
MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES

4.07–Ontario Parks Program

(Follow-up to VFM Section 3.07, 2002 Annual Report)

BACKGROUND

The Ontario Parks Program (Program) of the Ministry of Natural Resources is responsible for managing provincial parks and protected areas in support of the Ministry's vision of sustainable development of natural resources and its mission of managing such resources for ecological sustainability. The primary objectives of the Program are to protect natural resources, provide recreational opportunities, develop tourism, and enhance appreciation of the province's natural and cultural heritage.

At the time of our follow-up there were 314 provincial parks (there were 277 provincial parks covering over 70,000 km² at the time of our 2002 audit). For the 2003/04 fiscal year, the Ministry's funding for the Program was approximately \$59 million, of which \$47 million was funded from the Ontario Parks Special Purpose Account. Ministry capital spending on the Ontario Parks' infrastructure totalled an additional \$25 million.

Overall, we concluded in 2002 that, in many respects, the Ministry did not ensure compliance with the legislation and policies designed to ensure the sustainable use and development of park resources and that the Ministry did not have adequate procedures in place to measure and report on the effectiveness of the Program. In addition, we noted a number of instances where procedures for ensuring due regard for economy and efficiency needed to be improved. Specifically, we observed the following:

- The enforcement activity that was carried out was inadequate, in that over 70% of park superintendents who responded to our survey indicated that parks were not being effectively patrolled and that the Ministry's minimum operating standards relating to enforcement were not being met. As a result of the Ministry's not meeting its protection mandate, natural resources had been adversely affected and in some cases destroyed.
- The Ministry had management plans in place for only 117 of the 277 provincial parks. Such plans are essential if animal and plant life resources are to be managed and protected. We noted instances where inadequate planning and a lack of action resulted in uncontrolled wildlife growth and habitat destruction that threatened the sustainability of other species.
- The Ministry did not have an overall strategy in place for managing species at risk of extinction in the province, even though the *Endangered Species Act* has been in force since 1971. Of the 29 species deemed by regulation to be at risk, only five

had recovery plans in place. Three species that did not have recovery plans in place can no longer be found in Ontario.

- Customer service standards were not met for the parks' Computer Reservation and Registration Accounting System, which was operated by a private service provider. Over 65% of our sample telephone calls were not answered either because of a busy signal or because we were put on hold for 15 minutes, after which time we hung up the phone.

We made recommendations for improvements in each of these areas and received commitments from the Ministry that it would take corrective action.

CURRENT STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

According to information received from the Ministry of Natural Resources, some progress has been made on all of the recommendations we made in our *2002 Annual Report*. The current status of action on each of our recommendations is as follows.

COMPLIANCE WITH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Managing Parks for Ecological Sustainability

Recommendation

To help ensure that provincial park resources are protected and maintained at sustainable levels, the Ministry should:

- *complete management plans for all parks and review existing plans on a more timely basis;*
- *complete and monitor the required resource inventories for all parks;*
- *develop procedures, such as the selection and monitoring of indicator species, to help evaluate and report on the sustainability of park ecosystems; and*
- *conduct a province-wide risk analysis that will result in financial and human resources being directed to the most critical areas and ensure that the related implementations are effectively monitored.*

Current Status

The Ministry informed us that it developed criteria to be used to prioritize projects associated with provincial park management plans. These criteria include the age of the management plan, the risk to protected-area values, commitments, integration with other plans or planning processes, and partnership support. As of May 2004, the Ministry had 127 management plans in place for the 314 provincial parks that existed at the time of our follow-up review. However, the Ministry acknowledged that an additional 90 park management plans had not been reviewed in the past 10 years.

To help monitor protected resources, the Ministry also developed a computerized system to consolidate, on a provincial basis, information—based on park management plans—for the inventory of protected resources.

Protected areas throughout Ontario are subject to a variety of internal and external stresses, including hikers and campers within protected areas, intensive agriculture or forestry on adjacent lands, and the effects of climate change across the province. To help evaluate and report on the sustainability of park ecosystems, the Ministry has identified the potential ecological stresses with respect to provincial parks. The identification of these stresses is to form the basis for the development of a risk-based strategy that directs resources to the most critical areas in provincial parks.

Species at Risk of Extinction in Ontario

Recommendation

To properly manage species at risk and to help sustain and increase endangered populations, the Ministry should:

- *develop an overall strategy to provide for the conservation, protection, restoration, and propagation of species at risk;*
- *clear up the backlog for regulating identified endangered species; and*
- *prepare and implement recovery plans to help prevent species from becoming extinct in the province.*

Current Status

The Ministry has completed a draft Species at Risk Strategy for Ontario that sets out the principles, goals, and supporting strategies that should enable the Ministry to continue building a comprehensive Species at Risk program in co-operation with its partners. The key components of the strategy include monitoring and data management; assessing, protecting, and the recovery of species at risk; and public awareness.

With respect to the backlog for regulating identified endangered species, the Ministry informed us that this is an ongoing process, with about three species regulated each year. New species are continually added to the backlog, resulting in additional pressure on regulation efforts. Since our audit in 2002, an additional 11 species have been regulated under the *Endangered Species Act*. As of May 2004, there were 34 Ontario species (an increase of three since our audit) that have been recommended for national endangered status by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife but have yet to be regulated under the Act. The Ministry indicated that it will continue to consider all of these backlogged species for regulation under the Act. However, we were informed that some of these species receive protection under the *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act*, the *Provincial Parks Act*, the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act*, and the

Planning Act (under which municipalities must protect significant portions of the habitats of endangered and threatened species when planning for development).

As of May 2004, to ensure that recovery plans for endangered and threatened species were put in place, the Ministry stated that it had established 55 recovery teams addressing 73 species, had approved seven recovery plans, and was reviewing 19 draft recovery plans.

Enforcement Activity

Recommendation

To help ensure that provincial park resources are adequately protected, the Ministry should:

- *review the level of enforcement activity in both operating and non-operating parks to determine whether there are adequate levels of funding, staff, and equipment for park superintendents and wardens to carry out their enforcement responsibilities; and*
- *develop specific guidelines outlining a risk-based enforcement strategy for non-operating parks.*

Current Status

In 2003, the Ministry undertook a review of the adequacy of the enforcement activity in both operating and non-operating parks. As of May 2004, the Ministry was evaluating the recommendations made by the review team with regard to minimum operating standards, but no date had been established for implementing the recommendations from the review.

The Ministry informed us that it had developed a risk-based assessment strategy for non-operating parks to assist staff with the risk management process. The tool should help park superintendents and wardens identify and assess risks at their parks, assign priorities, determine the appropriate action required for protection, and determine the level of resources required. The Ministry was also considering the development of minimum custodial management standards for non-operating parks.

MEASURING AND REPORTING ON PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Recommendation

The Ministry should develop performance measures for use in assessments that help to ensure the ecological sustainability of provincial park resources.

Current Status

The Ministry has completed a framework that focuses on an ecosystem-based approach to monitoring and supporting planning and management of protected areas across

Ontario. Under this framework, the Ministry developed nine outcomes to measure performance against the goal of ecological sustainability. These outcomes are to measure the three main principles of ecological integrity, social well-being, and economic health. For each outcome, a number of indicators have been developed to measure performance. The Ministry indicated that the performance measures will be in place by March 2005. The Ministry also indicated that, when the performance measures are in place, it will produce a report on the state of the protected areas to determine if its practices ensure the ecological sustainability of provincial park resources.

DUE REGARD FOR ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY

Park Reservation and Accounting System

Recommendation

The Ministry should more closely monitor its service provider to ensure that customer service requirements are being met and ensure that future contracts with service providers include a provision for periodic independent security reviews.

Current Status

The Ministry advised us that it continues to monitor the performance of the service provider for the reservation call centre through the daily and weekly reports. In May 2004, the Ministry was in the process of creating a staff position that will be dedicated to monitoring and conducting random testing of the Internet-based reservation service and reviewing response times at the call centre. This position is anticipated to be in place during the summer of 2004. The Ministry determined that, since March 2003, the performance of the service provider has improved, with an average wait time for the reservation call centre to answer telephone calls being less than 10 seconds.

The Ministry also implemented semi-annual independent security reviews of the service contract for the Internet-based reservation service. According to the Ministry, the reviews have demonstrated that the Internet reservation service is secure.

Capital Infrastructure Maintenance

Recommendation

To ensure that provincial parks are maintained for the benefit of future generations and to correct infrastructure deficiencies that may pose a threat to health and safety, the Ministry should take action to bring the parks' infrastructure to a satisfactory state.

Current Status

The Ministry informed us that any known infrastructure deficiencies that may pose a threat to the health and safety of staff and visitors have been corrected through improvements or replacement of the facilities. The Ministry advised us that it will continue its ongoing efforts to maintain the parks' infrastructure and restore it to a satisfactory state, which it still estimates will cost approximately \$420 million. The Ministry indicated that, with current funding levels, it could take 30 years to bring the parks' infrastructure to an acceptable state.

With respect to the water treatment and distribution systems in provincial parks, the Ministry is continuing to work towards meeting the drinking-water standards established by the Ministry of the Environment. Since our audit in 2002, the Ministry has incurred capital expenditures of \$35.4 million to upgrade drinking-water systems in its provincial parks.

Provincial Park Movable Assets

Recommendation

To properly control and safeguard provincial park movable assets, the Ministry should develop and implement a new asset management system to permit the effective implementation of the new movable asset management policy and guideline.

Current Status

The Ministry has implemented a movable asset management system that records park inventories. All information from the old asset management system, which was discontinued in 1998, as well as all assets purchased since that time, have been incorporated into the new system. To ensure that the system contains a full accounting of all movable assets and to control and safeguard these assets, park superintendents are required to carry out periodic asset verification.

Ontario Parks Special Purpose Account

Recommendation

To ensure that all public money is properly accounted for and the Ontario Parks Special Purpose Account earns all the interest it is entitled to, the Ministry should:

- *require that contractors deposit all provincial park revenue into the Consolidated Revenue Fund as stipulated by the Provincial Parks Act and the Financial Administration Act; and*
- *perform the necessary reconciliations on a timely basis.*

Current Status

According to the Ministry, all new contracts with third-party contractors that operate large parks for the Ministry will require that all revenue collected be deposited to the Consolidated Revenue Fund. These contractors will now invoice the Ministry for the services rendered. As of May 2004, the Ministry was still reviewing the arrangements with contractors that operate access points into the parks and with contractors that operate partnership parks to assess the impact of the new requirements in terms of cost and administration for both the Ministry and the contractors.

The Ministry informed us that it now hires additional staff during the busy summer months to ensure that reconciliations of park revenue with deposits are performed on a timely basis. This has allowed for the timely transfer of funds from the Consolidated Revenue Fund to the Ontario Parks Special Purpose Account to maximize the interest earned by the account.