

New Brunswick Park Management Planning Process Lessons Learned

on the New River Beach Provincial Park Management Plan – Pilot

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Summary

The pilot of New Brunswick's Park Management Planning Process has resulted in a number of key lessons learned which can be used as the province moves forward in creating Park Management Statements and Plans for all of its park properties. These lessons include clearly articulating the substantive difference between management plans and management statements, developing clear communication strategies, recognizing the importance of timing in the process, using appropriate approaches for public engagement, involving First Nations throughout the process, and implementing a stand-alone adoption and amendment process that would apply to all Park Management Statements or Plans.

Introduction

Alliance Planning and Environmental Consulting (APEC) was engaged to lead the first of 18 Provincial Parks Management Planning processes in June 2017. APEC is a team of professional land use planners who have spent the majority of their careers planning for long term land use goals, a process which includes public engagement, zoning development, and land-based plan creation. While working throughout this pilot, APEC used its experience to help shape the process and the framework within which future park planning can take place. The following is our assessment of the approach used in the pilot park planning process in New River Beach Provincial Park along with recommendations moving forward.

New River Beach Provincial Park

New River Beach Provincial Park (NRBPP) was selected as the pilot for management planning because of its small size, lack of user conflict, and low development pressures in and around the park. NRBPP is 368 hectares in area and is located on the eastern edge of Charlotte County's Fundy shore. There are few development pressures outside the park, with much of the surrounding area being used for large vacation homes. Otherwise, the immediate area is experiencing a decreasing population of year-round residents. Finally, this park has had relatively little user competition or internal conflict for development in past years. These factors made it an appropriate candidate to test the park management planning process before rolling such processes out to parks facing significant issues of public concern.

Lesson 1: Management Statements vs Management Plans

The difference between a management statement and management plan has been discussed theoretically in research reports sponsored by the department leading up to the pilot management planning process. However, it was not until personnel were on the ground and moving through the planning process that the difference between the two processes has become clear. The Park Management Statement is a compilation of readily-available information and community engagement that results in the development of an overall vision and direction for park management and identification of outstanding information needs. The Park Management Plan, is an iterative document that is created over time with the inclusion of acquired baseline data, as well as ongoing land base discussions with key stakeholders, in particular First Nations.

In the case of NRBPP, the Management Statement identifies key features and the vision for the park being a recreation and tourism destination. It also identified key gaps in ecological data that would help direct on-the-ground management actions in the long-term. The Zoning map, which forms part of the Management Statement, is based on available ecological and land use data and known user activities.

The difference between plans and statements is difficult to communicate to stakeholders. And, while the distinction is important from a management perspective, it may be of less import to the general public.

Recommendation: That the department develop a clear and concise statement on the difference between the documents, but that an emphasis be placed on the management planning process (which is iterative and ongoing, even after completion of "final" documents), and not focus on the semantics of having "final" management plans as the ultimate goal.

Lesson 2: Communication

Communication with stakeholders and the public is another key lesson learned. Because this is a process initiated and led by the Parks Branch of the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture (DTHC), all communication must be filtered through the provincial communications system and follow provincial protocol. A key aspect of the Park Management Planning process is dependent upon stakeholder engagement. As such, clear, concise, and relevant communication that is delivered to stakeholders in a timely manner is vital to a successful process.

Because the NRBPP was the pilot process, all communication mechanisms had to be developed from scratch. As a result, APEC and departmental staff worked to develop clear messaging that could be shared with the public on the DTHC website. A page was developed to address Park Management Planning in general, and a second page was developed for NRBPP specifically. In moving forward, this aspect of the communication process will be simpler as there will be similar management pages developed for each park as they are brought into the process. APEC was not provided metrics related to the number of webpage views and shares, so it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this source of communication.

The team also made use of the department's Facebook and Twitter feeds. A minimal number of twitter posts were made, around the launch of the NRBPP survey and the public open house. Again, without

metrics it is difficult to ascertain the reach of this approach, but it likely had a minimal impact on the outcome of the process.

The most effective means of communication seemed to be direct email to park users (sent by the department), the NRBPP Facebook page updates, on-site posters and face-to-face communication by local park staff.

Recommendation: While provincial-level communications are important to maintain transparency in the overall park planning process, the key modes of communication for park-specific processes are local and on-the-ground. The local Facebook page (and twitter if used) of the subject park should be updated regularly on the status of the process.

Another aspect of communication that also needs to be addressed is around the concept of "zoning." Responses to the engagement survey indicated either "support for" or "unsure of" the accuracy of the zoning. This indicates that for those who understand zoning, that the proposed zones were appropriate. However, there was a fairly large percentage who were unsure of the accuracy (as distinguished from the very few responses that disagreed with the proposed zoning). As planners, APEC realizes that the concept of zoning is not an easy one to describe or understand for some. It is worthwhile spending more effort simplifying the concept of zoning during communication of the park planning process to help educate stakeholders and the public as to the value and use of zoning in this situation.

Recommendation: To create some user-friendly zoning descriptions and scenarios to help illustrate the use and justification for zones established in the subject parks.

Lesson 3: Timing

Park Management Planning is an iterative and ongoing process. Unlike a stand-alone research project, when a process requires stakeholder involvement, it is often difficult to put a hard time limit on the process. Depending on the breadth of public issues related to a single park, the consultation process may range from 4 months to more than a year. One of the key challenges is managing the consultation process timing in a manner that matches use of the park. Because this planning process involves a significant percentage of stakeholders who do not live on/near the subject park (i.e., tourists and visitors to the region), the engagement process needs to take advantage of seasonal timing to gather stakeholder input while these visitors are at the park.

In the NRBPP pilot, the primary use of the park is in the summer season – by far the vast majority of NRBPP users come to the park to use the beach (as evidenced by almost 100% of stakeholder input) followed closely by the trails (which are seasonal as well). As such, summer consultation is the key timing for NRBPP consultation. In the pilot study, because the communication pieces (see above) were so critical to the overall provincial approach, the on-the-ground consultation was not initiated until August and was completed in October 2017. As a result, one of the planned site visits by the consultants was scrapped in favour of a weekend Open House in September during which time many regular park users (i.e., seasonal campers, beach goers, and hikers) would potentially be available.

In moving forward with park planning in other parks, it will be important to determine at the outset, when the key park user period is (data already exists at the provincial level) to identify when engagement should be undertaken. If the park is a four-season park, it will be important to spread consultation with users across all four seasons to ensure that the range of stakeholders have been properly consulted. This will affect the timing of park planning processes, and will make timing, very park-specific. It is not recommended to follow the provincial fiscal year as an appropriate timeline for a park management process.

Recommendation: That park user seasons be a primary consideration for determining when park management planning is undertaken and that this be done on a park-by-park basis.

Lesson 4: Engagement

The goal of public engagement is to gather as much information as possible from a broad range of stakeholders so that the resulting data is reflective of the broad public perspective. The range of approaches to public engagement is vast and highly dependent on the context for which the engagement is required. In some cases, focus groups and in-depth consultations with key groups is best, and in other cases, public surveys will result in better all-around findings. For a park planning process, there are two main stakeholder groups – the users of the park (who are highly mobile) and the community members where the park is situated. Park staff and volunteers can also be considered a stakeholder group, as well as “friends of” non-profits who work on a park’s behalf. Developing an engagement approach for an audience that is not static (i.e., tourists and people not from the location of the study) requires a broad approach to capture the best data possible. For a more static population, on-site and face-to-face encounters are appropriate. However, again based on site-specific situations, if the local community is primarily made up of seasonal residents, that must be taken into consideration when establishing timing and engagement methods.

In the pilot project, two main approaches were used for public engagement. The first is the on-line survey. This was developed with a user-friendly approach including a combination of close-ended questions with supplied answers, ranking scales, and open-ended sections to help explain some responses. The survey link, prepared in both French and English, was emailed to all provincial park users who had consented to sharing their contact information. As well, it posted on the department’s NRBPP Park planning webpage and shared via the department’s Twitter feed. Further. The NRBPP’s Facebook page also shared the link. This survey was also made available on paper at the Park during the response period. The second approach used, was a public open house at the park one weekend in September. There were posters printed and displayed throughout the park and surrounding communities well in advance of the session. Notices were also posted on social media as above. There was a significant response to the public open house, with over 50 people in attendance.

As noted in the timing section above, consultation at NRBPP would have been appropriate throughout the summer, but due to issues out of APEC’s control this timing was reduced. However, despite the limited engagement timing, we feel confident that the results of engagement process did indeed illustrate the key priorities and concerns of the public because of the frequency of responses to several key issues of significance to the public. Specifically, in NRBPP, quality of the trails and signage to and at the park were repeatedly identified both through the on-line responses as well as in the face-to-face

interactions and the open house.

The survey and open house approaches worked well and are deemed appropriate for the NRBPP pilot. However, an appropriate approach to each park engagement process will need to be determined on a park-by-park basis. For those parks with more significant local issues (e.g., Parlee Beach Provincial Park), there will be a different approach required to address existing public concerns, in comparison to that used at NRBPP, or one that would be used at Mount Carleton Provincial Park, or the Anchorage Provincial Park, etc.

Recommendation: That a targeted public engagement strategy be developed at the outset of every park planning process that is appropriate to the park context. In each case, a combination of face-to-face and on-line approaches should be considered.

Lesson 5: First Nations Involvement

Substantive First Nations participation is crucial in park management planning because the land base is Crown land and is set aside for the use and benefit of the public. But more than simple consultation, First Nations need to be involved and given the opportunity to make substantive contributions to the process and final plan.

In the pilot, the NRBPP management statement has been developed based on information readily available to the department and stakeholders. This statement will provide the basis for the development of a full management plan that is inclusive of First Nations content, visions, and contributions.

As part of the province's approach, capacity building to enable fulsome First Nations participation is key. The Province's duty to consult should extend to a mutual sharing of information on the importance of provincial park properties (from environmental, social and economic perspectives) both to the general public, but also culturally and historically. The socio-cultural pre-history of the parklands should be recognized through interpretation, education, and celebration.

Recommendations:

That a consultation body representing First Nations be established to provide ongoing input and feedback on the park planning processes.

That local First Nation interests be engaged on a park-by-park basis to determine if there are items of special significance, oral legends or stories, and/or archaeological interests related to a specific site in relation to the provincial park under study.

That the park planning consultants/provincial staff work with local First Nation interests to ensure that information is captured in the proposed park management statements and/or plans.

Recommendations on the development of an Adoption and Amendment Framework

Under traditional land use planning processes used by New Brunswick municipalities and rural areas, the *Community Planning Act* sets out the rules for adoption of land use plans and how plans can be changed. For provincial Park Management Plans and statements, APEC recommends a modified approach through the creation of a Policy Statement under the Parks Act that would mandate a formal process for adoption of a Park Management Plan and making amendments to an approved plan. This Policy Statement would be applied to all Park Management Statements and Plans and would not be site specific.

The Policy Statement would mandate the following elements:

1. Those particular elements be considered in all park management plans (i.e., heritage, administrative areas, recreation areas, conservation areas, marine or riparian areas)
2. Development of a “zoning map” that provide structure around what can and cannot be considered in terms of provincial park land use.
3. That public engagement processes must be followed in establishment of the plans. Further, the policy should establish minimum standards that must be met, and recommending a creative approach to public consultations.
4. That the public must be notified if there is a significant change to the plan being considered. This policy should outline the form that this notification takes (website notice, mail out to neighbours, posting at park entrance, etc.). The notification period should also be detailed to ensure there is adequate time for the public to formulate a response if desired.
5. That the Policy outline the difference between a “minor” amendment that can be approved without notification, or a “major” amendment that triggers public notice.
6. That a Provincial park stakeholder group be appointed to review proposed new management plans or changes to existing plans to make a determination on minor changes and make recommendations on major ones.
7. That the policy outline who has final say in approving a Provincial Park Management Statement or Plan, and who has the ability to approve amendments to said plans.