

The Rationalization of the Visitor Services Program in Ontario Provincial Parks

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The Province of Ontario has had a provincial park system for over 100 years. Today, the Ontario Provincial Park system includes 259 parks that cover 6.3 million hectares, (15.6 million acres) or about 6% of Ontario's lands and waters. Of these 259 parks, 101 are operating parks that have some form of visitor services program. In 1993, 2.2 million visitors took part in the visitor services program. This paper will outline the process that was undertaken to evaluate the visitor services program in these parks.

In 1944, Algonquin Park held the first interpretive programs in the province's park system. In the late 60's, early 70's the "visitor services program" was introduced. The components of the program include: information (orienting the visitors to the park and the park system), interpretation (helping visitors gain an understanding and appreciation for the park's natural and cultural heritage) and outdoor recreation (aiding visitors in enjoying the park resources and facilities). Each operating park in the province was assigned a level of service which defined the type of visitor service program carried out in the park, ranging from simply providing information about the park and the park system, to a full scale year round personal service interpretive program. All operating parks have a requirement to carry out the information component of the visitor services program.

After the development of "A Strategic Plan for Visitor Services" in 1992, a review of the existing visitor services program with regards to the levels of service and personal service interpretation was undertaken. A concern was raised surrounding the interpretive component of the visitor services program. Each park has a unique story to tell, which is part of Ontario's natural and cultural history. These unique stories are referred to as park themes. In theory, if you were to visit every park with an interpretive program, you should have an understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of the province.

However, some of the interpretive programs were purely entertainment, and were not based on park themes. As well, there were many inconsistencies apparent in the existing levels of service. In the past, the designation of levels of service for each park has been somewhat subjective and for the most part based on tradition. As a result, it was decided that the evaluation of each park in terms of its interpretive potential should be done in a systematic way: a "rationalization" of the program. The goal of the

project was to develop methods to help structure and guide the program into the future.

Areas to be addressed included:

- Which parks merit the continuation of a personal service interpretive program for visitors?
- How do we rank parks in terms of their potential and ability to support an interpretive program?
- How do we develop and improve the quality of the program for visitors?
- What are the goals of the interpretive program in terms of the goals and objectives of the parks system and the wants and needs of the visitor?
- How do we develop a visitor needs survey that can be administered on a park by park basis to determine the type of programming best suited to a given park?

The project includes five steps: establishing criteria for ranking parks; developing three new levels of service for the delivery of the interpretive program; evaluating the name "visitor services," establishing operating standards for the program; and developing a visitor needs survey. Each of these steps will now be explained in greater detail.

Step One: *Establish criteria for ranking parks in terms of their ability and potential to carry out a personal service interpretive program.*

Criteria were established based on a number of factors that reflect the content and viability of the continuation of a personal service interpretive program in each park.

The following criteria were used, including the percentage (in bold) which each group contributes to the overall rank.

1. Significance of Natural Resources: **20%**
Scoring: Provincial Significance =20, Regional =10, Local =5
2. Significance of Cultural Resources: **20%**
Scoring: Provincial Significance =20, Regional =10, Local =5
3. Markets: **10%**
(Includes July/August weekend and weekday campsite occupancy rate plus shoulder season/winter season markets.)
4. Total Visitation: **10%**
1992 Total Visitation
5. Located on a Major Tourist Route: **10%**
Scoring: Yes =10, No =5

6. Existing Personal Service Visitor Services

Program within the park:

15%

Scoring: Yes =15, No =5

7. Park visitors that attend personal service interpretive

programs:

15%

Scoring: Percentages calculated for each park, grouped and ranked.

Each of the 101 operating parks was given a score under each of the criteria. Each score was then added together for the park to get a number out of 100. The parks were then ranked in order from one to 101. The weight of the ranking is based on the significance of the natural and cultural resources. The intent of the personal service interpretive component of the visitor services program is to interpret park themes based on the resources. In general, parks with significant resources ranked high, and parks without significant resources ranked low.

The ranking was then used as a guideline for decisions about the kind of service a park should be offering as explained in Step 2.

Step Two: *Evaluate the scores in Step One and develop three new levels of service for the delivery of the interpretive program.*

Before the rationalization project was undertaken, there were five levels of service which defined the type of programming a park would offer. These levels of service included: Major Activity, Seasonal Activity, Recreation, Self-Use and Basic. During the ranking process, the parks were clustered into three very specific groups. It was decided to develop new levels of service corresponding to the groupings within the ranking process.

Twenty-one parks had a score of 80% and higher. These parks have provincially significant natural and cultural resources, the visitation, markets, commitment to the program both internal and from the visitors, and the potential for long term personal service interpretive programs. We labelled these parks, Major Activity. Major Activity parks offer year round or long term interpretive programming.

The next cluster of parks fell within the 60% to 70% score. This included 23 parks. These parks have some provincial and some regionally significant natural and cultural resources. As well, these parks have reasonable visitation and markets, and can support a seasonal (June to beginning of September) personal service interpretive program. We called the parks, Seasonal Activity.

The rest of the parks fell into a category with a score below 60%. Most of these parks have no real significant natural or cultural resources. Those that do have significant resources are inaccessible and do not warrant a personal service interpretive program. We call this level of park Self-Use. In self-use parks, self-use facilities will be maintained such as hiking trails,

interpretive signs and displays. These parks will not have an interpreter on staff and will not conduct personal service interpretive programs.

Through this exercise, the number of parks with a personal service interpretive program was reduced from 61 to 44.

Step Three: *Evaluate the name "Visitor Services" to ensure it actually reflects the goals and objectives of the program.*

During the "Rationalization" project, the name "visitor services" was questioned by many staff. There was a general feeling that the name did not accurately reflect the goals and objectives of the program in the 90's.

As a result of a wide range of consultation, the name of the program has been changed to "Natural Heritage Education Program". The program components are still the same; information, interpretation and outdoor recreation. Park interpreters, in the past, were called visitor services programmers. They will now be called interpreters or naturalists.

Step Four: *Establish "Operating Standards" for the program.*

The most crucial component of the rationalization project, and by far the most difficult to establish, has been operating standards for the program. Operating standards are minimum requirements that all parks must meet in order to operate their assigned level of service.

The operating standard (see Table 1) has been proposed for the program. Note that some major activity parks (7) have permanent interpreter positions, and the standards for those parks would pertain to the support staff that those parks would require.

The objectives for the operating standard are:

- To provide park visitors with opportunities to learn, through interpretive programs and facilities, and through outdoor recreation skills training about Ontario's natural and cultural heritage.
- To inform park visitors about park facilities and events, park related Ministry management messages and local tourism attractions and services.
- To promote the use of parks for outdoor education.

Step Five: *Develop a visitor needs survey administered on a park-by-park basis to determine the type of programming best suited to that park.*

Now that a program structure is in place, a visitor survey is being developed to determine the best kind of programming for each park. The survey is being developed this summer with some pre-testing, and will be available for park use for the 1995 season.

Conclusion

The Visitor Services/Natural Heritage Education program is benefitting from the "Rationalization" project. There has been increased interest, support and recognition for the program internally. As a result of the rationalization project, the Natural Heritage Education program has now gained recognition as the provincial park's education program.

With the three new levels of service—major activity, seasonal activity and self-use—each park has clear direction about the type of programming the interpreters should be developing. Spring training workshops for seasonal interpreters focused on developing high quality programs. Each park interpreter is now telling visitors about their park's unique story, using park themes.

We will soon understand the kinds of programs best suited to the visitors of each park through the visitor survey. Through the operating standards, we can now predict the costs associated with the program for planning purposes. This is the 50th anniversary of the interpretive program and we hope to begin the next 50 years with a well structured, high quality program that will help the visitors to our provincial parks understand and enjoy Ontario's rich natural and cultural heritage.

Table 1

Operating Standard for Natural Heritage Education (formerly Visitor Services)
 Preparing and implementing a park Natural Heritage Education plan based on
 an approved regional or zone Natural Heritage Education plan and providing a
 Self-Use, Seasonal Activity or Major Activity level Natural Heritage
 Education program must be achieved given the following standards:

Level of Service	Must provide	Achieved by
Self-Use	<i>Information</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • signs/information kiosks, leaflets, trail and canoe route guides if appropriate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • about park, park system and local attractions 	
	<i>Interpretation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-use interpretive and recreational facilities (i.e., trails, displays, playgrounds, etc.) • superintendent and regular park staff • superintendent to attend Regional/Zone Natural Heritage Education workshop one in three years.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-use interpretation materials • superintendent may arrange for audio visual presentations or special events with zone or regional approval 	
	<i>Outdoor Recreation Skills</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilities for outdoor and recreation activities 	
Seasonal Activity	<i>Information</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • signs/information kiosks, park leaflet/tabloid/newsletter and appropriate trail and canoe route guides, checklist, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • about park, park system and local attractions 	
	<i>Interpretation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimum of four staff led interpretive/outdoor recreation skills programs per week in peak season • self-use interpretive facilities, i.e., trails, displays, viewing platforms, playgrounds, etc. • one interpretive staff for a minimum of 16 weeks • one additional interpretive staff for a minimum of 16 weeks in those parks that have provincially or regionally significant cultural resources.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of park resources and stories of provincial and/or regional significance 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research on park resources where appropriate 	

Table 1 (continued)

Level of Service	Must provide	Achieved by
Seasonal Activity (cont'd)	<p><i>Outdoor Recreational Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outdoor recreation skills programs suited to resource base • facilities for outdoor recreation activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • amphitheatre and/or Visitor Center if available Visitor Center opened a minimum of three hours/day five days/week in peak season • additional interpretive staff appropriate to operate Visitor Center • park superintendent must attend Provincial or Regional Natural Heritage Education workshop one in three years. • park interpretive staff must attend Regional Natural Heritage Education workshops yearly and Provincial Natural Heritage Education workshops if available
Major Activity	<p><i>Information</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • about park, park system and local attractions <p><i>Interpretation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of park resources and stories (provincially significant natural and cultural resources) • research on park resources • high quality support facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • signs/information kiosks, park leaflet/tabloid/newsletter and appropriate trail and canoe route guides, checklists, etc. • minimum of two staff led interpretive /outdoor recreation skills programs per week • minimum of six high quality staff led interpretive/outdoor recreation skills programs per week in peak season • self-use interpretive and recreation facilities, i.e., trails, displays, viewing platforms, etc.
	<p><i>Outdoor Recreation Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outdoor recreation skills programs suited to resource base • facilities for outdoor recreation activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one interpretive staff on minimum 26 weeks and one on minimum 16 weeks - an additional position for 16 weeks is desirable if budget allows • amphitheater and visitor center if available • visitor center opened minimum of three hours/day, two days/week in spring season • visitor center opened minimum of four hours/day, seven days/week in peak season • additional interpretive staff appropriate to operate visitor center.

Table 1 (continued)

Level of Service	Must provide	Achieved by
Major Activity (cont'd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilities for outdoor (continued) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • park superintendent must attend Regional or Provincial Natural Heritage Education workshop one in three years. • Natural Heritage Education staff must attend regional workshop yearly and provincial workshop if available

Note: This operating standard is a proposal only. An operating standard will be in place for the 1995 operating season.