Tourism In Canadian Provincial Parks Essay, Research Paper

The Issue of Tourism in Canada’s Provincial ParkI. INTRODUCTION

“The capacity to use leisure rightly is the basis of a man’s whole life.” This observation by Aristotle clearly proves the significance that it holds in our time. Previously, when the struggle for food and shelter took most of a man’s time, the ability to use leisure rightly had less significance. Over time there has been a vast change in thinking with regards to the usefulness of leisure, especially pertaining to issues concerned with land use and outdoor recreation resources. Hence, this essay will present a case study on Algonquin Provincial Park, which will draw on aspects of the workings of leisure and/or tourism and how various theories such as Distance Decay, the Ellis Curve’, the theories of Valene Smith and Doxey, give an insightful meaning to the planning and management of sustainable ecosystems.

II. PERSPECTIVE ON PROVINCIAL PARKS

In Canada, the emergence of parks, especially national and provincial parks, plays an integral role in our consideration of outdoor recreation resources. Public awareness with regards to this importance has enabled the public to “recognize more clearly a collective responsibility for the management of our environment and preservation of its values.” Also, with the technology that has become increasingly available to use, our abilities to alter the landscape have left very little lands to preserve in their natural beauty. Therefore, the conservation or preservation of resource-based parks should be implemented before all opportunities disappear permanently. As well, providing leisure opportunities enables us to fulfill our objectives of the best possible standard of living for every individual. In relation to this point there is a growing acceptance the “nature sanctuaries of solitude and repose where people can find re-creation of body and spirit are essential to provide a change from the pace and demands of modern civilization.” Thus, the provision of suitable land for outdoor living should deserve consideration in competing land uses.

It is already agreed upon the notion that we must provision land for outdoor recreation as a necessary public service; but the question now remains how to maintain the demand for such services when faced with a dwindling supply (available land) and an increasing demand (rising population, rising income/quality of life = increasing discretionary income = availability of more leisure time).

This leads us to the objectives of the necessity and objectives of our (Ontario) provincial park system. The basic reasons for establishing provincial parks have remained essentially fluid over time. “Protection, recreation, heritage appreciation, and tourism are the objectives of the current provincial park system.” These were the same reasons evoked in the late 1800’s for setting aside the first provincial parks in Ontario.

As a general description, in Ontario, the parks tend to be fragmented and multilayered. This means that at the provincial level of parks and outdoor recreation there are “at least 15 provincial departments, agencies, or commissions are actively engaged in parks and open space programs.” The parks are essentially used by many groups and individuals to satisfy a great number of recreational needs. Therefore, a given park may be multi layered(administered at several governmental levels) and multi purpose in nature.

Recently, with respect to the objectives of provincial parks, the policy has taken an economic outlook towards its managements. For instance, according to the official mandate of Ontario Parks is “to protect, plan, develop, and manage Ontario’s system of provincial parks while improving their self reliance.” Thus, the objective of creating and managing these parks is to “improve services to increase revenues, and, inturn, to sustain other parks.” This shows a marked difference in the nature of recreation perceived by park developers. By this we mean that the nature of the park itself has changed from one that was once for conservation and recreation to that of financial stability. For example, from excerpts from the Ontario Parks Objectives, the business objectives include the objective of “operating more like a business and improving customer service and market our products and services…” as goals. Their business plan includes, among others, objectives to create “a special purpose account for retaining and managing park revenues (fees, licences, permits, rentals) to be developed. It will improve customer service, maximize revenues and make park operations more efficient and accountable.” As this shows, the very basic existence of Ontario Parks has changed from one that provided outdoor recreation opportunities to every man, woman and child, to that of a corporate enterprise, trying to maximize profit in a monopolized marketplace. This is how recreation has changed over the time frame of the development of the parks to the present day policies and initiatives undertaken by the province which manages these parks.

III. CASE STUDY OF ALGONQUIN PARK

Algonquin Park is Ontario’s first Provincial Park and is located in the region of Near North’ in Ontario. The essence of Algonquin is its vast Interior of maple hills, rocky ridges, spruce bogs, and thousands of lakes, ponds and streams. More than 250 bird species have been recorded in the park. Many southern and overseas birders make special trips to Algonquin just to see northern specialties such as the Gray Jay and the Spruce Grouse, not to mention the rich variety of warblers or Algonquin’s most famous bird of all – the Common Loon, found nesting on just about every lake. Hence, a practical casestudy to examine, is that of Algonquin Park.

Algonquin Park was established in 1893 due to the growing concerns at the time. These issues revolved around the wood supply and climate that were being threatened by massive clearing of forests. The person responsible for the parks first lands reserves was Robert Phipps, who was strongly influenced by the public and senior civil servants of Ontario. Phipps believed that it was imperative to stop settlement and land clearing activities in this part of Ontario. He stated that “when covered with extensive woods the principal heights of land forms reservoirs which supply the sources of numerous rivers, give moisture to the numerous small lakes and watercourses…below them, and preserve throughout the whole country a fertility, invariably much impaired when the forests are removed.”

Robert Phipps enlisted the help of Alexander Kirkwood, who advised a commission that the objectives of establishing the first provincial park should be to “1)preserve the headwaters of the park river systems, 2) to preserve the native forests, 3) to protect birds, fish, game and fur bearing animals, 4) to provide an area for forest experimentation, 5) to serve as a health resort and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of the province.”

As well, the chairman of the Royal Commission on Game and Fish, that the provincial government had been forced to set up, by the public, was convinced that Ontario’s fish and wildlife were in the process of being eliminated. Therefore it was recommended the “formation of a provincial game park as the best means of restocking the province” with wildlife should be created. These powerful influences ensured that the park would be created and maintained.

Therefore, by establishing the park in 1893, it not only tended to stop logging but to establish a wildlife sanctuary, and by excluding agriculture, “to protect the headwaters of the five major rivers which flow from the park.”

The original name was “Algonquin National Park”, but it was in fact always under Ontario’s jurisdiction. The name was officially changed to Algonquin Provincial Park in 1913. It was named to honour the Algonquin-speaking first nation people and to date covers more than 7725 square kilometres of forest, lakes, and rivers.

As the park has changed and evolved since its creation, so to have the policies concerning Algonquin. The construction of the railroad across Algonquin after the park was created, was used primarily for logging purposes. It was constructed between the years 1894 and 1896. However, the completion of the railway had a great effect on the recreational use of the new park, for it was now accessible for the first time to everyone. For the next 40 years, the people using the park for purposes like lodges, youth camp, could only be accessed by train. Some predicted that the multi purpose uses for the park (logging, recreation) would soon run into complications.

After the construction of Highway 60 from 1933 to 1936, an alternative to the railroad provided even greater access to the park’s facilities. More than 3600 automobiles entered the park’s gate during the highway’s first full year of operation, and soon campgrounds had been established at popular sites. At the same time, this more convenient means of access to Algonquin made the demise of the railroad just a question of time. The increasing conflict between logging and recreation finally came true – the late 1960s were a time of great public controversy and debate about the role of logging in Algonquin. Most believed that the logging was unacceptable with the wilderness park they wanted.

This lead to the Algonquin Park Committee designed to present and implement official policy guidelines with regards to the management of Algonquin provincial park. The report created was called the Algonquin Master Plan. It addressed the contemporary issues/problems that were facing the park and the solutions recommended by park planners to rectify the situation. The Algonquin Park Master Plan was released by the Ontario government in 1974. It was also decided to review the effectiveness of this plan’s policy every five years and to suggest better ways to improve the park during these times. These periodic public reviews and modifications would not take away the main focus of the plan.

As stated earlier, the plan was prepared by the Ontario government in an attempt to resolve the many “conflicting demands being placed on the Park, and to set out rational guidelines for Algonquin’s future use and development in the face of pressures that can only become stronger in the years to come.” The Master Plan’s official goal for Algonquin is to “provided continuing opportunities for a diversity of low intensity recreational experiences, within the constraint of the contribution of the Park to the economic life of the region.” What this essentially implied is that logging would continue to operate within the park’s boundaries, but that it would be managed in such a way that the “feel” of wilderness is not destroyed by either logging or recreational activities.

The main features from the Master Plan remain unchanged. Some of the highlights from the Master Plan include that the park is divided into zones each with different allowed uses. Logging, for example, is permitted only in the recreation-utilization, or about 57% of the park’s total area. Other zones include wilderness zones, development zones, nature reserve zones, and historical zones.

Another feature of the Plan was the cancellation of the existing timber licences held by some twenty logging companies, and the creation of a Crown agency called the Algonquin Forestry Authority. It now carries out all logging and forest management in the park in accordance with comprehensive regulations administered by the Ministry of Natural Resources. The Authority sells the wood to the mills which were formerly supplied by the private companies.

In another attempt to control the logging practices of the forest, the provincial government has created a planning process called Lands for Life which states that “logging companies will manage our public land and will have rights to it for up to 100 years at a time. Logging companies have openly stated that they do not want any new protected areas to come out of Lands for Life and they want to log in existing parks like Algonquin.”

The third area where the Plan introduced far-reaching changes was that of recreation in the park interior. In an effort to preserve those qualitites shown by studies and questionnaires to be sought after by the vast majority of interior users, the Plan called for regulations such as banned motor boats from most lakes, limiting the number of canoeists, limiting the size of interior camping parties, and banning disposable cans and bottles in the park interior.

Another area under intense scrutiny was that of the park’s perimeter. The committee recommended the provision of additional intensive recreation facilities outside the boundaries of Algonquin park. Basically, the committee had in mind the establishment of additional facilities in order to takes some of the pressure off Algonquin. The park, in their terms, had reached its carrying capacity due to overuse. The natural solution is to establish satellite parks.

Another issue relates to that of concessions and the committee commented on this by stating that the “proposed expansion of the park facilities to meet the anticipated demand is going to be expensive from capital cost and from operating and research expenses. It is appropriate that the park users should pay a fair share of the costs through users’ fees such as entrance and camping fees. The balance of the costs could properly be borne by the general revenues of the province.”

Many of these provisions continue to be refined and modified particularly in response to periodic public reviews of the Master Plan. Thus new issues that deal with human interaction through outdoor recreation and the stability of the park are continuously brought up. The decisions by the park planners with respect to the issues facing the park could not have all been foreseen. They believe that the park, though growing and facing new changes with respect to its needs for outdoor recreation, serves “its original purpose as well as many of the interests currently are being expressed by the various elements within society today.”

I.V. THEORIES OF THE CASE STUDY

Taking into consideration the objectives and aims of the Ontario Provincial Government to ensure the protection and future developmental process of the Algonquin Park, one can apply certain theories.

A theory which applies to the Algonquin Provincial Park is the issue of Distance Decay. Distance Decay states the further away a place is from a community, there will be a significantly lower the number of visitors.

With reference to the Distance Function Graph, the percentage of users of the Algonquin Provincial Park before infrastructure improvements the slope of the curve had a steady outward decrease. However, with the improvements of the infrastructure such as the establishment of Highway 60, the slope of the curve has changed. The inferred increase in the slope of the curve means that the park has become more accessible and hence an increase in the number of visitors. In 1997, more than 8.5 million people enjoyed provincial parks and as many as 2,400 people attended public wolf howling sessions in Algonquin in a day. And with the further improvements of the park, these numbers are expected to increase.

The expected increase of users is a concern of Ontario Parks hence a limitation of visitors was established. The Distance Decay function, however, is tied to the theory of Valene Smith, Hosts and Guests, 1977. Smith classifies the type of tourist and their adaptations to local norms. In the past the Algonquin Park has mainly attracted the Explorer’ type of tourist, limited in numbers but who accepts fully the environment. However, an argument can be put forward that the type of tourist to Algonquin has shifted to the Incipient Mass’ type tourist. Reasoning for this classification is because there is now a steady flow of tourist to the park, but mainly because the tourists now seek Western amenities. These amenities are the presence of newly established restaurants, lodging and designated walking trails.

The Algonquin Park, in some sense, is moving towards a McDonalization of Tourism, in which vacations are controlled as to the number of people allowed into the park and predictable with respect to the areas visitors are allowed to visit. The natural concept of going to Algonquin to experience nature first hand, is therefore somewhat lost by the adding of museums and the creation of a tourism bubble. There is nothing real anymore. Like Disney theme parks, fakes ( simulacra’) are more real than the real’. The tourism experience becomes one of tourism consumerism’, a concept of Post-Tourism. Therefore, there is no authentic’ tourist experience because the post-tourist realize that they are play a game. The experience of going to Algonquin to watch the birds or to see the wolves is in a controlled atmosphere – it is not the real thing’ – but rather an assimilation of what the tourists expect to see when visiting Algonquin.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Ellis Curve’ helps to visually summarize the concepts and effects of tourism on Algonquin Provincial Park.

Before Algonquin Provincial Park was established in 1893, the placement of Algonquin along the Ellis Curve’ can be arguably placed in the A’ quadrant. The reasoning for this placement is because, the tourism effects were more favourable to the environment – more Explorer type tourist- and to the economy, wherein there was the presence of private logging companies.

After 1893, the placement of Algonquin was now closer towards the “B” quadrant. The tourism effect became less favourable towards the environment and more favourable for the economy. The improved infrastructure created an increase in users, a shift in the type of tourist – Incipient Mass – and an increase presence of logging companies, all of which placed concerns about the carrying capacity of Algonquin Park.

However, through the new objectives of the Provincial Government in levying user fees of campgrounds, the consolidation of logging under Crown supervision to deal with the issue of the carrying capacity, the placement of Algonquin could be placed back in Quadrant A’.

Striking a balance between the recreational aspect of the park and the economic functions of logging has been the primary focus of Ontario Parks. The step towards the concept of McDonaldization of Tourism can be seen as a form of alternative tourism in which monetary concerns to fund educational programs and the preservation of the ecosystem by limiting human impact, is seen as the better of the two evils.

Finally, with drawn reference to the work of Doxey, The Irritation Index of Tourism, my personal opinion is that the present environmental policies in place have established a level of apathy, wherein the attitude of tourist (the public) and host (park operators) is a moderate acceptance and support of tourism and is a positive step towards fulfilling “the capacity to use leisure rightly as the basis of man’s whole life.”