

# THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF PARKS

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PHOTOS BY KUMI STODDART

A recent advertisement for Newfoundland and Labrador tourism featuring Gros Morne National Park offers viewers spectacular images of mountains, waterfalls, forests, coastlines, fjords, and the otherworldly rock formations of the Tablelands. The video ends with a voiceover: “It has been said those who don’t believe in magic will never see it. Little chance of that happening here.”

This aired on television and has been viewed over 90,000 times on YouTube since January 2014. It evokes a sense of wonder at the nature that is protected by this world-renowned national park. Other iconic national and provincial parks, including Cape Breton Highlands (Nova Scotia), Bay of Fundy (New Brunswick), Algonquin (Ontario), Banff and Jasper (Alberta), and Pacific Rim and Garibaldi (British Columbia) also promise a magical connection between visitors and nature that is drastically different from the cities and suburbs where most Canadians carry out their day-to-day lives.

Many of us believe that a magic trick explained is a magic trick spoiled. By contrast, paying closer attention to our relationships with parks helps us appreciate the social-cultural dimensions of these protected areas.

National and provincial parks play several important and distinct roles. Parks serve as a way for our governments to physically demonstrate a commitment to environmental values. By demarcating landscapes where ecological values are given greater weight than resource extraction or industrial development, parks embody the degree to which we are willing to respect the wellbeing of animals and vegetation that does not easily cohabit with significant levels of human settlement and activity.

The United Nations states that protecting 12 per cent of the land base is an achievable commitment to biodiversity protection. Meeting these goals through the creation of national and provincial parks is one way to reflect a social commitment to sustainability as part

of a global community. Unfortunately, the Canadian record is uneven. Nationally, 10 per cent of the land base is protected. When this is broken down by province, this ranges from a high of over 14 per cent in British Columbia to a low of approximately 3 per cent in New Brunswick and PEI. Newfoundland and Labrador ranks 11 out of 13 among Canadian provinces and territories, with approximately 4.6 per cent of the land base protected. This indicates significant room to improve our political commitment to biodiversity protection and sustainability in this province.

Parks play another important social-cultural role as tourism anchors. Tourism is one of the world’s largest industries, involving massive flows of people, airplanes, cars, and other modes of transportation. Global flows of tourist travel are structured by key tourism anchors, including resorts, theme parks, iconic cities, and national parks. Over the past few decades, there has been increasing interest in travelling beyond the tropical seaside resorts and mega-theme parks that characterize mass tourism. As an alternative, more and more people are seeking out experiences of unique cultures and landscapes through nature- and recreation-oriented forms of tourism. Parks are important in this regard, as they draw tourists to a region by providing opportunities for visitors to immerse themselves in environments completely unlike the urban areas where the majority of North Americans live.

Parks also play an important social role in contributing to a sense of collective identity. The old growth forests of



Gros Morne

Pacific Rim National Park, mountains of Banff or Jasper, and fjords and coastlines of Gros Morne bring idealized notions of wilderness to life for visitors. The idea that Canada is defined by its relatively undeveloped wilderness landscapes has become part of the collective identity of many Canadians. In a 2008 national survey conducted by Ipsos, for example, “wilderness” was among the top ten symbols that define Canada for respondents.

Gros Morne National Park is the most iconic protected area in Newfoundland and Labrador, and perhaps in Atlantic Canada more broadly. This is due to its spectacular mountainous and coastal scenery, as well as to the promotional work of provincial advertising campaigns to make the park visible to potential visitors. When Gros Morne was first established, however, it generated conflict with local communities. Residents were displaced so that boundaries could be set around a landscape that would appear uninhabited. There was also resistance to the idea that community access to land and resources would be cut off by the creation of the park. While there was early opposition to the creation of the park, and there is still resentment among some community members, Gros Morne has become a key point that structures tourism travel to Newfoundland and Labrador. As indicated by provincial advertising campaigns and tourism guidebooks, it has also become central to the “tourism destination image” of the province, a term used by researchers to describe the ways potential visitors view a tourism site. The Gros Morne region is one of the few areas of the province beyond the Avalon Peninsula where tourism development has evolved to the point that it makes a significant contribution to community viability. While the economic benefits of tourism are not evenly spread throughout host communities, the success of Gros

Morne as a tourism anchor has provided economic and social benefits to many people in the region.

As an environmental sociologist, I have spent the past few years working on the research project *Puffins, Kayaks and Oil Rigs: Shifting Modes of Society-Environment Interaction on the Newfoundland Coast*. Part of the project involves looking at the ways in which Newfoundland tourism is depicted by mass media outside the province in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The research results show that parks—especially Gros Morne—are central to media travel stories about Newfoundland, along with whales, icebergs, and the authenticity and historical value of rural outpost communities. This same cluster of key tourism attractors are repeatedly described in research interviews with tourism operators and promoters when they are asked, “What do you see as the main features that bring tourists to Newfoundland?” This demonstrates that Gros Morne, in particular, is integral to the tourism iconography of the province.

Recently, there have been proposals to pursue oil development in the region. These include the Old Harry offshore oil exploration project in the Gulf of St Lawrence, as well as the proposed Shoal Point fracking project at Sally’s Cove, just outside Gros Morne Park boundaries. Both proposals have generated controversy among communities and drawn the attention of environmental organizations from within and outside the province. While oil development promises employment and economic wellbeing for oil-producing communities, it also creates risks for the wildlife and coastal environments that draw tourists to Gros Morne. For many of us, the risks of oil development are represented by the type of large, catastrophic failures of the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the ecological devastation that resulted.



East Coast Trail

However, oil development also creates less spectacular, everyday impacts through ongoing habitat modification, as well as effects on air and water quality. In addition to these environmental risks, oil development at the edges of Gros Morne also threatens the image of wilderness embodied by the park that draws tourists to the region. If Gros Morne represents a social commitment to environmental values and is used as an anchor for nature-oriented tourism, then it seems inconsistent to proceed with oil development right outside its boundaries. From this perspective, it is understandable that the proposed developments at Old Harry and Sally's Cove have caused anxiety and protest from community members, potential visitors, and other groups with an interest in the park. In reaction to the Shoal Point controversy at Sally's Cove, the provincial government has put a fracking moratorium in place. As debate over the benefits and risks of oil development on the west coast of the island continues, the social and ecological costs of oil extraction should be measured against the social-cultural and ecological benefits that Gros Morne provides to the region and the province.

I wish to conclude by turning to the East Coast Trail. While the trail passes through a few parks and protected areas, including La Manche Provincial Park and Cape Spear Lighthouse National Historic Site, most of it is unprotected. The East Coast Trail is a community-led initiative that has seen the development of 265 kilometres of hiking trails since 1994. A 2005 report for the East Coast Trail Association on the economic impacts of the project indicates the trail has been successful at attracting tourists and locals to experience the coastal environment through hiking. There is evidence that the trail has produced direct and indirect economic benefits for communities along the way. In my ongoing research on tourism, hiking comes up repeatedly in mass media

coverage, interviews, and web content as a highly valued way for visitors to engage with the coastal environment. Just as Gros Morne National Park embodies nature for tourists on the west coast of the island, the East Coast Trail is an anchor attraction for nature-oriented tourism and recreation on the Avalon Peninsula. However, unlike Gros Morne, the East Coast Trail does not enjoy the status of a park or protected area.

The lack of protection for this ambitious, community-led project can be interpreted as a lack of political commitment to keep this tourism anchor and recreational landscape from being chipped away by ongoing real estate development along the coast. Already, the trail has been rerouted to accommodate new housing construction. As noted above, Newfoundland and Labrador ranks 11<sup>th</sup> among provinces and territories in its commitment to protected areas. The East Coast Trail is a valuable anchor for tourism development. It is also an important recreational amenity for local communities. As such, it is an excellent candidate for a new protected area, which would serve as a physical commitment to environmental sustainability and biodiversity protection in this province. A model for how this might work is Juan de Fuca Provincial Park in British Columbia. Its 1,528 hectares form a protected area around the 47 kilometre Juan de Fuca Marine Trail on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Adopting such a model would recognize and protect the social, cultural, and ecological value of the East Coast Trail. It would also ensure that this high-quality hiking trail, which is regularly used by tourists and residents, is not slowly eroded by real estate development and other interests. **NQ**

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