



# Planning for the Future: Elk Island National Park of Canada



Management Planning Newsletter #1

August 2010

## An Invitation

Like Canada's other national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas, Elk Island National Park is part of our heritage and our legacy to future Canadians. By way of this newsletter, I invite you to get involved in updating the park management plan for Elk Island.

The plan will guide Parks Canada in the park's future care and operation and its work with partners and stakeholders. And your involvement is welcomed. What do you think the future should hold for Elk Island as to its protection, promotion, presentation and opportunities for visitors? Find out more from this newsletter or by attending an open house. Join Parks Canada as we shape the future for Elk Island. We look forward to hearing from you.

Alan Fehr,  
Field Unit Superintendent

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## Elk Island: An Overview

Elk Island National Park is the sixth oldest and seventh smallest of Canada's forty-two national parks. It is the only national park to be entirely enclosed by fence, a legacy of its original and continued role. Elk Island began in 1906, as the nation's first wildlife sanctuary to contain and protect one of the last remaining herds of elk in the country.

In today's system of Canada's national parks, Elk Island's purpose is to protect a representative portion of the Southern Boreal Plains and Plateaux Natural Region. More than 42 species of mammals, 250 species of birds, five species of amphibians, one reptile species and two species of fish live in Elk Island's diverse landscape of forests, lakes, wetlands and grasslands. On the doorstep of Edmonton, Elk Island has been described as a "wilderness park in the suburbs" and "Canada's Serengeti" for its wildlife viewing opportunities. Within the park's 194 km<sup>2</sup>, visitors can choose from backcountry day outings on foot, ski or by canoe; various recreation activities such as golfing and camping at Astotin Lake Recreation Area; and wildlife viewing along the scenic 20 km Elk Island Parkway. Nearly 200,000 people visit Elk Island every year.

Elk Island is divided by the Yellowhead Highway into the wood bison area (60 km<sup>2</sup>) to the south of the highway and the main park area (134 km<sup>2</sup>) to the north. Most visitor facilities, services and programs are provided in the main park, at the Astotin Lake Recreation Area and on trails leading off from the Parkway. The portion south of Highway 16 is not developed for visitor use beyond one trail.



*Elk (Parks Canada)*



*Cross-country Skiing (Parks Canada)*



*Picnicking on Sandy Beach (Parks Canada)*

Elk Island is a founder and major supporter of the Beaver Hills Initiative, formed to create an ecological, social and economic sustainable Beaver Hills region through shared initiatives and coordinated action. The Initiative is a collaboration of municipal, provincial and federal governments, private land owners, non-government groups and industry. The Beaver Hills Initiative is in the process of nominating the Beaver Hills as a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve, with Elk Island as the main part of its protected core.

## Recent Improvements to Elk Island

- In 2008, the Elk Island Parkway was improved by resurfacing.
- In 2007, potable water became available in the Astotin Lake Recreation Area.
- In 2006, Elk Island became part of the newly designated Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve.
- The Astotin Lake Theatre has new equipment and a new look.
- The Visitor Centre by the highway is open, redecorated and has a beautiful mural.
- The Ukrainian Pioneer Home and other heritage buildings in the park are being repaired.
- The state of the aspen forest has improved by reducing overgrazing by ungulates (hoofed animals).

## Why a New Management Plan?

The current Elk Island National Park management plan was tabled in Parliament in November 2005 (available on request or at [www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland](http://www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland)). According to the *Canada National Park Act*, a park management plan must be reviewed every five years to ensure it continues to be relevant and effective for decision-making with respect to Parks Canada's mandate, legislation, policy, corporate plan, and the park vision.

Following a review that included the *Elk Island National Park of Canada State of the Park Report 2010* (available on request or at [www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland](http://www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland)), a new management plan was identified to replace the 2005 plan. There were two main reasons.

First, Elk Island needs to clearly define, manage for, and convey to the Canadian public its evolving role as a national park. Some of this challenge is due to: vague park themes and messages; challenges with location of park facilities, services and staff in relation to where best to welcome and interact with visitors; the future of the park's wood bison; and the broadening conservation role of Elk Island as a core protected area of the Beaver Hills.

Second, the current plan does not meet recent expectations for plans to integrate management and implementation of the three Parks Canada mandate elements:

- protecting heritage resources, which includes all those activities related to the protection of natural and cultural resources and natural processes;
- facilitating opportunities for visitor experiences, which includes activities, services and facilities to enable a visitor's personal interaction with the park and heighten his or her sense of connection to place; and
- providing public education opportunities, which include a wide range of activities from on-site interpretation programming and products to outreach education initiatives reaching Canadians at home, at leisure, at school, and in their communities.



*Bull Moose (Parks Canada)*

## The Planning Process

There will be three stages to the planning. The **first stage** sets the context. It will include planning and consultation to: develop the park vision; identify issues to be addressed; and explore strategies for change. The **second stage** will follow with planning and consultation to: refine the vision and strategies; and develop measurable objectives and actions for the strategies. The **third and final stage** will be to: complete the management plan; submit it for approval; and inform the public of the results. All stages will happen fairly quickly as there is a legislated requirement to complete the plan within 2010.

We are here

Through each stage Parks Canada will keep you informed; invite and listen to your ideas, concerns and comments; and provide feedback to you on how your input has influenced the management plan for Elk Island.

Stage 1 - Late Summer 2010. The current stage: introduces the planning process; outlines initial needs and opportunities to be addressed and potential approaches; presents a draft vision; and invites the public to contribute their ideas to this initial stage of plan development.

Communication and consultation by Newsletter #1, Parks Canada website, open houses

Stage 2 - Fall 2010. This stage will involve: review of public comments received from Stage 1; a planning team of Parks Canada staff draft components of the proposed plan; one stakeholder workshop to further develop proposals; and inviting public review of the proposals.

Communication and consultation by Newsletter #2, Parks Canada website, open houses, stakeholders' workshop

Final Stage - Winter 2010. This stage will involve a review of public comments received from Stage 2; final revisions to the management plan; forwarding the plan to the Minister of Environment responsible for Parks Canada; and informing the public of results of the planning.

Communication by Newsletter #3, Parks Canada website



*Pond dipping  
(Parks Canada)*

## Park Issues and Challenges

The following are issues and challenges currently facing the park as further described in the *Elk Island National Park of Canada State of the Park Report 2010*. If you have thoughts on these or other issues for consideration during planning, please let us know.



*Plains bison (Parks Canada)*

***Park Identity and Messages.*** Visitor surveys indicate visitors are not receiving or understanding the park messages. Is it a problem with the messages, their delivery, or both? Elk Island is a leader in wildlife conservation and offers some great viewing opportunities. However, other aspects tied to the landscape, lakes and wetlands, and cultural heritage should form part of the park's identity. How can a broader, better defined identity be determined and then conveyed to visitors?

***Visitor Service Offer.*** The park is not providing for positive, memorable experiences. Outdated signs and exhibits, and small non-serviced campsites leave the impression of a dated park and low satisfaction for fees paid. Staff offices are away from the Astotin Lake Recreation Area, limiting opportunities for staff-visitor interaction.

***Urban and Aboriginal Relationships.*** Despite its proximity to a large urban audience, there is a lack of public awareness about Elk Island due to limited outreach, and outdated marketing and branding strategies. There are also no partnered initiatives between Aboriginal groups and Elk Island. Possible partnering opportunities lie in areas of bison and other wildlife management programs.

***Moose Population in Main Park Area.*** The park moose population north of the Yellowhead has declined significantly since 2002 and could lead to the loss of moose in this area. The decline may be from the giant liver fluke, a parasite that is often reported to be fatal in moose.

***Grassland Health.*** Elk Island grasslands are impacted by weed invasion and forest encroachment. Covering less than 5% of the park, the combined loss from these impacts is a significant threat to grassland health. A noxious weed eradication program was expanded in 2009 in an attempt to mitigate the continual invasion of noxious weeds. A fire management program that restores or maintains park grasslands while ensuring public and visitor safety could also be used as an effective management tool.

***Lake and Wetland Water Levels.*** Drought in east-central Alberta continues to contribute to the decline of water levels in park lakes and wetlands, affecting the diversity and distribution of wildlife and plant species, including a decline in the beaver population.

***Wood Bison Population.*** Wood bison were introduced into Elk Island in the 1960s and are listed as 'Threatened' under the *Species at Risk Act*. Serving as the national recovery herd, the Elk Island wood bison are a source of disease-free animals for safely reintroducing the species into native habitat. Once wood bison are deemed to be re-established in Canada, as per the draft national recovery strategy, the Elk Island herd may be decommissioned. The park area south of the Yellowhead would then be available for other park conservation and visitor use activities.

## A Draft Vision for Elk Island

A vision statement is meant to convey the special character of a park and paint an inspiring picture of its future desired state. Here is a draft vision. Do you like it? Is there something missing? With your input, we can create a vision that captures people's imagination and gives strong direction.

*With its bison tracked earth and starry skies, Elk Island rises above the surrounding plains. Exploring this knob and kettle landscape reveals grasslands transitioning to boreal. Vast wetlands offer the musical call of the loon and trembling aspen groves smell of running sap. This is a place of wonder.*

*The people of the area have shaped this land, protecting it for tomorrow, ensuring sustainability and coexistence. Elk Island's rich human and conservation history, demonstrates leadership in the preservation of at risk species, while honouring the stories and artefacts of our past.*

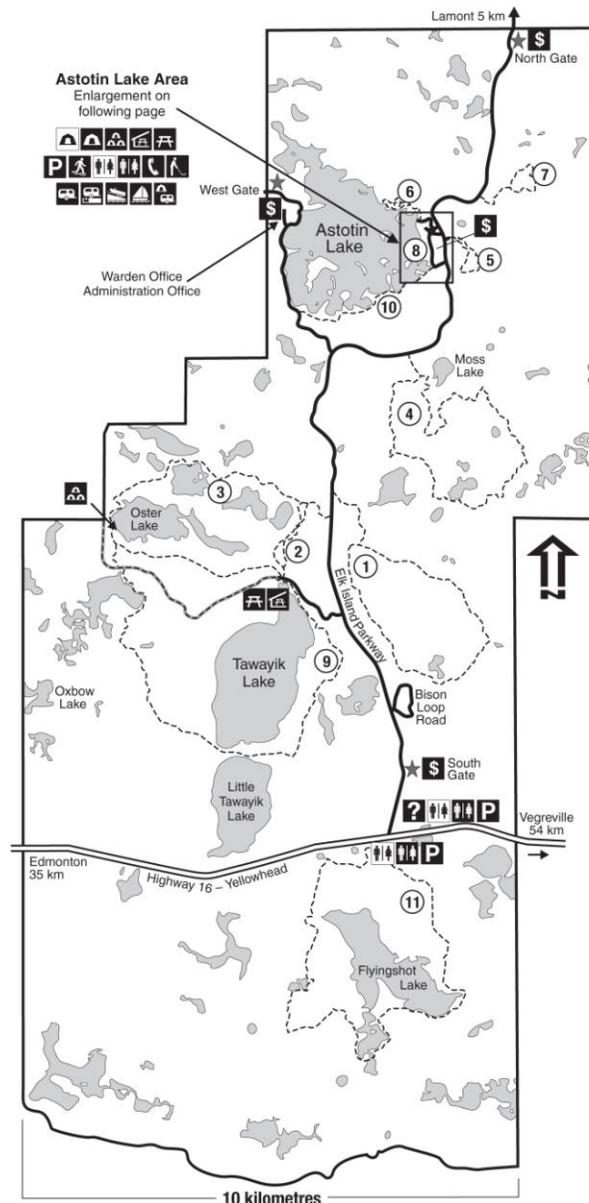
*Reintroduction and restoration are the essence of Elk Island and we share our passion for conservation with the world. Maintaining healthy landscapes as stewards of the greater ecosystem, we work together to achieve our biosphere goals, promoting appreciation and understanding for future generations.*

*Elk Island offers an experience for everyone. It will continue to be a gateway to the world of leisure; a place of tranquility, rejuvenation and peaceful retreat from the urban setting. Becoming a learning centre for new and urban Canadians, youth and educators will be our challenge. Through exploration of new opportunities and embracing diverse cultures, we have inspired a deeper connection to Canada.*

*Our philosophy is to move from education to action, creating stewards of Parks Canada and support for our environment. Elk Island poses as a living classroom, connecting public to place and curriculum to child.*

*Welcoming and engaging communities, we attain higher, more sustainable goals. Becoming a biosphere reserve provides economic and environmental opportunities, presenting Elk Island to the world. Renewing ties with local Aboriginal people connects our understanding of past, present, and future cultural and conservation goals. Our relationships are the key to our success.*

## Elk Island, Reintroducing You to Nature



Legend					
	Hiking / Walking		Accessible		Viewpoint
	Snowshoeing		Information		Cook Shelter
	Cross Country Skiing		Picnic Site		Boat Launch
	Washrooms (Summer)		Parking		Golf Course
	Washrooms (Winter)		Exhibit		Trailers / RV
	Telephone		Group Tenting		Sani-Station
	Park Passes Available		Campground		Sailing

## Proposed Key Strategies

Key strategies describe an integrated, focussed approach of how the park will be managed in the coming years. Four draft strategies are proposed, founded on improving the park's identity, enabling more positive visitor experiences, managing and monitoring for ecological integrity, and defining Elk Island in the regional landscape. Your comments on these strategies are welcome.

**Strategy 1: Welcoming One and All** will focus on diversifying visitor experience opportunities and public education outreach for existing and new markets. It recognizes the untapped opportunities of Elk Island as a destination for nearby populations of urban and new Canadians and as a convenient break for Yellowhead travellers.

**Strategy 2: Inviting Participation** will focus on building public understanding and support for park management. It has two components. The first is to improve opportunities for people to actively participate in that form part of the visitor experience as well as contribute to heritage protection (e.g., citizen scientist programs). In 2009, there were 37 volunteers contributing 1,111 hours of their time. Opportunities will be sought to build further volunteerism and other participatory programs at the park.

The second component will be to enable stakeholder involvement and advice in park planning and implementation. An Aboriginal advisory process will also be sought for Elk Island, designed for the mutual benefit of the park and Aboriginal communities and organizations.

**Strategy 3: Showcasing Elk Island's Conservation Legacy** will acknowledge the historic significance of the park's rich past and present in species conservation. It will be about informing visitors and the Canadian public of this legacy by: 1) documenting, preserving and interpreting the history and cultural heritage associated with park conservation activities; and 2) interpreting current practices and programs of wildlife and ecosystem management to the public.

**Strategy 4: Beyond the Fence: Working with Others in Support of the Ecological Integrity of Elk Island and the Sustainability of the Beaver Hills.** Elk Island is at the core of maintaining the ecological integrity and biodiversity of the Beaver Hills. The park plays a vital role in protecting one of the last remaining habitat corridors in east-central Alberta, and is part of the 200 km<sup>2</sup> Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve. Elk Island is identified as one of two protected core areas of the nominated UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve. *Beyond the Fence* will focus on where, how and with who Elk Island will place its limited resources to mutually benefit tourism, ecological management and education, in the park and region.



Canoeing  
on Astotin Lake  
(Parks Canada)

Tipi and aurora at  
Astotin Lake  
(Allan Dyer)



## Area Concepts

Area concepts focus on areas within the park requiring specific management attention.

**Astotin Lake Recreation Area** continues to need improvements to visitor services and programs such as the campgrounds to meet the changing needs and expectations of campers today. Opportunities for visitor-staff interaction should also increase. An interpretation plan will be developed for the Ukrainian Pioneer home. The management plan will give direction for future uses of this recreation area.



*Camping at Sandy Beach (Parks Canada)*

**Park Main Entrance Visitor Centre** is located to greet visitors coming to the park and those who briefly pull off the Yellowhead. However, Elk Island is challenged to operate it with the current financial and staff resources. The 1996 management plan recommended a partnered approach to operating the Visitor Centre and the 2005 plan recommended its closure and relocating the centre to the Astotin Lake Recreation Area. The Visitor Centre has not been closed. The long-term viability of the centre will be revisited for this planning cycle.

**Park Area South of the Yellowhead** is used for the wood bison herd. Visitor use is limited to the 16 km Wood Bison Trail and the Canadian Birkebeiner cross-country ski race that takes place every winter here and in the Alberta government-operated Cooking-Lake Blackfoot Grazing Area. Depending on the status of the wood bison at Elk Island, changes to management and use of this area could include physically linking park trails to adjacent and nearby protected heritage and recreational use areas, diversifying the visitor service offer, and evaluating the need for fencing. The management plan will explore the opportunities for visitor use and management of this area, with or without the presence of the wood bison.

## How You Can Get Involved

The Parks Canada planning team is looking for your ideas on the issues, draft vision, key strategies and area concepts. Send comments and suggestions to:

*E-mail:* [elkisland.plan@pc.gc.ca](mailto:elkisland.plan@pc.gc.ca)

*Fax:* 780-992-2951

*Mail:* Elk Island National Park, Site 4, R.R.#1  
Fort Saskatchewan, AB, Canada T8L 2N7

For further information, *phone* 780-992-2964 or 1-888-773-8888

**A Comment Form** is available at [www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland](http://www.pc.gc.ca/elkisland), or by contacting us.

Please submit comments before **August 31, 2010** so that they may be considered for Stage 2 of the planning.

In accordance with *Access to Information* and *Privacy Acts* all information you provide will be confidential.

*Aussi disponible en français.*

### ***Come to an Open House***

Learn more, speak with Elk Island Staff

- August 30 and October 21, 6 - 9 PM  
University of Alberta Conference  
Centre, Edmonton
- August 31 and October 20, 6 - 9 PM  
Lamont Recreation Centre