

## GATINEAU PARK: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CHANGING PARK PURPOSES IN THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE

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### Abstract

This study examines the planning process for Gatineau Park's 2005 master plan, specifically the issues of public participation and changing park purposes as they relate to recreation in the wildland-urban interface. Although the plan acknowledges that Gatineau Park, unlike other natural parks in eastern Canada, protrudes into a large urban area, the planning process did not involve a systematic survey of the views of current and potential park visitors as well as the diverse population in the region. The plan, by stating that the park will be "managed primarily for conservation then for recreational use" (National Capital Commission 2005b, p. 19), created a dichotomy that does not reflect an increasing recognition of the complementary nature of park visitation and ecological integrity.

### 1.0 Introduction

Gatineau Park is a classic example of a park confronted by management issues related to the wildland-urban interface (Heintzman 2007). Managed by the National Capital Commission (NCC), a Canadian federal government agency, Gatineau Park is adjacent to a large urban area (Ottawa-Gatineau), unlike other large nature parks in eastern Canada (Figure 1).

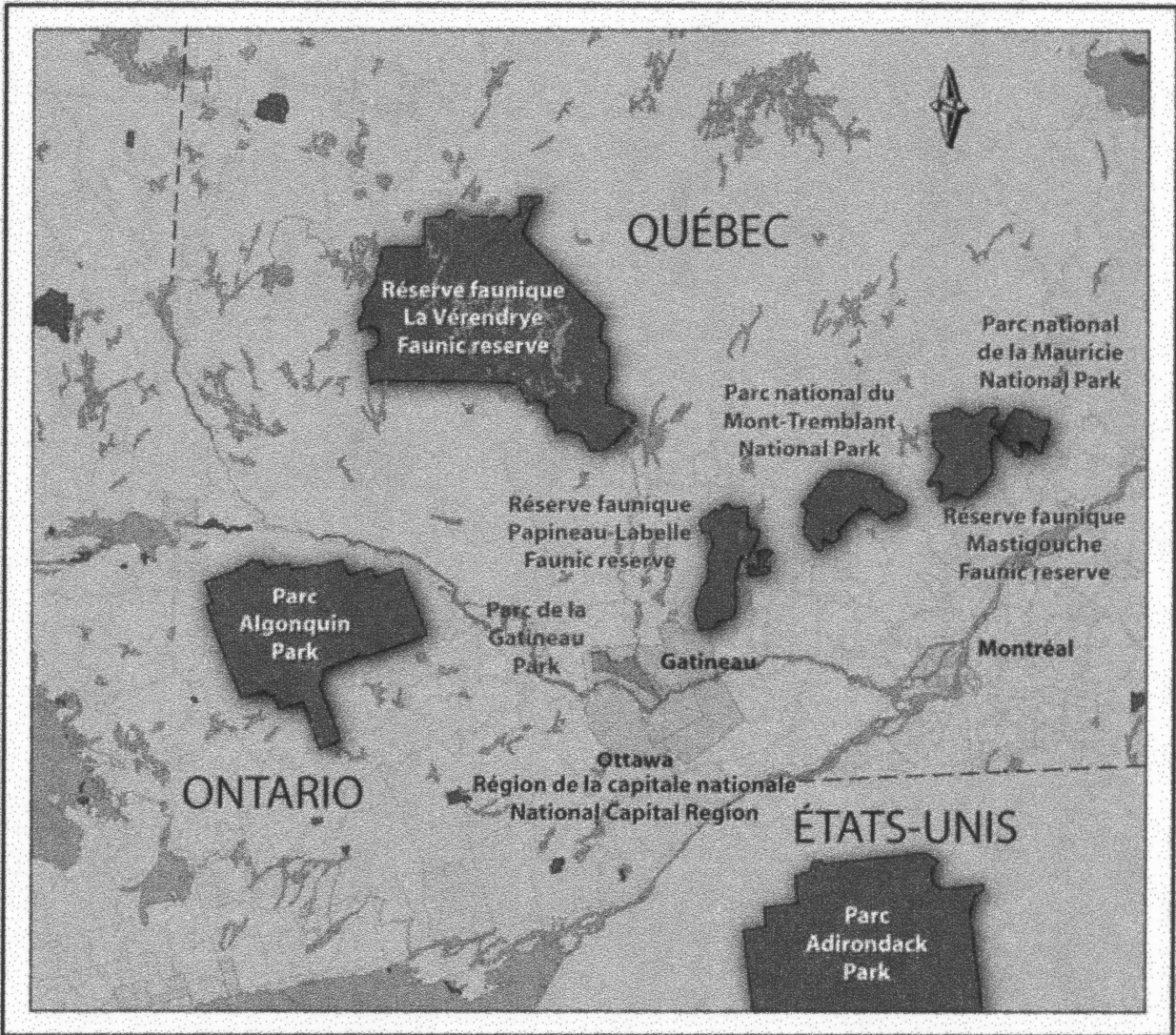


Figure 1. Geographical Context of Gatineau Park  
 Source: NCC (2005b, p. 3)

In 2005 the NCC approved a new Master Plan which replaced the balance of conservation and recreation outlined in the 1990 Master Plan with a conservation focus, so Gatineau Park would now be the “Capital’s Conservation Park” rather than the “Capital’s Nature Park.” The new plan increases the area where conservation is the priority by 25%, includes decisions to control visitor numbers to maintain the quality of the natural environment and the recreational experience, and places limitations on non-compatible recreation (NCC 2005b).

This paper investigates the planning process for the 2005 Gatineau Park Master Plan. The research questions are:

1. Did the master planning process reflect a rational (expert) or a transactive (participatory) approach?
2. To what extent were the public, park visitors, and recreation interests represented in the master planning process, especially regarding the shift in the park’s mission to a “Conservation Park”?

## 2.0 Method

This study utilized a case study approach where a particular unit (i.e., Gatineau Park) was intensively investigated to obtain insights that might be helpful in the management of other similar parks in the wildland-urban interface (Henderson & Bialeschki 2002). The form of data gathering used in this study was document review (Stake 1995). The case study approach with a review of documents is the same method used in Nortey’s (1992) study of the 1980 Gatineau Park Master Plan. Specifically, the present study involved a critical review of documents related to the approval of the 2005 Master Plan for Gatineau Park. Key documents reviewed included the 2004 Preliminary Master Plan (Del Degan, Massé et Associés Inc. 2004), the 2005 Master Plan (NCC

2005b) and the Consultation Report (NCC 2005a). In an effort to triangulate data available in these documents (Stake 1995), park staff and consultants were contacted to clarify aspects of the planning process – for example, whether or not planners used data from visitor surveys. Media documents describing the public participation events, letters to the editor written by concerned citizens, and position statements or papers written by interest groups were also reviewed.

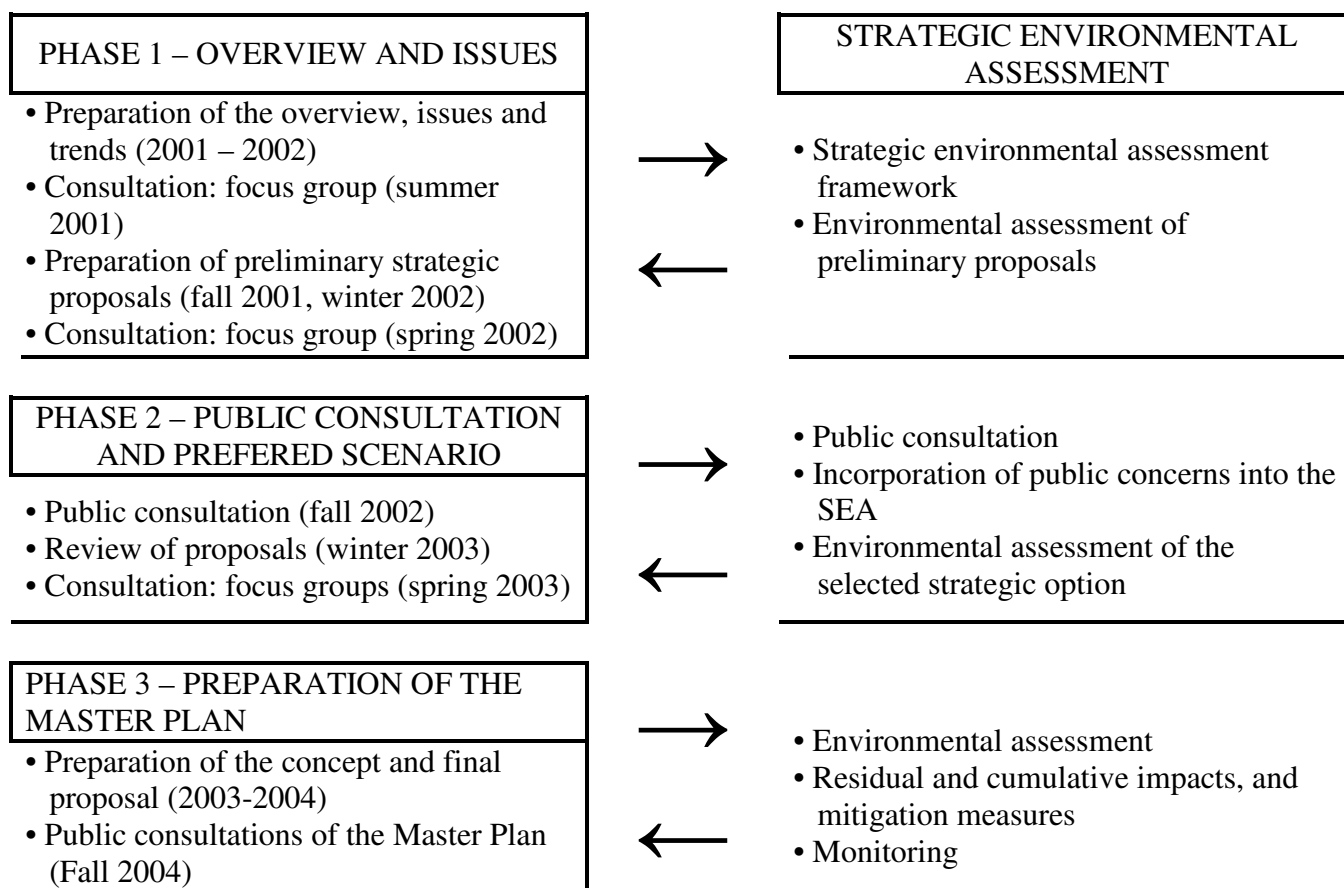
### 3.0 Results

Examination of the planning documents revealed 11 observations concerning the Gatineau Park planning process.

#### 3.1 Three-stage Process

The public consultation process for the master plan involved three phases (Figure 2). The first phase from 2001 to 2002 included 11 workshops attended by more than 50 invited target groups. The purpose of these workshops was to review the current status of the park and to identify the major issues to be considered during the planning process. The second phase (2002 to 2003) involved public consultation in the fall of 2002 and two workshops in 2003. More detailed preliminary strategies for six strategy areas (e.g., environment, recreation) were presented at two evening consultations attended by more than 120 people. The two workshops involved target organizations and interest groups with the purpose of analyzing and improving the preliminary proposals. The third phase from 2003 to 2004 involved public consultations, written submissions, and an opinion poll. In October 2004, two evening public consultation sessions were held, at which a final draft of the master plan was presented. A six-question survey was also distributed at these sessions. About 500 people attended the two public meetings and more than 240 letters, emails, and completed questionnaires were received from agencies, organizations, municipalities and citizens (NCC 2005a). This phase also included an opinion poll with a sample of 503 National Capital Region residents in November of 2004.

Figure 2:  
Review Process: 2005 Gatineau Park Master Plan



Source: Adapted from National Capital Commission, (2005b). *Gatineau Park Master Plan*. Ottawa, ON: Author, p. 2.

This three-stage public consultation process, reflecting a transactive planning approach, provided the public with the opportunity to give input throughout the planning process. Unlike the two-phase 1980 planning process, input was solicited prior to the development of a conceptual plan (Phase 1), however only invited interest groups, NCC staff, and committee members participated in this stage.

### 3.2 Public Consultation

The planning documents consistently use the term “public consultation” rather than “public participation.” The Consultation Report (NCC 2005a) suggested more of a rational rather than a transactive approach: “The comments received have helped clarify and improve the orientations and the content of the proposed Plan” (n.p.). Public input fine-tuned, rather than determined, the plan’s orientations and content.

### 3.3 Federal and NCC Policies.

Reflective of a rational process, existing federal and NCC policies, alongside new trends related to the management of Canadian and international protected areas, influenced the plan’s conservation orientation. The plan notes that “The Master Plan must promote and communicate the Canadian government’s environmental commitments” (NCC 2005b, p. 3). Also the shift in mission is based on new planning policies introduced in the *NCC’s Plan for Canada’s Capital, 1999* (NCC, 1999) which designated the park as a World Conservation Union (I.U.C.N.) Category II natural heritage area.

### 3.4 Diverging Trends versus Consensus

Transactive planning seeks consensus rather than determining the ‘best’ alternative with respect to an agency’s goals (Payne & Graham 1993). Two major and divergent trends were evident in the broad range of views expressed during the public consultation process (NCC 2005b). Public feedback on the preliminary plan ranged from opposition to restrictions on recreational use (e.g., rock climbing, snowmobiling, mountain biking), to calls for more conservation. For example, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society objected to proposed developments and roads in the park and advocated for greater emphasis on ecological integrity and legislative protection, such as National Park status, for the park (Munter 2004). Transactive planning builds consensus among two divergent trends, however, in this case, the new plan with a primary emphasis on conservation, tends to dichotomize these two views.

### 3.5 Specific Recreation Interests

The public consultation process was dominated by specific recreation interests. The proposed bans on rock-climbing and snowmobiling received the most attention at public meetings (Drolet 2004) and the greatest number of submitted documents (NCC 2005a).

### 3.6 Public Meetings

The planning process involved public meetings on weekday evenings at urban museums. Weekend meetings in the park might have attracted the involvement of park visitors who were not special interest group members (Stein 2005).

### 3.7 Opinion Poll of Residents

An opinion poll of 503 National Capital residents revealed that residents supported a conservation orientation for the park; however, poll questions focused on conservation and did not include a question specifically on the role of recreation.

### 3.8 Lack of Visitor Survey

The Master Plan does not mention a visitor survey. Park staff and consultants indicated that several visitor surveys completed between 1999 and 2001, approximately five years prior to the plan, were available to those involved in the planning process (personal communication, Michel Viens, May 17, 2007; Claude Gagné, May 15, 2007). However the Master Plan does not refer to these visitor surveys.

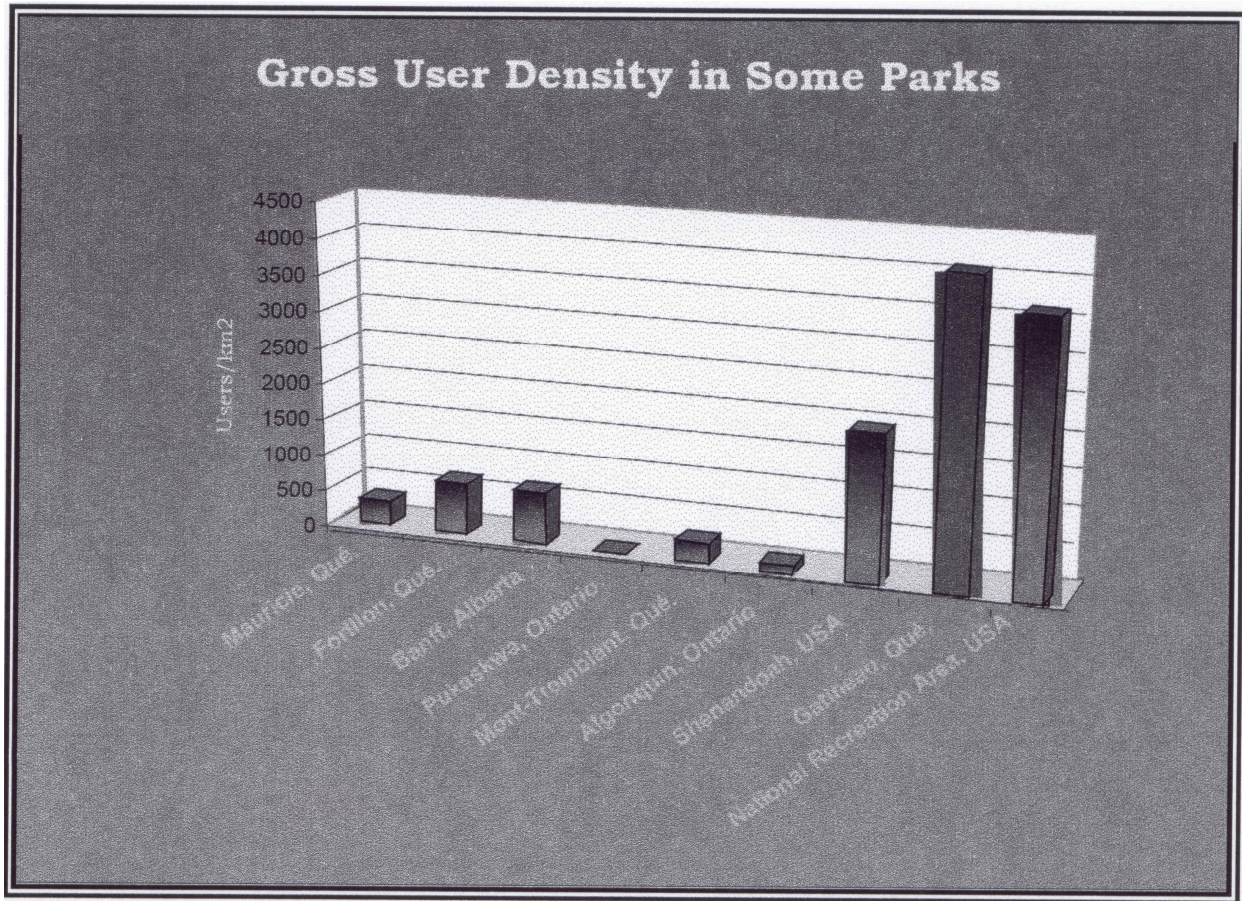
### 3.9 Recreation Demand Analysis

The planning process lacked specific data on recreation demand within the region. The plan briefly noted a greater recreational demand due to more urban neighborhoods around the southern part of the park, population growth in the region, an aging population, increased demographic diversity, an increase in educated technology sector employees seeking outdoor activities, and a greater emphasis on quality of life, health, heritage and culture. However the plan did not elaborate on these social demographic changes and how they might influence park use.

### 3.10 Gross Use Density

The preliminary and final plans (Del Degan et al. 2004; NCC 2005b) presented a graph (Figure 3) illustrating that Gatineau Park has a higher gross user density compared to some other parks. This graph seems to imply that Gatineau Park is unique in regards to gross use density and that the use level may be a concern. This type of comparison is not necessarily appropriate as these parks

are different in terms of type (national, provincial, etc.), size, and distance from urban centers. Some, such as Banff National Park, have vast areas of little or no use as well as smaller areas of very intensive use. A more helpful comparison would be Fish Creek and Cypress Provincial Parks, both adjacent to major Canadian cities. Another possible comparison is with parks of similar size and number of visitors, such as Acadia National Park, which is smaller in size (50,000 acres) and has more visitors (2.4 million in 2004) than Gatineau Park (Manning et al. 2006).



Source: NCC (2005b, p. 9)

### 3.11 Lack of Environmental Impact Data

Although the plan stated that "...the scope, number of recreational activities in the Park and the failure of Park users to comply with codes of ethics have triggered certain environmental problems that are likely to diminish the quality of the Park experience" (NCC 2005b, p. 22) the plan also recognized "incomplete knowledge of natural processes, as well as deficiencies in ecosystem monitoring procedures" within the park (NCC 2005b p. 14). Data on the environmental impact of recreational activities would have been beneficial in the planning process.

## 4.0 Discussion

### 4.1 Public Participation Process

Nortey (1992) criticized the public participation process for the 1980 plan as having a weak foundation because the NCC did not include "public participation" in the planning documents and viewed information as participation. Similarly, the 2005 documents never use the term "public participation" but consistently use the term "public consultation" which although never defined, seems to suggest fine-tuning of an existing plan. Nortey's (1992) other criticism of the 1980 process was that participants in the planning process were generally those who had a personal interest in the plan rather than a cross-section of visitors. This criticism remains true for the 2005 planning process as the issues that dominated the process involved specific interest groups. While a variety of recreational and environmental interest groups (e.g., snowmobile associations, climbing clubs, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) submitted briefs or comments, there was no attempt to survey park users.

While the media picked up on the issue of increasing socio-economic diversity in the population around the park (Huggett 2004), the public participation process did not include an investigation of the recreational needs, motivations, and preferences of this

increasingly diverse population. A weakness of the planning process was the lack of systematic study of the current and potential recreational park visitors' views of the park.

Overall the public participation process tended towards a rational or expert approach rather than a transactive or participatory approach. Yet, in "messy" planning situations such as the wildland-urban interface where there are disagreements on goals and actions needed to achieve the goals (Eagles & McCool 2002), a transactive approach may be more appropriate.

#### 4.2 Shift to Conservation Park

The shift to "conservation, then recreation" as priorities in the 2005 plan parallels recent changes in the mission of Parks Canada, Ontario Parks, and other park agencies. However, unlike these other parks, Gatineau Park is much closer to a metropolitan area and is located within the wildland-urban interface. The question arises as to whether all parks, especially those in the wildland-urban interface, should be managed primarily for conservation and ecological integrity.

Often ecological conservation is associated with the absence of people and it is thought that human activities in a park are inherently negative and damaging (Eagles & McCool 2002). Eagles and McCool (2002) suggest that this is a rather shallow view. A number of arguments can be made that visitation is beneficial to conservation. First, in their Tourism and Conservation Cycle, Eagles and McCool (2002) state that visitation is critical to park creation and ongoing societal support for parks. They suggest that people develop an appreciation for parks through their visits, which in turn leads to a strong positive attitude that results in political action supporting park creation and management. This cycle, supported by some empirical research, suggests that there is an association between outdoor recreation participation and environmental concern, and that this association is stronger if the environmental concern involves protecting the environment (e.g., parks) where recreation participation takes place (Berns & Simpson 2009). Shultis and Way (2006) also argue that ecological integrity and park visitation can co-exist and that visitation may actually enhance conservation purposes. They suggest that an emphasis on ecological integrity does not override human purposes as the concept itself eliminates the traditional dichotomy of environment and human culture. Rather, humans work with nature to ensure ecological integrity.

Second, while concern is often expressed about the negative environmental impact of visitors upon protected areas, the relationship between use levels and impact is complex (Eagles & McCool 2002). Research suggests that negative environmental impacts take place with relatively low use, and then increase rapidly before leveling off (Leung et al. 2001). Impacts depend on factors such as type of soil, vegetation, or animals affected, season and timing of use, and visitor behavior, in addition to simple use level. Limiting use is likely to be unsuccessful in minimizing impacts except at very low levels of use, thus managers need to implement other techniques to manage impacts (Eagles & McCool 2002).

Third, Thomson (1973) argued that Gatineau Park is every person's wilderness. She noted that most nature parks are remote from urban areas and thus the enjoyment of these areas is "the preserve of the affluent," (p. 11) yet all people need access to nature experiences. If certain types of recreation are banned from Gatineau Park, then visitors may travel greater distances to engage in their preferred recreation – for example, to Adirondack Park in upstate New York to climb and to Mont Tremblant Park to mountain bike – thereby creating other environmental impacts such as an increase in greenhouse gases. Indeed, transportation to the recreation site makes a significant contribution to the ecological footprint of outdoor recreation (Fresque & Plummer 2009). By providing recreation opportunities close to urban areas, parks can mitigate global warming through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions which would be produced if citizens traveled to more distant parks to engage in these recreation opportunities (Gelb & Dolesh 2009). Furthermore, only the affluent can afford travel to distant parks. Research on an urban-proximate nature area confirmed that outdoor recreation opportunities near a metropolitan area are important to meet the needs of residents who otherwise have limited opportunities for recreation experiences (Andreck & Knopf 2007).

#### 5.0 Conclusion

Gatineau Park's new master plan illustrates a lack of knowledge about recreationists in the wildland-urban interface and how recreation can serve both humans and the ecosystem. By stating that the park will be "managed primarily for conservation then for recreational use" (NCC 2005b, p. 19), the plan has created an unnecessary dichotomy. Although the NCC classifies the park as a Category II natural heritage area, which according to the I.U.C.N. (2007) classification system is characterized by management for ecosystem protection and recreation, in Gatineau Park the NCC gives priority to protection over recreation. While the NCC claims it is following trends in park management with an increased focus on conservation, its emphasis on conservation over recreation does not reflect an increasing recognition of the complementary nature of park visitation and the maintenance of ecological integrity (Dearden & Rollins 2009, Shultis & Way 2006). As is the case in national parks (Dearden & Rollins 2009), the greatest threats to Gatineau Park may be external ones. Thus, the Gatineau Park Master Plan is actually lagging behind the most recent park management trends.

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