLOS** est un collègue post doctoral CRSHC dans le département d'histoire à l'Université de Western Ontario où il étudie les rapports entre le peuple locale et les parcs nationaux durant les premières décennies du vingtième siècle. Il commence une position dans la faculté d'histoire à l'université Mémorial de la Terre-Neuve dans l'été de 2006.

---

86 Hessing and Howlett, *Canadian Natural Resource and Environmental Policy*, 74-91.