

**Volunteers, Our Parks' Hidden Resource:  
A Case Study of Fish Creek Provincial Park, Alberta, Canada**  
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**Introduction**

Although volunteering is an integral part of Canadian society, with 11.8 million Canadians over the age of 15 contributing their time in 2004, only 3 percent (354,000) were involved in the environmental sector (Hall et al. 2006). Only 2 percent of Alberta's volunteers are involved in this sector (Roach 2006).

Volunteerism in Alberta parks started in the 1920s with people interested in establishing some of the first provincial parks (Fitl 2007). Over the years volunteers became more and more involved with Alberta Parks, particularly as budgetary constraints lead to staff and program reductions. Many parks now have "Friends" groups or cooperating associations; not-for-profit, volunteer organizations that work closely with park managers. These groups assist with education, public relations, special events, exhibits, trail care, research, and other activities. They also provide fundraising capacity and take on advisory roles (Alberta Tourism 2008).

**Research Objectives**

Training volunteers requires time and money consequently, retention of trained volunteers is imperative. To attain long-term volunteer commitment to park programs a better understanding of motivations and benefits derived from voluntary participation is needed. In addition, an understanding of how working with volunteers is perceived by staff within the parks system is important. The study objective was to determine the motivations and benefits to volunteering in park programs and to gain a better understanding of the relationship between volunteers and park personnel. The intent was to provide information to both volunteer managers

and park managers for the improvement of existing and development of new volunteer programs.

This study focussed on volunteers in Fish Creek Provincial Park, Alberta, Canada.

Fish Creek Provincial Park (the park), the largest provincial park in an urban area in Canada, is part of the system of provincial Parks and Protected Areas managed by the Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation department. Created in 1972, the park is located near the southern edge of the City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and encompasses approximately 1,348 hectares. The park stretches along 15 km of the Fish Creek valley from the Tsuu T'ina Nation in the west until it meets the Bow River in the east. The park also contains lands on both banks of the Bow River, upstream and downstream of the confluence of the creek and the river (see Figure 1). The growing city of Calgary almost completely surrounds the park with suburban development, creating a unique set of challenges usually not faced by park managers. Designed for 750,000 visitations when created, the park now receives an estimated 3.5 million visitors annually. Most houses backing onto the park have created their own access points and often treat the land outside their property lines as an extension of their backyards. Off-leash dogs and undesignated trails are two of the top enforcement issues.

An active, not-for-profit volunteer organization, the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society (the Friends) has worked closely with park managers since 1992. Volunteers are recognized as an important component of general park operations and are acknowledged in the Fish Creek Provincial Park Management Plan (Alberta Environmental Protection 1997). The Friends coordinates most volunteer activities within the park, and unlike groups in other parks, focuses on resource management through wildlife and habitat monitoring programs. Wildlife monitors (monitors) are involved in beaver monitoring, amphibian surveys and a garter snake population study while ParkWatch Stewards (stewards) take on an outreach/public service role

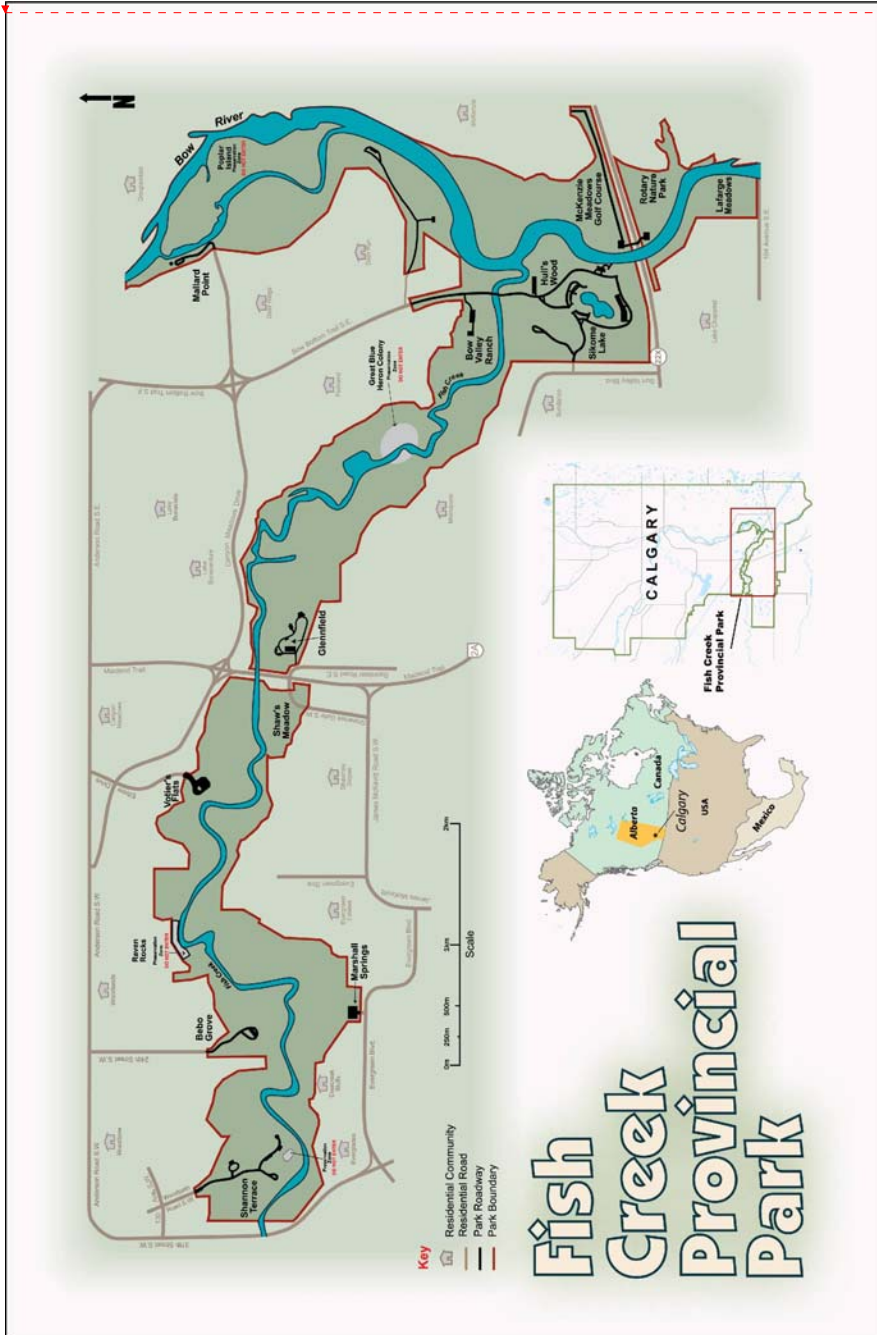


Figure 1 Map of Fish Creek Provincial Park (adapted from Alberta Tourism 2008 by S. Mueller, University of Calgary, Department of Geography)

by patrolling the park and pro-actively educating the visiting public on park rules and regulations. They also report issues such as fort building, facility vandalism, and safety concerns directly to Conservation Officers. In 2005 there were 27 adult monitors and 30 stewards, with some individuals involved in both programs. Monitors come from various communities throughout the City of Calgary while stewards tend to come from the communities adjacent to the park.

As the researcher, Kromplak approached this study as an “insider”. Since 1995 she has been an active volunteer with the Friends. For four years prior to conducting her research, she held the voluntary position of Monitoring Programs Coordinator for the Friends and worked closely with park managers to develop park monitoring programs. She organized and participated in beaver monitoring, amphibian call surveys and the garter snake population study.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

Most researchers studying habitat restoration volunteers have used a quantitative approach. Although providing useful information, this method cannot delve into the deeper personal issues that bring an individual to volunteer in the first place, nor can particular benefits derived from this activity be assessed. In order to gain an understanding of the experiences and realities of people choosing to volunteer, a different frame of reference than that of the impartial observer is needed. A qualitative approach provides researchers with more flexibility and acknowledges that individuals bring a personal perspective to volunteering; a personal set of values, goals and aspirations. Some of these may be the same as the next volunteer’s, but most are unique to the individual (Winchester 2000).

Semi-structured interviews use an interview guide; a set of questions or topics on which the interviewer can base the interview while having the flexibility to follow various avenues of

conversation within the area of interest (Patton 2003; Dunn 2000). Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were carried out with the Friends' volunteers between September 2005 and February 2006. In addition, three key informant interviews with park personnel were held in March 2006. Volunteer interviews were chosen randomly within a purposeful sampling regime (Patton 2003). The intent was to have a proportional mix of volunteer characteristics as illustrated in Table 1. In addition, volunteers ranged in age from 19 through 74 with approximately one third being retired, semi-retired or working from home. Park personnel were chosen specifically because of their positions and their willingness to participate in the research.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Volunteers Interviewed**

No. of Years Volunteering	Male(♂)		Female(♀)		
	Monitors (M♂)	Stewards (S♂)	Monitors (M♀)	Stewards (S♀)	Both Programs (B♀)
1	1	2	1	1	-
2	4	-	3	3	2
3	-	2	3	1	-
4	-	3	-	1	-
5	1	-	-	-	-
More than 5	-	-	-	-	1 (9 yrs)
Totals	6	7	7	6	3

Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, each interview was coded to designate main and subsidiary themes, with representative quotations assigned to each theme. A synopsis of general findings was sent to all volunteer participants for review and comment in January 2008. A synopsis of findings from interviews with park personnel was sent for comment in June 2008.

### **Findings**

Of the common themes found within the volunteer interviews, those most closely connected to the decision to become involved in the park's volunteer programs, and to continue in those programs, were a personal connection to nature; an emotional connection with the park,

including a sense of ownership and knowing that the work being done was worthwhile. Selected findings within each of these themes are described briefly below.

### **Personal connection to nature and a love of the park**

Not unexpectedly, a personal connection to the natural world is very important to everyone volunteering in the park and, for most people, this connection has been apparent since childhood.

“I’ve always been interested in nature...I can’t remember not being interested in nature. I walked 3 miles to school, one way, and we’d encounter new things every time...”  
(Interview #6M♂)

“I don’t know, it may sound cheesy, but I think part of being human you almost need to interact with the wilderness...” (Interview #8M♂)

Sightings of flora and fauna and general scenic views are significant in visits to the park and add to the feelings of connection, with most people having “special places” or walks that they return to over and over again. In particular, the sense of not being in the middle of a large city is very important to many people, with time spent in the natural environment providing a peaceful and relaxing alternative to busy city lives.

“...when I was doing beaver monitoring, there were times where you just sort of float away, and you don’t even know you’re in the City.” (Interview #28M♂)

“...I usually go to look at the mountains in the background and the park and the quiet and the stillness, ...and the feeling that this park is mine, and those mountains out there...it’s just a beautiful, peaceful scene...” (Interview #13S♀)

“...a sense of peace. It helps me put things in perspective, so it’s very helpful if life has been chaos or I’ve been worried about something...” (Interview #25M♀)

Many people mentioned a spiritual or religious aspect to their time spent in nature and in the park.

“I’m not religious, but I consider nature my church, and I find such joy in anything alive...” (Interview #26M♀)

“I just feel peaceful and for me it’s a spiritual connection. ...I really believe that you don’t need to look for miracles in the world, you know, they’re all around you.” (Interview #23M♀)

“...being at peace, you get the same feeling you do from a church service, the odd time where you’re as close to God as you can get.”(Interview #12S♂)

A sense of ownership or stewardship toward the park is very important to many volunteers and this strong emotional attachment has influenced decisions to volunteer in the park.

“I really care about the park, so why would I be [volunteering] anywhere else”. (Interview #2B♀)

“We feel it’s our park, right? You get personally attached to it, which is natural. You want that attachment or otherwise you wouldn’t protect it the same way...” (Interview #17S♂)

“It’s [the park is] like a child, we love it, we nurture it.” (Interview #19S♀)

The flood of 2005, a one-in-one hundred year event, caused extensive damage to trails and infrastructure, resulting in physical and financial challenges for park managers. Also, the flood was an emotional challenge to those who love the park, particularly the volunteers. Not only were regular routines affected by the park being closed, but the enormity of the damage was difficult to comprehend. Similar to those who mourned for trees stricken with dogwood anthracnose (Windle 1992), the parks’ volunteers were mourning for what was lost. Intellectually they knew the natural process of flooding could be beneficial but many volunteers spoke of an immediate sense of loss when they saw the extent of the damage.

“The first time I went down, I couldn’t get to my spot [“special place”], and I was really upset; I was devastated.” (Interview #26M♀)

“It felt as though a piece of me just got washed away in that flood...just the force of nature.” (Interview #22S♀)

“Yes, well, I’ve really felt bad about the damage done by the floods. It’s just...it’s changed the park so much from what it used to be.” (Interview #12S♂)

“I was kind of shocked, but...I guess it has benefits...if that natural occurrence plays a part in revamping the park, you know, with usage and stops maybe some of the abuses...” (Interview #15M♂)

This same sense of loss is felt by volunteers dealing with vandalism within the park and issues such as creation of undesignated trails, dogs off-leash harassing wildlife, and habitat degradation.

### **Communication**

Communication between volunteers and administration is critically important to the continuity of any volunteer program. Interviews revealed some recurring communication concerns between both volunteers and the Friends’ office, and between volunteers and park management. Many concerns centred on the 2005 flood and the effects of a rapid changeover of Friends’ staff during that summer.

“I think a lot of volunteers felt rejected this year, because the park was closed and nobody was saying ‘come back, would you like to do this? We’re having this special thing on’ or whatever. ...but it was circumstances, I mean, not only was the park closed, but you had 3 people in the coordination role [the Friends], so nobody’s going to follow-up...” (Interview #13S♀)

“...I guess with all the changes that happened in the Friends of Fish Creek...there kind of seemed like there was a kind of void there for a while, but I think once they get people established, there will be a new stability there.” (Interview #22S♀)

Other interviews included comments about the need for weekly or bi-weekly updates of park happenings so that volunteers, particularly stewards, feel prepared for their shifts. The need



for feedback; acknowledgement of phone calls and emails, from both to the Friends' office and the park offices, was highlighted in interviews.

“...you don't necessarily know when you fill out your report where does that information go? What do they do with it? And how does that have an impact on what's happening down there?” (Interview #22S♀) [first season volunteering]

“...I sent several things [by email]. I forget if it was to [Friends' office] or [park office], or something like that, several issues, but I never heard a word back. Never heard anything and I thought well, do our things that we send to them, do they just go into a big hole? Or do they address them and handle them like there's something going on?” (Interview #17S♂)

### **Value of Volunteer Contributions to the Park and Support of Volunteers by the Park**

Most volunteers believed their volunteer activities were beneficial to the park and its flora and fauna. Many would not continue volunteering if they were not making a positive contribution. As well, the majority of volunteers felt that park management supported and was appreciative of their efforts; park staff attendance at social events was viewed as a very positive indication of this support. Concerns about park management support tended to be linked to the communication issues. Based on responses to the synopsis sent in January 2008, most of the communication issues have been rectified, primarily through the improved staffing situation with the Friends who now have a full-time General Manager. This individual has good rapport with both park staff and Friends' volunteers which has enhanced the flow of information between all parties.

### **Staff feelings about volunteers**

Together, the three senior Park personnel interviewed had a total of 96 years working in Alberta Parks and 72 years experience working with volunteers. From their perspective,

volunteers are an invaluable resource. Simply stated, they could not do their job without volunteers being a part of the process.

“Definitely beneficial. Ever since I’ve been dealing with them, the department’s been in situations where we just don’t have enough of our paid manpower.” (Interview #30♀)

“I would say, most definitely it’s been helpful. ...the most obvious would be having various projects or work done through non-paid staff. That would be a budgetary advantage. Secondly, and probably more importantly, would be building a constituency of support for parks through volunteers working closely with the Park.” (Interview #31♂)

The preceding comment points to the importance of volunteers becoming advocates for the park’s welfare. Volunteering provides a better understanding of how the park works and the difficulties it faces. This knowledge increases the likelihood of volunteers sharing their knowledge with their neighbours and the surrounding community.

Working with volunteers also creates challenges, including the demands on park staff time given the amount of supervision required.

“They’re great to have around, but I’m not sure it’s time well spent...it’s different for different situations...you have to be there with them, whereas paid staff, you can kind of give them direction and it’s really up to them to go and do it.” (Interview #30♀)

Volunteers can lose interest and not deliver as promised, or the volunteer’s goals and understandings can be in conflict with the park’s objectives or rules and regulations.

“We have had volunteers do a lot of work, but we never see any results from it, or poor results, ...” (Interview #32♂)

“...their goals [previous volunteer group] and objectives weren’t the same as what we were trying to achieve and personal issues became their goals...” (Interview #32♂)

“...sometimes they just lose interest, they just burn out and they don’t want to do it anymore, and so, it is always a constant reshuffling to try and keep things going.” (Interview #31♂)

However, the rewards for managers and the park tend to outweigh the negatives.

“Supervising volunteers gets you back into the field...I don’t mind working with them, it gives me an excuse to do the things I want to do.” (Interview #30♀)

“It gets the work done. It also does projects, like research projects that we never do, and they’re advocates for the Park.” (Interview #32♂)

“In some ways managing volunteers is much more difficult and much more time consuming than regular staff, but again, it’s very rewarding because these people are doing this because they want to, purely because they want to...” (Interview #31♂)

The inclusion of volunteers in park operations has not always been smooth. In many areas staff have felt “that if you had volunteers doing the work that normally paid staff did, then this was a way of not hiring staff and therefore detrimental to employees” (Interview #31♂). This comment points to the importance of the park contact person being someone who truly likes working with volunteers and supports their efforts; a liaison for staff and volunteers.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Without the dedication of their volunteers, Alberta Parks could not operate as effectively as they do currently. Personal connection with an area is difficult to instill; it is either felt or not. However familiarity with a park and openness on behalf of park managers to accept volunteers and work with them can help make volunteers want to continue their involvement.

Many of the requirements for satisfied volunteers can be met by ensuring there is a paid staff position within the “Friends” organization to provide the guidance and continuity required. The “Friends” group ensures there are sufficient volunteers for projects before they are initiated and takes care of all of the necessary interviewing and paperwork. They provide the liaison vehicle between the volunteers and park managers thus allowing for more open communication between all parties. Park management reciprocates with willingness to explain restraints and challenges facing the park. This partnership between parks and their volunteers is only possible

when members of staff of both organizations are willing to put in the effort necessary to work together. They must agree on the direction of volunteer activities and the priority of projects. Park staff and volunteers need to have a clear understanding of their respective roles within the park, and to agree on how each fits into the organization of the other. To ensure that volunteers remain active, training programs are essential. These should include direction in the designated project, policies and procedures of the volunteer group and general information on the relationship between the park and volunteers. Most importantly, there need to be clear and open lines of communication between the volunteers, the “Friends” group and park management to ensure that everyone continues to work for the benefit of the park.

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