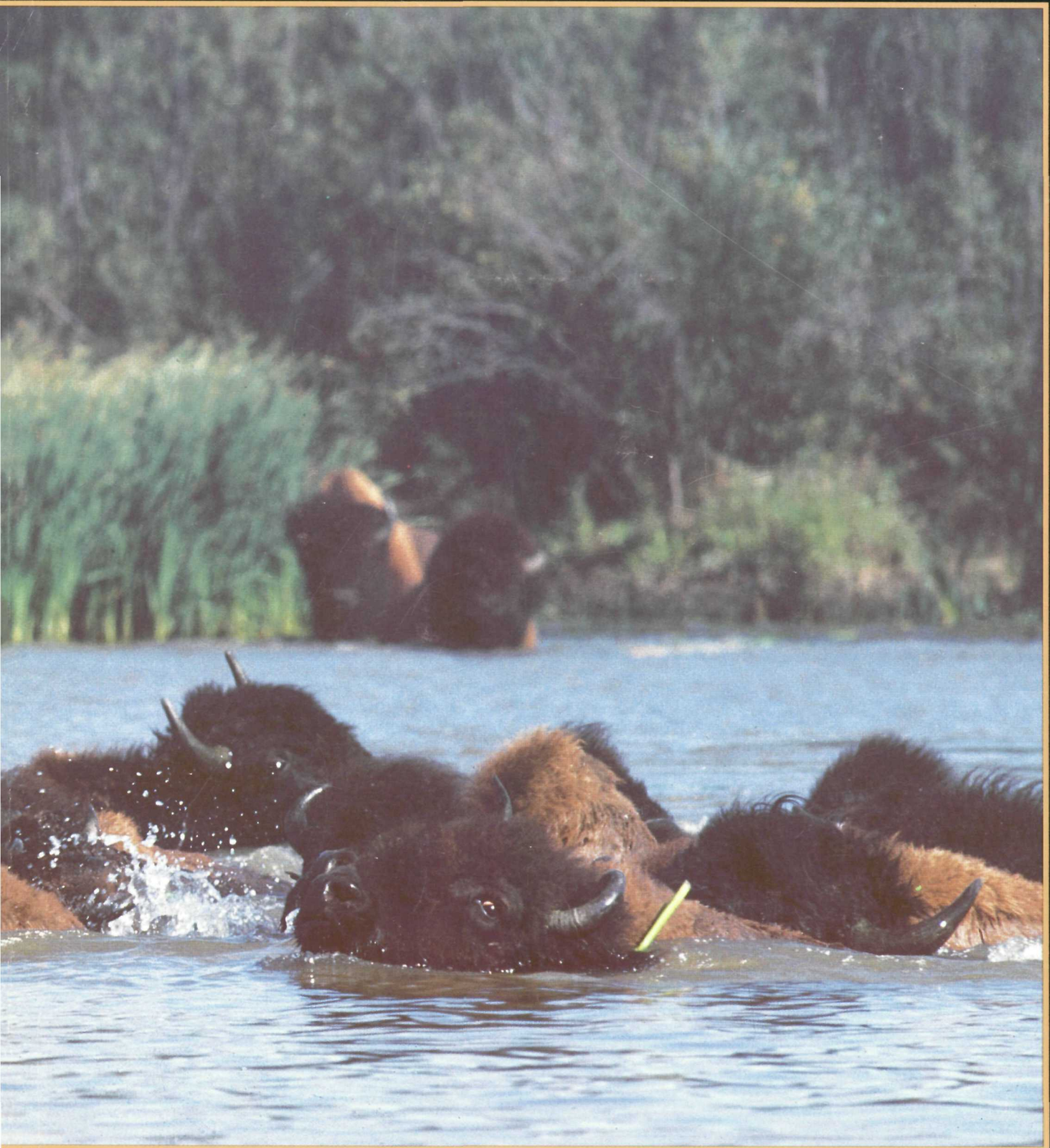


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## Overcoming Decades of Indifference

*The Painful Process of Preserving Wilderness*

By Kevin McNamee

Canada's Green Plan could reverse a historic trend of political apathy toward national parks creation. Since Banff was established in 1885 only 1.8 per cent of Canada has been preserved in national parks.

The Green Plan should reverse this trend because federal politicians have promised Canadians 18 new national parks. The federal government is committed to establishing at least five new terrestrial parks by 1996, and to sign final agreements on a further 13 parks by the year 2000. When complete, it will preserve about three per cent of Canada, the federal contribution toward the 12 per cent recommended by the Brundtland Commission.

The Green Plan's parks goals are significant because the government is now committed to establish a specific number of parks by specific dates. The Canadian public has demanded action and now we can hold politicians accountable if they stumble.

The goal is to establish a park in each of the system's 39 natural regions that is representative of the Canadian landscape. To date, 18 of the 39 natural regions are unrepresented by national parks, with candidates having been identified and confirmed for only 10 of the unrepresented regions. Completion of the national parks system requires three new national parks in B.C., two in Manitoba, four in Quebec, two in Labrador and seven in the Northwest Territories.

The fact that candidate sites have not been confirmed for a quarter of the parks system since the policy was adopted in 1971 reflects a dismal lack of political commitment to new parks. Meanwhile, proposals for logging in the Chilcotin area of B.C. and for hydroelectric development in the James Bay region of northern Quebec will jeopardize two candidate sites for national park status. The Canadian Parks Service warned the Standing Committee on Environment in May 1990 that "without action, it will become increasingly difficult to establish national parks within unrepresentative regions" in southern B.C., Manitoba and Quebec.

Other land-use decisions will affect the federal government's ability to establish new parks. For example, the settlement of aboriginal land claims presents a very significant opportunity for the federal government to pursue candidate parks. Northern Yukon National Park was established in 1984 through federal legislation that approved the Inuvialuit Final Agreement for the western Arctic. But, if the government fails to declare its interest in candidate national parks during negotiations, aboriginal people may become owners of potential parks.

A systematic approach to national park creation was first suggested by Arthur Laing, the federal Parks Minister in the Pearson government. Laing pointed out in 1967 that "it will require 40 to 60 new national parks to round out the system and achieve adequate representation of Canada's heritage." The minister suggested that two to three national parks should be established each year to complete the system by 1985, the centennial year of national parks in Canada.

Jean Chretien set a precedent by creating 10 new national parks in less than four years. His resolve produced the first national parks in Quebec (La Mauricie and Forillon) and the first parks in northern Canada (Kluane, Nahanni and Auyuittuq). It also brought the government into conflict with local and aboriginal people.

Strong objections over the expropriation of land in Kouchibouguac National Park in New Brunswick and Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland brought a change in parks policy that now requires the government to secure the support of local communities before establishing new parks. Communities such as Snowdrift, Pond Inlet, Sachs Harbor and Churchill are now playing a role in shaping new parks.

Chretien's failure to consult with aboriginal people over the proposed northern national parks also yielded changes. An amendment to the National Parks Act in 1974 created the category of "national park reserve," which means that the boundaries for a particular national park, such as Kluane, will only be final once a land claim agreement has been approved by Parliament.

Former parks minister Hugh Faulkner's personal interest in northern conservation shifted the focus for new national parks to northern Canada. In 1978, Faulkner announced plans to establish five new national wilder-

ness parks and one Canadian landmark in northern Canada. Called Six North of 60, the program was launched in response to Justice Thomas Berger's Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, which called for the preservation of important arctic wilderness and wildlife areas. After 14 years, half of this initiative has been achieved by the establishment of Northern Yukon and Ellesmere Island national parks and the Pingos of Tuktoyaktuk landmark.

During the final months of the Liberal government, Environment Canada developed plans to expand the national parks system as its centrepiece for the 1985 national parks centennial. The department wanted cabinet approval for a plan to complete the national parks system by the year 2000. They sought approval to spend \$495 million to establish 10 northern and 10 southern national parks as well as 10 national marine parks.

However, Environment Canada's ambitious plans were dashed by the the appointment of Suzanne Blais-Grenier as national parks minister in 1984. Environment Canada had to shift its focus to implement the minister's \$33-million cut to the department's budget. Environmentalists had to contend with a minister who supported logging and mining in national parks. The cabinet submission became another file in the morgue and no new national parks were established during the centennial year, a bitter disappointment for park advocates.

Tom McMillan is best remembered for his great political resolve to preserve the South Moresby wilderness and strengthen the National Parks Act. However, McMillan was not interested in developing a plan to expand the parks system. His priority was to finish several lingering park initiatives, such as Ellesmere Island, Pacific Rim, Bruce Peninsula and Grasslands. This piecemeal approach to creating parks was reinforced during the 1988 election when the Conservative government would only commit to six new national parks/marine parks over the next five years. It appeared that progress on new parks was years away.

But pressure for a renewed commitment by the Conservative government to new national parks came early in their second term. In August 1989, a coalition of environmental and aboriginal groups presented their Greenprint for Canada: A Federal Agenda for the Environment to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and the new Environment Minister, Lucien Bouchard. One recommendation called on the government to develop an action plan by 1991 to complete the national parks system by the year 2000. And, with the launch of the Endangered Spaces Campaign in September 1989, World Wildlife Fund (Canada) kept the pressure on the federal government to make the commitment.

Lucien Bouchard was quick to make the commitment. "I share the conviction of those who contend that Canada should, by the year 2000, complete the national parks system," he said. Nearly a year later, Bouchard's personal commitment became government policy with the release of Canada's Green Plan in December 1990.

While it was 25 years in the making, the commitment to complete the national parks system was enthusiastically endorsed by the environmental community. But despite the Green Plan's lofty goals, the national parks systems is still only half complete. No new national parks have been created since Grasslands in 1988. And governments continue to allocate large tracts of wilderness for industrial exploitation.

To prompt more aggressive federal action, environmentalists have produced Action Plan, which calls on the federal government to accelerate the process in 1992. And the prospects for three new national parks in 1992, including Banks Island and North Baffin Island in the N.W.T., appear excellent. Negotiations to establish three new national parks in B.C. have finally begun. And the Newfoundland government is interested in assessing the prospects for two new parks in Labrador.

Lucien Bouchard reminds us why we need to complete the national parks system: "The very fragility of the planet compels the expansion of the national parks system. We are among the last generations with an opportunity to preserve intact examples of our nation's threatened natural resources..."□

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