Notions of Nature, Notions of Humanity:
Shifting Historical Perceptions of Canadian Parks

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In a nation largely comprised of wilderness, the rhetoric of nature and exploration has long dominated public and academic understandings of the history of the Canadian landscape. From said history have grown the mythologies of explorers such as David Thomson and Samuel de Champlain—men who, though not “Canadian,” have gripped public memory in Canada nonetheless. Indeed, the romanticizing of an “uninhabited and untouched” wilderness has led to one definition of “Canadianness” in terms of the natural world. From proudly displaying beavers on nickels to using the moose as a symbol for the Canadian nation-state itself, both the state and the public have placed great importance on nature. Such a respect for nature is supposedly exemplified by extensive parks systems at every level of governance, including a national system of forty-seven parks. Attracting tourists from all around the globe, Canadian parks represent a fantastic revenue-generating opportunity for a nation lacking in popular man-made tourist attractions, especially when compared to the United States just to the south. As parks, especially national parks, are a relatively new concept (the first in Canada was established in 1885), historical interpretations of parks are limited in critical analysis and generally lack nuanced scientific understanding. However, modern histories of Canadian parks have increasingly begun to subvert conventional social attitudes towards nature. Shifts in the understanding and interpretation of Canadian parks history have been centralized around a few mechanisms: greater scientific and social understanding of natural interconnectedness, redefinition of parks and park systems as not inherently “good,” and new analysis regarding the role of economics, transportation, and social policy in the natural world. Driven by the liberalization of historical understandings throughout the late 20th century, these shifts are also fueled by new methods of

generating scientific and historical evidence.[1] These new understandings afford readers a new perspective on human interactions with nature and illustrate that “community and nature are not separate.”[2]

Whether justified either socially, philosophically, or religiously, human superiority over other living organisms and natural systems has long been upheld as a rationale for the exploitation of natural resources, ecosystems, and organisms. People have debated what it means to be human since the first schools of philosophical thought emerged in ancient Greece.[3] The practice of oppositional definition has led many scholars to identify humanity as being contrary to, or differing greatly from, the natural world; in particular, those organisms with lower intellectual capacities have found themselves the target of such thinking. Perceptions of human superiority have coloured historical understanding concerning the inevitability of human domination over nature and the moral righteousness of such control. Even the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, which upheld the value of natural landscapes and aesthetics, still depicted man in competition with nature in literature and art—take for example “Apostrophe to the Ocean” by George Byron, one of the most famous poets of the Romantic movement.[4] In scientific reality, however, human interactions with nature are characterized foremost by a great degree of interconnectedness between all spheres of organic and inorganic nature. Historiographical analysis of modern environmental history has upheld the scientific

[1] Including greater numbers of women, racialized peoples, queer people, and people of non-Christian beliefs entering the historical field, as well as increasing interest in the study of history from a non-Western point of view.
[2] Caroline Elizabeth Grego, “Maybe National Park: Consultation, Conservation, and Conflict in the Okanagan Similkameen,” *BC Studies*, no. 186 (Summer 2015): 38.
[3] Dylan Futter, “Socrates’ Human Wisdom,” *Canadian Philosophical Review*, 52, no. 1 (March 2013): 62-65.
[4] George Gordon Byron, “Apostrophe to the Ocean,” *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: Canto the Fourth* (1818). https://sharpgiving.com/101famouspoems/poems/original/108Byron.html?visited=1

evidence of this interconnectedness, leading to better contextualization of the role that humans play in natural processes.

Taking the dog-strangling vine of the Rouge Valley in Toronto, Ontario as her example, Canadian environmental historian Catriona Sandilands illustrates the concept of "invasive species" as a purely human invention. In her exploration of imperial and (subsequently) neo-liberal trade and immigration routes, Sandilands identifies that invasive species are largely transported to new locales by human means. The rhetoric of human domination has created the biological and social entity of "invasive species," which are only perceived as a problem because they inhabit areas that humans would rather see populated by other types of plants.[5] Moreover, Sandilands identifies a major shift in parks history by identifying that the advent of Rouge National Urban Park highlights contradictory perceptions of nature and humanity. She argues that the type of interconnectedness championed by the City of Toronto actually fails to approach appropriately contextualize what ecological interdependence is. Interconnectedness is central to all human-nature interactions, making the compartmentalizing of parks a denial of the type of interconnectedness that governs natural processes. Sandilands exposes the Toronto City Council's static belief that human processes can be separate from nature. In identifying complex human history as intertwined with park spaces, Sandilands acknowledges an interconnectedness long neglected in environmental history.

Interconnectedness is inherent in the relationships between sentient living beings as well. Faulty perceptions of animal interactions with humans have had great effects on historical understandings of nature. Animals that are symbolic or in some way elevated, as a such a moose,

[5] Catriona Sandilands, "Dog Stranglers in the Park?: National and Vegetal Politics in Ontario's Rouge Valley," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 104.

beaver, bear, or loon, are often held in higher regard and have more legal and physical protections than other more common animals, such as a mouse, raccoon, frog, or magpie. The projection of human ideals onto nature has greatly influenced the symbols that Canadian government and cultural bodies pull from nature. Animals have been labelled static beings, their existence only important in relation to human perceptions of what they are. Canadian environmental historian Sean Kheraj challenges this notion by identifying how human perceptions of animals are shaped by autonomous activities over time and how human modifications to ecosystems through the parks model have made a difference in how animals interact with their environments.[6] Animals have an existence apart from human control and often living autonomously within interactive relationships with humans. A raccoon foraging in a rubbish bin has no greater inherent natural value than a bear foraging in a woodland; value is only assigned when humans make those judgments. Moreover, human interference in the name of preservation is still interference. While inventions in natural parks to protect wildlife such as wildlife bridges and tunnels are celebrated, these structures were created only to attempt to work around challenges created by complicated perceptions of nature and wildlife. Dismantling what perceptions govern and influence parks policy is at the core of establishing a new body of environmental historical work. New analysis of what animal-human relationships have historically entailed forces a recognition of humans and animals as independent agents acting on one another. Humans are not “in control” simply because of the power imbalance between humans and animals. The relationship between humans and animals functions more as a complex, eternal dance—and the search for complexity serves to open more space for non-Western perceptions of the relationship. Historiographical recognitions of interconnectedness

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[6] Sean Kheraj, "Demonstration Wildlife: Negotiating the Animal Landscape of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1888-1996," *Environment & History* 18, no. 4 (November 2012): 499-500.

mark new directions being taken in the examination of human interaction with parks and natural spaces.

Parks have often been idealized due to their natural beauty, creating a public perception of the inherent "goodness" of parks which ignores the practical historical realities of park creation. Used—for better or worse—as mechanisms of state propaganda, such as during the Canada 150 campaign of 2017, parks are an important device through which the state can enforce and reinforce contemporary social and economic attitudes.[7] The less morally advantageous aspects of parks systems were ignored by historians of the early 20th century, largely due to a perceived obligation to support the development of the Canadian nation-state. Moreover, environmentalist movements in support of parks creation have overlooked the contentious history of many parks in order to maintain public support for what they perceive to be an ecologically justifiable end. As human geography and ecology researcher Olivier Craig-Dupont identifies, parks represent different things for different groups; for public institutions, parks represent a chance to turn a "sow's ear into a 'wild' silk purse."[8] In this pursuit of moral goodness for profit's sake, institutions like Parks Canada have engaged in scientific reinterpretation of natural landscapes, presenting the public with vastly simplified environmental complexities by ignoring human and industrial input. In the case of La Mauricie National Park (just north of Trois-Rivières, Quebec), scientific findings were often used for tourist imperative rather than for the goal of scientific advancement.[9] Craig-Dupont argues that while presenting

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[7] "Free entry to national parks starts for Canada 150," CBC Toronto, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, last modified 20 May 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/free-entry-to-national-parks-starts-for-canada-150-1.4125492.

[8] Olivier Craig-Dupont, "Hunting, Timber Harvesting, and Precambrian Beauties: The Scientific Representation of La Mauricie National Park's Landscape History, 1969-1975," *A Century of Parks Canada 1911-2011*, ed. Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 181-182.; Craig-Dupont, 184-185.

[9] Craig-Dupont, 189-190.

parks as a scientific havens, entities like Parks Canada have covertly held the "main goal of national parks … resemb[ling] a museum or art gallery."[10] This deception, Craig-Dupont claims, amounts to "cultural colonialism," by which Parks Canada educates visitors on its preferred types of relationship with nature whilst pushing local knowledge and impact to the side.[11] In examining the aspects of parks systems with which the public is less comfortable, modern historians have developed nuanced approaches in which the local and national, human and nonhuman, and economic and environmental converge.

As the practice of history has been liberalized over the past seventy years, events in the histories of marginalized and racialized peoples have been increasingly explored. Of particular importance are those events that contradict status-quo perceptions of social good. In the history of Canadian parks, the maltreatment of Indigenous peoples for the sake of the parks systems' progress has been left unrecorded and unexplored. Craig-Dupont remarks that in order to fit their narrative of virginal wilderness, Parks Canada "folklorized" the presence of humanity in parks regions, specifically at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Such a characterization left Indigenous groups excluded culturally and historically from their ancestral homelands, alongside the strict physical banishment already suffered.[12] Perhaps no example is more apparent than the expulsion of the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway Band from Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park in 1936. In exploring the relationship between this expulsion and the creation of Riding Mountain, Canadian historian John Sandlos identifies the "popular notions of race hierarchy, social progress, and economic development within the Riding Mountain region" that were used

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[10] Craig-Dupont, 190.
[11] Craig-Dupont, 198-199.
[12] Craig-Dupont, 197.

to justify the unjust practice of expulsion.[13] The creation of Riding Mountain National Park stripped reserve lands and natural spaces of any value for native hunters while also marginalizing Ojibway individuals in an increasingly "middle- and upper-class white" space.[14] Depictions of national parks as honourable and pragmatic entities clearly conflict with the historical realities of class and race hierarchy "written into the line that marked the park boundary."[15] By using oral history as evidence, Sandlos acknowledges Indigenous perspectives long excluded from the history of Canadian parks, while also placing the creation of parks within the realm of social, racial, and class-based prejudices of their respective eras—prejudices that were often purposefully ignored or reinforced by contemporary government records.[16] In acknowledging the varied motivations—both "good" and "bad"— behind the creation of Canadian parks, modern historical interpretations offer a greater degree of nuance and highlight historical fact ahead of state-driven representations of social good.

The exploration of bureaucratic park creation processes in many historical works inevitably stumbles upon the role of policy in the natural and social worlds. Environmental policies, such as those of ecological restoration (the practice of humans planting/replanting/introducing plants they determine to be "natural" and seeking to "preserve" one natural state), stem from common perceptions of the natural world and of humanity's place within it. In the case of Vancouver, British Columbia's Stanley Park and the windstorm of 1962, after numerous old growth trees were knocked down, the City of Vancouver had the dead trunks propped up and filled with man-made preservatives. From this incident, Kheraj identifies policies

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[13] John Sandlos, "Not Wanted in the Boundary: The Expulsion of the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway Band from Riding Mountain National Park," *Canadian Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (June 2008): 189.
[14] Sandlos, 217.
[15] Sandlos, 221.
[16] Sandlos, 207.

of park restoration as an attempt to resist the random and autonomous forces of nature, borne out of a belief that human domination and control was truly necessary to sustain the park's ecosystem.[17] These same policies created a collective amnesia about the frequency and severity of windstorms, in essence rewriting the popular existence of natural weather cycles of El Niño and La Niña. The "nature myths" such policies encouraged created an imagined virginal past for Stanley Park, when in reality scientific records list scores of windstorms throughout the early twentieth century.[18] This human interference based on sentiment and romanticism furthered strong spiritual and cultural collective attachments to the cedars of Stanley Park, attachments so strong that Vancouverites forgot their impermanence.[19]

Both shaping and shaped by collective perceptions of nature, the concept of ecological restoration did little good for Stanley Park. Kheraj presents a strong case as to how parks policy itself is predicated on the notion of human self-importance, combined with a genuine care for the environment expressed through practices of stewardship. This nuanced convergence exposes a new historical understanding of humanity as irrational, if also well-intentioned, in matters of environmental policy. Research such as Kheraj's complicates human understandings of natural agency and brings to light underexplored links between psychology and ecological practices throughout history. Canadian parks have been the foreground for many other important developments in Canadian history: recreation historian Qi Chen pinpoints federal-provincial relations, environmentalist movements, public advocacy, and international pressures all as being

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[17] Sean Kheraj, "Restoring Nature: Ecology, Memory, and the Storm History of Vancouver's Stanley Park," *Canadian Historical Review* 88, no. 4 (December 2007): 594-600.
[18] Kheraj, "Restoring Nature," 604-609.
[19] Kheraj, "Restoring Nature," 606-607.

critical to public debate and governmental decisions on parks development.[20] Parks played an important role in the recognition of public consultation as democratic dialogue, as well as the growth of local activism enmeshed into larger activist networks. The emergence of such networks signifies growth of activist movements centered around commonly held perceptions of what nature is and should be: subjective environmental theory at its core is based on either upholding or dismantling perceptions of the natural. Parks are often the sites where opposing or different natural ideals come to a head, making them an ideal subject that historians can use to foreground otherwise intangible concepts and theories. Burgeoning analysis of the centrality of parks to modern political activism and free speech narratives is critical to new understandings of how parks history has influenced social processes in Canada.

The natural world plays an important role in the lives of Canadians, just as Canadians do in the existence of the natural world. New historical understandings of interconnectedness, ethical nuance, and environmental policy all signify the perpetually shifting nature of historical interpretation regarding Canadian parks. Equipped with new banks of scientific knowledge, Canadian environmental historians can view natural processes in light of the biological, social, and cultural notions that shape human interaction with them. Historical recordings of humanity's "illusive quest for a stable 'balance of nature'" have allowed historians to grapple with human irrationality that informs the complex systems governing interactions between humans and nature.[21] With some encouragement, developing understandings of a complex environmental history interwoven with Canadian parks policy will allow historians to better understand

[20] Qi Chen and Pearl Ann Reichwein, "The Village Lake Louise Controversy: Ski Resort Planning, Civil Activism, and the Environmental Politics of Banff National Park, 1964-1979," *Sport History Review* 47 no. 1 (2016): 102-105.

[21] Kheraj, "Restoring Nature," 611.

humanity itself. The role that historiographical analysis plays in the growth of environmental history should not be underappreciated either. Historiographical practice serves to remind all historians to identify their own place in history so as to better contextualize historical occurrences, as well as to check their biases at the door of historical best practices. The furthering of environmental history, particularly through the exploration of Canadian parks history, reveals the best and worst of humanity in interaction with the natural world.

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