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Heritage Conservation: Canada's National Historic Sites

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Heritage Conservation: Canada's National Historic Sites
(In Brief)

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HERITAGE CONSERVATION: CANADA'S NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Canadian government has assigned federal heritage designation to over 970 national historic sites.¹ These sites, which are located in every region of the country (see Appendix A), make up a system of extremely varied localities that bear witness to defining moments in Canada's history.² By illustrating the creativity and cultural traditions of our country's people, these sites give us a better understanding of how Canada was built.³

At the federal level, the Parks Canada Agency is responsible for preparing a directory of all national historic sites and for administering some of them. The Agency also manages a funding program for sites that do not belong to the federal government, and supports an advisory board responsible for designating sites.

This paper gives an overview of the designation process and of the administration of Canada's national historic sites. It then gives a brief description of the condition of these sites during the past few years. It goes on to discuss the recent federal public service strategic review, in particular the budget cuts in the 2012 Budget that affected Parks Canada, and the impact of these cuts on the federal government's ability to fulfill its mandate to administer and preserve national historic sites.

2 HISTORIC SITE DESIGNATION

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is the federal agency that evaluates applications for national historic site designation. The Board's mandate is to advise the Minister responsible for Parks Canada with respect to the designation of such sites.

For a site to be officially designated a national historic site, the first step is the submission of an application to the Board.⁴ Following an evaluation process and recommendation by the Board, the Minister may designate the site. Approximately 95% of designation applications come from the public or from interest groups.⁵ There were nine designations between 2009 and 2011.⁶

Only buildings, ensembles of buildings and sites of national historic significance whose integrity has been maintained over the years and that were "completed by 1975" may be considered for designation.⁷ They must also meet all of the criteria established by the Board and fall within the thematic framework used by Parks Canada to "assess the extent to which the diversity of the Canadian population and its history is reflected in our system of national historic sites."⁸

This framework organizes Canada's history under five major themes:

- Peopling the Land
- Governing Canada
- Developing Economies
- Building Social and Community Life
- Expressing Intellectual and Cultural Life⁹

In addition to its advisory role in the designation of historic sites, the Board advises the Minister on the designation of events and persons of national historic significance, as well as heritage railway stations and heritage buildings.¹⁰

National historic sites are usually commemorated with a bronze plaque that is readily accessible to the public.¹¹

3 ADMINISTRATION OF HISTORIC SITES

Not all national historic sites come under the jurisdiction of the same entity. Although many are owned by Parks Canada or other federal organizations and administered by them, most are managed by provincial or territorial governments, municipal councils, Aboriginal communities, local organizations, private sector companies, or even individuals (see Appendix A).¹² There are therefore major differences in how they are managed and financed.

3.1 FEDERAL GOVERNMENT NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

Of the 970 listed national historic sites, 229 are administered by federal departments and agencies (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Number of National Historic Sites Under the Authority of Federal Departments and Agencies

Federal Departments and Agencies	Number of Sites	% of Sites
Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada	5	2.2%
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	1	0.4%
Canadian Museum of Civilization	1	0.4%
Canadian Museum of Nature	1	0.4%
Correctional Service of Canada	2	0.9%
Environment Canada	1	0.4%
Fisheries and Oceans Canada	10	4.4%
National Arts Centre	1	0.4%
National Battlefields Commission	1	0.4%
National Capital Commission	5	2.2%
National Defence	22	9.6%
National Research Council of Canada	1	0.4%
Parks Canada	167	73.0%
Public Works and Government Services Canada	10	4.4%
Royal Canadian Mint	1	0.4%
Total	229	100%

Source: Table prepared by the author using data obtained from Parks Canada in emails from staff at the Canadian Register of Historic Places, 5 March 2013.

Parks Canada owns 167 national historic sites in Canada, but administers only 124 of these sites.¹³

The other 43 may be divided into two groups. Those in the first, and largest, group provide limited interpretation services and have neither buildings that are kept open nor staff to welcome visitors. No third parties are involved in operating these sites, which are financed fully by Parks Canada. The sites in the second group are operated by third parties in accordance with procedures that vary greatly from one site to another. The third parties assume the financial responsibilities associated with their use and occupation of the site.¹⁴

Some 15 federal organizations share responsibility for the 62 other national historic sites administered by the federal government. The activities related to the management and conservation of these sites are in most instances financed from the annual budgets allocated to these departments and agencies.

3.2 OTHER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

Most national historic sites (over 75%) are not owned by the Canadian government and are therefore administered and financed by other entities.

The owners of these sites may nevertheless receive financial assistance from the federal government under Parks Canada's National Historic Sites Cost-Sharing Program.¹⁵ This program receives project proposals that aim to ensure the commemorative integrity of all Canada's historic sites by maintaining the sites and protecting, communicating and respecting their heritage values.¹⁶

4 CONDITION OF HISTORIC SITES

In view of the heritage value of the national historic sites, an overview of their condition going back 10 years might be useful – whether they are administered by Parks Canada, other federal organizations or non-federal organizations. However, the great disparities that sometimes exist in the administration and financing of these sites make it difficult, if not impossible, to provide a full picture of the situation. Much of the information in this section is therefore not exhaustive and is provided only for illustrative purposes.

4.1 FEDERAL GOVERNMENT NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

4.1.1 HISTORIC SITES OWNED BY PARKS CANADA

In her November 2003 report, the Auditor General reported on the poor state of the national historic sites administered by Parks Canada, the federal agency that owns the largest number of such sites:

Built heritage is threatened. Many of the national historic sites administered by the Parks Canada Agency are showing signs of deterioration. This issue will have to be addressed in the next two to five years to prevent the permanent loss of elements that show the sites' historical significance, closure to the public, or rapid deterioration of the sites.¹⁷

A few years later, in a report released in February 2007, the Auditor General noted the improvements made by the Agency and stated that it had made “satisfactory progress” in addressing the 2003 recommendations.¹⁸

Also in 2007, Parks Canada decided to reassess annually all its sites that had received a low score for commemorative integrity¹⁹ during the five years preceding the assessment.²⁰

The Agency reported that after this reassessment program was introduced, in the period from 2007 to 2012 there was a 72% improvement in the commemorative integrity elements that had been rated poor.²¹ This progress was “a result of targeted investments by Parks Canada to improve the condition of its built cultural resources.”²² The Agency’s report on the state of Canada’s natural and historic sites for 2011 includes a table indicating the condition of each of the Agency’s sites in that year.²³

Parks Canada admitted that despite the improvements made in recent years, conservation work must constantly be performed on national historic sites. The Agency also pointed out that its efforts are sometimes impeded by external factors, such as bad weather and erosion:

During this time, it has become clear that several sites experience environmental threats to certain cultural resources that continue to challenge Parks Canada’s efforts to improve their condition.²⁴

The Agency said that it would continue to look for effective long-term solutions to better address these threats.

4.1.2 HISTORIC SITES OWNED BY OTHER FEDERAL DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES

The Auditor General’s February 2007 report addressed not only Parks Canada, but also the departments of National Defence and Public Works and Government Services Canada, which own 22 and 10 historic sites, respectively, or 10% and 4% of the sites owned by the federal government. According to the Auditor General, conservation of the national historic sites under the authority of these two federal departments was at risk.²⁵

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is another federal entity responsible for 10 historic sites, seven of which are lighthouses. In 2008, the Parliament of Canada passed the *Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act*²⁶ and, three years later, the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans pointed out in a report on the protection of heritage lighthouses that “[v]ery few lighthouses are commemorated as National Historic Sites.”²⁷ According to the report:

Sadly, over the years, many of Canada’s historic lighthouses and lightstations received minimal, if any, maintenance, leaving most in various states of disrepair and allowing some to literally fall apart.²⁸

The Committee recommended that “the Government of Canada adopt as a general national policy goal the preservation of a reasonable proportion of Canada’s lighthouses for future generations of Canadians.”²⁹ The government, which said that it supported this recommendation, affirmed that:

[b]y enacting the *Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act* on May 29, 2008, the Government of Canada has recognized that measures must be taken to ensure the preservation of heritage lighthouses.³⁰

4.2 OTHER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

It is difficult for the federal government to exercise control over the conservation and protection of national historic sites that it does not own:

While a national historic site designation helps to focus public attention on a particular site, it does not affect ownership of the site or provide protection against destruction. In Canada, protection of heritage property not owned by the federal government is the responsibility of each provincial and territorial government under its respective legislation. Only provincial and territorial governments have jurisdiction over private property, which enables them to pass and enforce legislation extending legal protection to designated properties.³¹

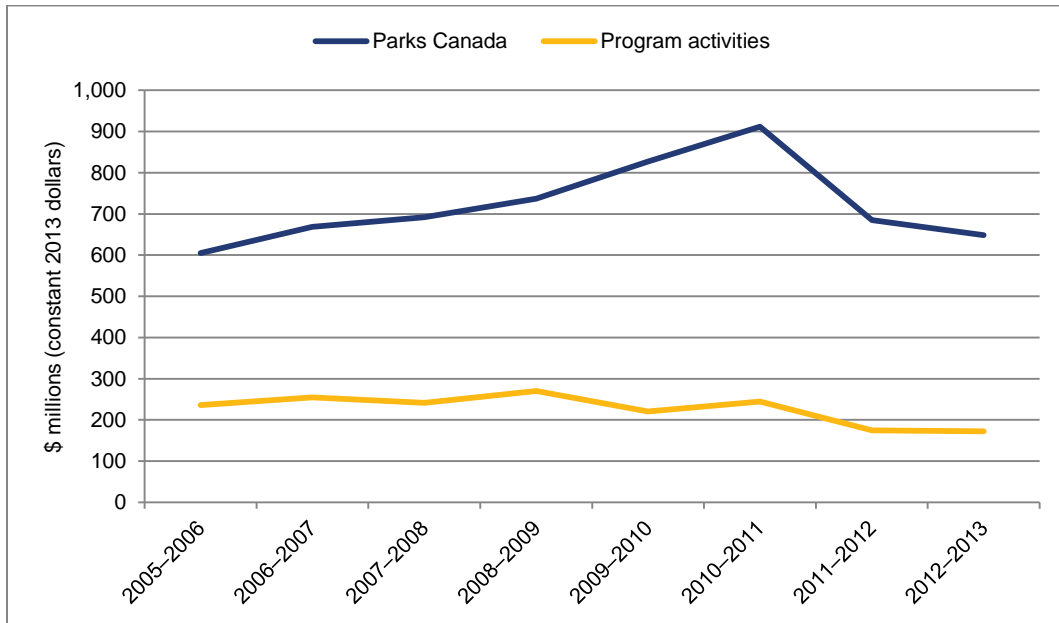
In order to provide guidance to the entities that administer these sites, standards and guidelines for the conservation of historic places in Canada were developed and published in 2010 as part of a federal–provincial/territorial collaboration.³²

5 IMPACT OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S STRATEGIC REVIEW

Although Parks Canada owns only 167 of the 970 national historic sites, it is nevertheless responsible for “ensuring the commemorative integrity of national historic sites managed by Parks Canada and influencing the commemorative integrity of those managed or owned by third parties.”³³

For a better understanding of Parks Canada’s ability of to do so over the years, it is helpful to look at how its budget has changed, particularly its allocations for national historic sites (as was noted earlier, the conservation of sites belonging to other federal departments or agencies is paid for from their budgets). Figure 1 provides an overview of this evolution.

Figure 1 – Authorities for the Canada Parks Agency as a Whole and for Program Activities Related to National Historic Sites, 2005–2006 to 2012–2013 Fiscal Years



Note: These are the total authorities employed in the course of the year for the following program activities: “Heritage Resources Conservation” and “Heritage Places Establishment.”

Sources: Figure prepared by the author based on data from “Volume II: Details of Expenses and Revenues,” *Public Accounts of Canada*, 2006 to 2012, and from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, “[2012–13 Budgetary Expenditures by Standard Objects](#),” 2012–13 Estimates (Part II: Main Estimates).

The Parks Canada budget therefore increased steadily between the 2005–2006 fiscal year (when it was \$605 million) and the 2010–2011 fiscal year (when it was \$911 million).³⁴ Over the past two years, however, it has declined by approximately 30% to \$648 million, the amount authorized for the 2012–13 fiscal year.³⁵

The budget for national historic site program activities also decreased over the years, but less significantly: it dropped from \$236 million in 2005–2006 (39% of the Agency’s total budget), to \$172 million in 2012–2013 (27% of the Agency’s total budget).

Figure 1 shows that the budget authorities for these program activities remained relatively stable compared to the Agency’s overall budget, which fluctuated a great deal over the years.

After the 2012 federal budget was announced, some unions said that they were worried, among other things, about the impacts that the announced cuts could have on the management and conservation of national historic sites.³⁶ These concerns, which were reported by the media, were also raised by a number of other groups, such as the Canadian Archaeological Association and the Canadian Association of University Teachers.³⁷

5.1 PARKS CANADA'S NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

Nevertheless, the conservation of heritage sites remains one of the organizational priorities set out in the Parks Canada 2012–2013 to 2016–2017 Corporate Plan:

Actions will also continue to improve 70% of Parks Canada's national historic sites where the condition of cultural resources of national significance was rated as poor, within five years of the original assessment. Addressing priority conservation challenges in Canada's national parks and national historic sites will help ensure that Canadians of this and future generations can continue to enjoy them.³⁸

And despite the budget cuts to Parks Canada, the government says that it would like to “modernize national historic sites ... over the next two years.” This measure, which the *2012 Economic Action Plan* estimates would cost \$142 million, would more specifically consist of making:

major capital repairs to visitor infrastructure at national parks and national historic sites, and to cultural assets at national historic sites and historic canals managed by Parks Canada.³⁹

5.2 OTHER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

In January 2013 the Minister responsible for Parks Canada reiterated the federal government's support, through Parks Canada's National Historic Sites Cost-Sharing Program, for historic sites not owned by the Canadian government. He placed an emphasis on the program's “proven record in the conservation of the country's historic heritage.”⁴⁰ The Minister added that the program helped to support local economies by creating jobs and promoting tourism.⁴¹

The program budget, which includes salaries, goods and services for administration of the program, is relatively modest and varies from year to year, depending on the availability of additional funds or on other circumstances. The program was suspended from 2005 to 2009, and resumed in the 2009–2010 fiscal year with a budget of \$2.7 million. Its budget peaked at \$7.5 million in 2010–2011, and then gradually declined to \$1 million (forecast for the 2013–2014 fiscal year).⁴²

6 A HISTORIC YEAR

As was mentioned earlier, the corporate plan currently in place at Parks Canada remains in force until 2017, which is the 150th anniversary of Confederation. The celebrations surrounding this historic event could lead the federal government to place more of an emphasis on national historic sites across Canada.

NOTES

1. Parks Canada, [Directory of Federal Heritage Designations – About the Directory](#).
2. Two national historic sites are not in Canada, but in France, at Crête-de-Vimy and Beaumont-Hamel.

HERITAGE CONSERVATION: CANADA'S NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

3. Parks Canada, [National Historic Sites of Canada](#).
4. Parks Canada, "[Applying for Designation](#)," *Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada*.
5. Parks Canada, "[National Historic Sites System](#)," *The State of Canada's Natural and Historic Places 2011*.
6. Ibid.
7. Parks Canada, "[General Guidelines](#)," *Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada*.
8. Parks Canada, "[Part A: The state of Parks Canada protected heritage systems](#)," *The State of Canada's Natural and Historic Places 2011*.
9. Ibid.
10. Parks Canada, [Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada](#). Some heritage lighthouses are designated as national historic sites and others as heritage federal buildings.
11. Parks Canada, "National Historic Sites System," *The State of Canada's Natural and Historic Places 2011*.
12. Parks Canada, [National Historic Sites of Canada – System Plan](#), p. 51.
13. Parks Canada, in email exchanges between the author and Parks Canada, 27 February 2013.
14. Ibid., 29 May 2013.
15. Parks Canada, [Parks Canada's National Historic Sites Cost-Sharing Program](#).
16. Ibid.
17. Office of the Auditor General of Canada [OAG], "[Chapter 6 – Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Federal Government](#)," *2003 November Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.
18. OAG, "[Chapter 2 – The Conservation of Federal Built Heritage](#)," *2007 February Status Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.
19. "Commemorative integrity refers to the condition or state of a national historic site when the site is healthy and whole. This is the desired state for a national historic site." (Parks Canada, "[1.1 The Concept of Commemorative Integrity](#)," *Guide to the Preparation of Commemorative Integrity Statements*.)
20. Parks Canada, "[Program Activity 2: Heritage Resources Conservation – Performance Summary and Analysis of Program Activity](#)," *Departmental Performance Report 2011–12*.
21. Parks Canada, "[Organizational Priorities](#)," *Departmental Performance Report 2011–12*.
22. Ibid.
23. Parks Canada, "[Annex 1: State of National Historic Sites Administered by Parks Canada](#)," *The State of Canada's Natural and Historic Places 2011*, 2011.
24. Parks Canada, "[Program Activity 2: Heritage Resources Conservation – Lessons Learned](#)," *Departmental Performance Report 2011–12*.
25. OAG (2007).
26. [Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act](#), S.C. 2008, c. 16.
27. Senate, Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, [Report on the Implementation of the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act](#), October 2011, p. 7.
28. Ibid., p. 2.

29. Ibid., p. ii.
30. Fisheries and Oceans Canada, [Government of Canada Response to the Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans: Report on the Implementation of the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act](#), March 2012.
31. Parks Canada, [Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada – Protection of National Historic Sites](#).
32. Canada's Historic Places, [Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada](#), 2nd ed., 2010.
33. Parks Canada, [Corporate Plan: 2012–2013/2016–2017](#), p. 22.
34. Government of Canada, [Public Accounts of Canada 2011 – Volume II: Details of Expenses and Revenues](#). Data reported in constant 2013 dollars.
35. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, [2012–13 Budgetary Expenditures by Standard Objects](#).
36. Public Service Alliance of Canada, [“Thousands more public service workers told they could lose their jobs,”](#) News release, Ottawa, 30 April 2012.
37. Canadian Archaeological Association, [Draconian cuts to Parks Canada](#); Canadian Association of University Teachers, [Canada's Historical Sites & Archaeological Heritage in Danger](#).
38. Parks Canada, [Corporate Plan: 2012–2013/2016–2017](#), p. 12.
39. Government of Canada, [“Improving Parks Canada's National Historic Sites and Visitor Facilities,”](#) *Canada's Economic Action Plan*.
40. Parks Canada, [“Government of Canada renews efforts to protect Canada's historic heritage,”](#) News release, Ottawa, 28 January 2013.
41. Ibid.
42. Parks Canada, in email exchanges between the author and Parks Canada, 26 June 2013.

APPENDIX A: MAP OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES OF CANADA

Figure A.1 – National Historic Sites of Canada

