

Summary of Public Engagement

Rouge National Urban Park Management Plan

Introduction

Since 2011, through four phases, Parks Canada has engaged Indigenous partners, the public, stakeholders, volunteers, all levels of government, and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) in developing the *Park Vision* (2011), *Park Concept* (2012), and the Rouge National Urban Park Management Plan (2018). Over this period more than 20,000 Canadians and 200 organizations have provided feedback and been involved in the planning for Canada's first national urban park.

This report summarizes the results of public engagement on the first-ever management plan for Rouge National Urban Park. The report describes the following:

- Management Plan Engagement Process
- How the 2014 Draft Management Plan has been Changed and Improved
- “What We Heard” in 2018
- “What We Heard” in 2014
- The Future

Management Plan Public Engagement Process

A draft management plan for the park was released for public review in June 2014. Over an extensive engagement period lasting until the end of October, thousands of people were engaged at 100 events that Parks Canada attended in surrounding communities; more than 500 people attended four public meetings in Toronto (downtown and Scarborough), Markham, and Pickering; and Parks Canada held 30 meetings with all levels of government and non-governmental organisations. Parks Canada also consulted and worked closely with Rouge National Urban Park’s First Nations Advisory Circle. Nearly 10,000 comments were received over the summer and fall of 2014, a summary of which is contained in this report.

On the basis of the extensive input received during 2014 phase of engagement, staff began to refine the draft management plan.

Following the transfer of the first lands for the park and its official establishment in May 2015, Parks Canada’s early experiences in park operations, ecological restoration and farmland enhancement contributed knowledge and experience in ‘on-the-ground’ realities that helped to further refine the management plan. Additionally, regular engagement with the First Nations Advisory Circle, the Province of Ontario, regional and local municipalities, the TRCA, and partners and stakeholders throughout the period from 2015 and 2018 continued. Parks Canada’s attendance at many public and community events enabled staff to learn more of the public’s desires for and concerns about the park. Finally, Parks Canada’s regular input into many provincial, regional, and local land use and transportation planning exercises provided additional information that is reflected in the final management plan.

Following October 2017 amendments to the *Rouge National Urban Park Act*, Parks Canada launched a second formal phase of engagement in late 2017. This engagement focused on three key topics: the first priority in park management on ecological integrity; long-term certainty for the park’s farming community; and the park as a gateway to environment and heritage. This phase of engagement involved six meetings with Indigenous partners from Rouge National Urban Park’s First Nations Advisory Circle, and six workshops involving 23 stakeholder organizations, park volunteers, and representatives of 12 government agencies and departments. Meetings were also held individually with several stakeholder groups. The results of this engagement phase are reported on below.

How the 2014 Draft Management Plan has been Changed and Improved

The input received in 2014 and 2018 generated extensive changes to the draft management plan for Rouge National Urban Park. Key changes contained in the 2018 final management plan are presented below:

- First priority on the **maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity** is integrated across all elements of the management plan, including nature, culture, agriculture, visitor experience, and outreach, to reflect the 2017 amendments to the *Rouge National Urban Park Act*.
- The plan includes the roughly 2,000-hectare **expansion of the park** into the Oak Ridges Moraine in Pickering and Uxbridge announced in 2015 and followed in 2017 by the transfer of administration from Transport Canada to Parks Canada.
- The plan embodies the amended park legislation's provision of **certainty for farmers** in the context of first priority for ecological integrity in park management. It does so by building on the legislation's direction to encourage "sustainable farming practices."
- **First Nations perspectives on ecological integrity** are woven throughout the management plan in terms of Indigenous knowledge of ecosystem management, human (and visitor) learning relating to maintaining or restoring ecological integrity, and active involvement in ecological restoration.
- Six **management area concepts** cover smaller geographic areas of the park to provide more specific direction for managing natural heritage, cultural resources, agriculture, and opportunities for visitor experience and education and the maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity. They build on and tailor key strategy actions to the unique and varied circumstances within different areas of the park. Maps of each area provide a more complete picture of the desired park future.
- The key strategies have been modified to provide a **clearer understanding** of what is to be achieved over the life of the management plan. This simplified plan structure is complemented by clearer objectives and actions,

and by more precise targets linked to desired outcomes.

- The plan's **wording is simplified** and text boxes have been added to explain and elaborate upon key terms and concepts.

"What We Heard" in 2018

The six meetings with members of the 10 First Nations Advisory Circle (FNAC) members explored ecological integrity considerations for the park; a subsequent "what we heard" presentation and discussion at an FNAC meeting allowed for further group discussion.

The six stakeholder and government workshops explored the range of actions that would best support: 1) what ecological integrity means for the Rouge; 2) achieving a vibrant farming community; and 3) the park as a "gateway" to nature, culture, and agriculture.

"What We Heard"—First Nations

The discussions with our First Nations partners revolved around three questions relating to ecological integrity (EI) in the Rouge. A synthesis of the main messages follows.

→ *How do you see ecological integrity reflected on the park landscape?*

- Diverse ecosystems are represented in the park
- All elements of the system work together if sustainable practices are employed; there is interconnectedness
- Healthy water supports healthy soil supports healthy people
- The park's urban context and farming must be considered (healthy soils and water are part of EI)
- Respect the land; the land is part of cultural heritage
- Municipalities/other governments understand the park's value, the park vision, and EI
- We are protecting habitat for humans too; it must be healthy

→ *What do you think needs to be done to achieve ecological integrity?*

- Base actions on the understanding of interconnectedness

- Integrate farming into EI and involve farmers in EI planning and farming sustainability
- Learn from First Nations farming that was in harmony with EI
- Practise different types of agriculture/reduce pesticides and herbicides
- Cultural heritage—facilitate immersive experiences that reconnect people to land and nature
- Educate visitors and others to respect the land (tailor to varying levels of knowledge and experience)
- Undertake ecological restoration; use native plants
- Work with municipalities on their planning and infrastructure so that their actions support the park's EI
- Make sure increasing tourist demand is managed in support of EI
- Plant more native agricultural crops suited to the terrain
- Account for larger factors (act on a watershed basis, consider climate change effects)
- Engage in pilot and showcase projects (e.g., remove cattle from streams, road ecology projects)
- Create a sustainability committee
- Create public gardens
- Develop inventories/knowledge of baseline conditions and monitor all activities, conditions, and trends

→ How do we know when we have achieved ecological integrity in the park?

- The end point will always be changing; conditions will never be perfect
- Be practical (a working definition of EI will constantly change); can't bring the park back to a pristine condition
- The land is in better condition than how we found it
- The three requirements for life—water, air, soil—are healthy
- Ecosystem resilience is maintained or increased
- Ecosystems are self-sustaining
- Traditional Indigenous knowledge plays a part in knowing the state of EI
- The First Nations Advisory Circle helps monitor progress made against targets

- Animals, fish, and birds have returned (e.g., Northern Shrike, bees and milkweed, salmon)
- Reduced presence of invasive species (e.g., phragmites)
- Park farmers contribute to EI
- There is increased awareness (every five years ask people if they see improvements in EI)
- Have we been innovative?

"What We Heard"—Stakeholders, Volunteers, and Government

Two government and three stakeholder workshops were held, as well as a workshop for park volunteers. Participants explored the following three topics:

- What ecological integrity means for the Rouge;
- Achieving a vibrant farming community; and
- The park as a “gateway” to nature, culture, and agriculture.

At each workshop, small groups of participants assessed 10 key actions presented for each topic.¹ Each group worked through six questions associated with each topic and recorded their answers in a workbook. Each participant was also asked to choose what they considered the two most important actions within each of the three categories by posting 6 “dots” on a wall-mounted list of all 31 actions.

A summary of the results from the six workshops is provided below.

TOPIC #1: What Ecological Integrity means for the Rouge

→ What ecological integrity (EI) means for the Rouge

Participants felt the park's diversity of landscapes and its urban context made the concepts of “balance” and “integration” key to understanding and integrating EI, particularly in terms of agriculture and visitation. Common discussion themes included “continuous improvement” in EI, innovation, and working with all park users and stakeholders. People were considered a key component of maintaining or restoring EI.

¹ “The park as a “gateway” to nature, culture, and agriculture” topic featured 11 actions.

Most Exciting of the “Top 10” Actions

- A long-term integrated ecological restoration and farmland improvement program focused on restoring ecosystem function, improving connectivity, and implementing best farming practices
- A Multi-Species at Risk Action Plan within one year
- An Integrated Monitoring Program for forests, wetlands, freshwater ecosystems, and farmland

Most Difficult Actions to Implement

Participants felt that species-at-risk recovery and achieving harmony between the park and municipal and other infrastructure, such as roads that cross the park, would be the two most difficult actions to achieve.

Ideas for Additional Actions

Three additional actions were suggested for consideration: influencing upstream actions that affect the park; building capacity for farmers to contribute to ecological integrity gains; and acquiring additional lands.

Success means...

- The ability to measure and count greater species diversity and numbers
- Knowing your baseline and having tangible goals
- Collaboration
- Increased agricultural yields, economic viability, and higher biodiversity on the farm
- Resilience, harmony, and balance
- Stopping the use of salt on roads
- “Clean, green, accessible, affordable, open, diverse, usable, connected, attractive, meaningful”

Actions deemed most important by individual participants

1. A long-term integrated ecological restoration and farmland improvement program focused on restoring ecosystem function, improving connectivity, and implementing best farming practices.
2. Work with governments responsible for roads and other infrastructure crossing the park so that maintenance, operations, and improvements are compatible with the park’s ecological integrity.

3. Use farm plans and best farming practices to nurture a vibrant farming community that also supports the maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity.

TOPIC #2: Achieving a Vibrant Farming Community

→ What a vibrant farming community in the Rouge means

Participants took a broad and integrated view of farming as economically and ecologically sustainable and as a contributor to the maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity. Participants saw the park as a leading-edge farming showcase of international repute including educational opportunities for park visitors. Crop diversity was viewed as important. One quote summed up the discussion: [A vibrant farming community involves...] “farmers who are profitable and sustainable, innovative, and have a positive impact on the surrounding environment.”

Most Exciting of the “Top 10” Actions

- Implement a leasing framework focused on long-term stability; economic viability; natural, cultural, and agricultural resource protection; fair return to the Crown; and tenant investment in their leases.
- Introduce innovative best farming practices with park farmers and farm organizations, universities, government, and other institutions in research and pilot/demonstration projects.

Most Difficult Actions to Implement

Participants felt that changes in farming required to give priority to ecological integrity—the ability of farmers to find the time to report on progress—and developing a Rouge agricultural “brand”, would provide the largest challenges.

Ideas for Additional Actions

Two additional actions included securing an “agricultural champion” to speak on behalf of and promote farming in the Rouge, and linking the park into the larger Greater Golden Horseshoe Agricultural System.

Success means...

- Mutual trust and collaboration
- A clear baseline by way to measure improvements from best management practices

- The park is a leader in farming practices that yield quality products and contribute to EI
- Farm plans include EI measures
- Happy farmers
- Rouge crops and products are sold locally and the park agricultural brand is recognized

Actions deemed most important by individual participants

1. Implement a leasing framework focused on long-term stability; economic viability; natural, cultural, and agricultural resource protection; fair return to the Crown; and tenant investment in their leases.
2. Develop a park-wide agricultural sustainability approach that identifies opportunities for diversification, community-based farming, mentoring, incubator farms, marketing, and agri-tourism.
3. Work with leaseholders to develop and implement a farm plan for each agricultural leasehold to identify each farmer's contributions to achieving the park vision, including support of sustainable agriculture and maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity.

TOPIC #3: The Park as a Gateway to Discovering Canada's Environment and Heritage

→ *How the Rouge can serve as a gateway*
 Participants identified many “gateway” opportunities for the park. It could introduce residents of Canada’s largest urban region to nature, culture, history, landscape, agriculture, and food systems; to rural Ontario; and to the national parks system. The park could promote healthy lifestyles, spur action in visitors’ own communities, and display best practices across the national parks system. Good access by rail, transit, walking, and biking was viewed as essential to make the park accessible to all visitors regardless of means and ability. High-quality outreach beyond the park throughout the GTA was also seen as an important “gateway” role.

Most Exciting of the “Top 11” Actions

- A strategy to brand RNUP as a protected area of national significance and improve orientation and way-finding for visitors.
- Learn-to Camp opportunities for low- to middle-income Canadians and newcomers, and

programming partnerships with libraries, recreation and community centres, newcomer and settlement agencies, GTA events and festivals, etc.

- An adopt-a-trail program whereby volunteers can help prevent and remove litter, act as park ambassadors, and assist with minor trail maintenance.

Most Difficult Actions to Implement

Participants felt providing convenient transit access to the park would be a major challenge, as was the work required to complete 100 kilometres of trails in the park, and transforming a park known at the neighbourhood level to a GTA tourism offering.

Ideas for Additional Actions

Ideas included incorporating Indigenous interests into the “gateway” theme and integrating programs with the Ontario school curriculum. Building relationships with regional tourism organisations was also suggested. Access-related ideas included better rail access (i.e., GO Transit) and adding more secondary access points.

Success means...

- Knowing what impact you’ve had (e.g., survey visitors)
- The Park “brand” is widely recognized (global destination, signage)
- Visitors to the Rouge go on to visit other parks in Canada
- Visitors have learned more about the environment and heritage from their visit to the park
- More trails and welcome centres
- Working with others to deliver programs
- “Diverse, satisfied, engaged, educated visitors that return to the park regularly”

Actions deemed most important by individual participants

1. Build two “flagship” primary welcome centres in Toronto and Markham and secondary welcome areas throughout the park.
2. By 2022, significantly increase the number of park trails.
3. Provide free weekly guided walks and other interpretive and educational programs that profile natural, cultural, and agricultural heritage.

“What We Heard” in 2014

The 2014 phase of management plan engagement generated a wide range of comments from a broad range of participants. A questionnaire provided via the on-line survey and at the 5 public meetings enabled participants to identify what they liked about the management plan, where they felt improvements could be made, and specific suggestions they had relating to the key strategies.

The following summary groups the comments received accordingly, and incorporates the input of submissions made by governments, First Nations Advisory Circle members, and non-governmental organizations.

Key identified strengths of the draft management plan for Rouge National Urban Park:

- The conservation of nature, a vibrant farming community, and a continuous trail network from Lake Ontario to the Oak Ridges Moraine.
- Parks Canada’s integrated management approach for nature, culture, and agriculture.
- The inclusion of agriculture in the park and the opportunities it presents for connecting visitors to farming, for diversifying and producing local food, for new farmers, and for innovation through research and development.
- A strong volunteer stewardship and ambassador program and the continued involvement of volunteer organisations in the protection and presentation of the park.
- The development of a rich and inspiring visitor experience program, driven by strong “Learn-to” programs and inclusive park experiences for young families, youth, and new Canadians.
- The proactive engagement of First Nations partners in the conservation and presentation of Rouge National Urban Park through the First Nations Advisory Circle.
- The development of a prevention and enforcement program supported by a team of park wardens.
- The focus on transit, cycling, walking, and other “green” transportation access to and through the park.
- Collaboration with municipalities, academia, and the private sector, including an inclusive governance framework and a strong research agenda.

Topics in the 2014 draft plan that participants felt require more work or clarification:

General

- The need for a strengthened ecological approach to the overall planning and management of the park. Native biodiversity and the health and resilience of the park’s ecosystems were considered fundamental objectives, such that all park improvements, management, and operations should enhance ecological conditions.
- A clearer description of what the *Rouge National Urban Park Act* means.
- More mapping and implementation detail that describes what will happen where in the park.
- A less convoluted plan structure to avoid overlapping or repeating topics.
- Clearer and easier-to-understand language that also appeals to youth; define terminology.
- Strategies, objectives, and actions with measurable targets that tie back to them.
- A “go forward” section outlining the processes to be followed in future park planning.

Natural Heritage

- More guidance on restoration and species at risk with more detail on the protection and management of what’s already there (e.g., biodiversity, water resources, natural hazards/floodplains, invasive species).
- More details on how the plan “meets or exceeds” provincial policy, including ecosystem connectivity between Lake Ontario and the Oak Ridges Moraine.
- Guidance on how Parks Canada will manage the effects of climate change on the park.
- More systematic monitoring/adaptive management, such as watershed and ecosystem contexts.
- How land uses will be managed to benefit ecosystems and park objectives.

Agriculture and Cultural Heritage

- More clarity and details on what sustainable agriculture means and how it will be implemented (e.g., soil management, pollinators, urban food security, best management practices).
- How the transition to sustainable farming will occur.

- Additional guidance for cultural heritage (e.g., archaeology, adaptive reuse of buildings)

Visitor Experience

- Consider how many visitors the park can sustain.
- A focus beyond GTA youth, newcomers, and young families to include baby boomers and rural Canadians.
- More emphasis on “Learn-to” opportunities, including schools, families, and cultural programs.
- Details on permitted trail uses and recreational activities (e.g., fishing, camping).
- How visitor facilities/activities support the environment and four-season experiences.

Collaboration

- Strengthened direction for volunteer activities, and give volunteering more prominence.
- How the park will fit with the larger tourism and tourism promotion picture.
- Demonstrate green leadership in the park’s management.
- Manage infrastructure crossing the park (e.g., effects on wildlife, cumulative effects).
- How Parks Canada will work with the public, stakeholders, and municipalities on land use inside the park and with others so that land uses next to the park contribute to its health.

The Future

This public engagement report marks the conclusion of the public engagement program for Rouge National Urban Park’s first management plan. The extensive and constructive input provided by First Nations, the public, non-governmental organisations, and governments has generated a significantly improved management plan from the draft plan released in 2014.

With more than two-thirds of the lands identified for transfer now administered by Parks Canada, Rouge National Urban Park has not only been created, it is now operational. The implementation of this management plan will take on more significance as administration of the remaining lands in the south of the park is transferred to Parks Canada.

Although concluding another phase of engagement in the establishment of this unique park, the issuing of this report opens up another. Implementation of the approved management plan will be characterized by a continuing process of engagement and dialogue involving Indigenous partners, stakeholders, the public, and other governments through the mechanisms described in this plan. In this way, the public that visit, live, and work in the park will continue to help shape the future to which they contributed during the course of developing this management plan.

Parks Canada thanks the many people and organisations who invested their time, effort, thoughts, and passion to help shape this management plan, and invites your continued engagement as part of the park’s exciting future.