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Nature within reach of Canadians

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Next week sees the centennial of the establishment of Parks Canada, the first agency in the world devoted to national parks. How do you plan to celebrate? Are you visiting one of the newer parks in the system, like Quttinirpaaq in Nunavut? The park’s website explains that to get there you’ll need to charter a plane, at a cost of $15,000. “However,” it adds helpfully, “you will need two flights, one to go to the park and another to come out for a total cost of around $30,000!” That may explain why its official 2009-10 attendance was … two. It’s unclear whether that included the pilot.

When the Dominion Parks Branch, precursor to Parks Canada, was created in 1911, it was to manage existing parks and to create new ones “for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada.” The agency has done that extremely well over the past century. The parks already in existence at the time – most of them in the Rocky Mountains, such as Banff and Jasper – have been faithfully maintained. New parks have been established in all the provinces and territories, helping make the parks system truly national.

At the same time, the agency came to see its prime mission as representing Canada’s ecological diversity. In 1970, it set itself the ambitious goal of “completing” the parks system by maintaining at least one park in each of Canada’s 39 “natural regions.” The focus of park creation since then has been in regions that don’t already have a park, which has tended to mean in places far, far away from where most Canadians live and most tourists tour.

As a result, our country’s newest national parks have extraordinarily low attendance. Nine of the 10 least visited parks in the system were created after 1970. The 10 most visited parks were all created before 1970. It would take all of the parks created since 1990 more than four years to welcome the number of visitors that Banff sees in a single day.

Some will see that as evidence only that Banff has too many visitors. But it is hardly preferable that a fast-growing share of the energies and resources devoted to national parks in this country is being spent on places that most Canadians not just will never see, but can never see. That runs counter to the guiding principle of the parks system since its creation – the contradictory, unattainable, but ultimately fundamental principle that parks are both to be preserved unimpaired and to be enjoyed. And it is no way for Parks Canada to instill in an increasingly urbanized Canada a love of our country’s nature, let alone to foster a constituency that cares about national parks.

That’s why the Conservative pledge during the recent election campaign to create a national park in the Rouge Valley, just east of Toronto, holds such promise. This would be the first national park in Canada close to a large urban centre, easily accessible by public transit – no charter plane required. It would also undoubtedly be the first national park – in fact, the first significant expanse of Canadian nature – that many Southern Ontarians, including many new Canadians, would ever visit. If this park does move forward, its proximity to Toronto will mean extra headaches for the government and Parks Canada. Before establishment, there will be issues involving the local population and expropriation, and after establishment, there will be issues involving
visitor services and ecological integrity. But Rouge Valley National Park will also signal a recognition that while the national parks system has ecological objectives, it also has social objectives, and to fulfill those at least some of the parks must be within reach of Canadians.

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