



Sable Island

What We Heard

A Summary of
Public Input
December 2010



Photo: S. Coffen-Smout





Introduction

In June 2010, Parks Canada embarked on a public consultation program to seek input on the proposal to designate Sable Island as a national park. This report provides a summary of the input received, along with some background information and an overview of next steps.

About Parks Canada

Parks Canada is the federal agency responsible for managing national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas. On behalf of Canadians, Parks Canada protects and presents these treasures because of the stories they tell, the experiences they offer, and their role in helping us to appreciate the essence of Canada.

This is a time of celebration for Parks Canada – this year the Agency is proudly celebrating 125 years of natural heritage conservation in Canada with the establishment of Banff National Park in 1885; and in 2011, Parks Canada will be celebrating 100 years as the world’s first national parks service.

National parks are representative examples of Canada’s terrestrial regions. They protect the ecological integrity of these spectacular places while offering a variety of recreational activities and opportunities for Canadians to discover, experience and personally connect with their land. Canada’s system of national parks currently comprises 42 national parks ranging from vast, remote parks in Canada’s north that welcome only a handful of visitors a year to smaller parks that are more accessible and offer more opportunities for a diverse range of people to come, discover and create their own memorable experiences. Parks Canada is a proud steward of these heritage places and manages them for the benefit and enjoyment of Canadians while ensuring that they remain unimpaired for present and future generations.

Parks Canada’s mandate and vision

The mandate of Parks Canada describes what the Agency does, and has remained essentially unchanged for three quarters of a century:

On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada’s natural and cultural heritage and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations.

Parks Canada’s goal is to make Canada’s places and stories more relevant to Canadians, as described in its vision statement:

Canada’s treasured natural and historic places will be a living legacy, connecting hearts and minds to a stronger, deeper understanding of the very essence of Canada.



About Sable Island

Sable Island has a long and fascinating human history spanning three centuries and is home to many species of plants, birds and mammals, including the famous wild horses.

The island is characterized by extensive beaches and sand dunes, including some of the largest dune systems in Eastern Canada. Approximately one third of the island is vegetated and there are a number of freshwater ponds. The ponds provide habitat for unique plant and animal communities and fresh water for the island's inhabitants.

The island is a biodiversity gem, with over 190 species of plants and 350 species of birds recorded, owing to its position as a key migratory flyway. The Ipswich sparrow and the Roseate Tern both breed on the island and are protected under the *Species at Risk Act*. Sable Island is home to the world's largest breeding colony of grey seals, which pup on the island between late December and early February. The island's most famous inhabitants are the wild horses, believed to have been introduced sometime in the mid 1700s. Current estimates place their population at around 375 animals.



Photo: D. Austin, Parks Canada

Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, several unsuccessful attempts to settle the island were made, although various domesticated animals such as horse, cattle, pigs and sheep were left on the island over the years. Rough seas, storms and fog made the island a major hazard to navigation on the east coast, and since 1583 there have been over 350 recorded shipwrecks, earning it the title of "Graveyard of the Atlantic".



Photo: D. Austin, Parks Canada

The island has been continuously inhabited since 1801, when the Nova Scotia government established the first of multiple life saving stations on the island. With the advent of more accurate navigational equipment following the Second World War, shipwrecks on Sable became less frequent, and in 1959 the federal government closed the life-saving stations.

In more recent history, the island has been used by a number of government departments and industries for a variety of operations. The meteorological station was built in the early 1890s and is still operational. It is currently managed by Environment Canada. During the 1960s, Sable Island was a hotspot for the petroleum industry and up to nine wells were drilled from the surface of the island. The island has been the base for a number of long-standing research programs. A helicopter refuelling station on Sable Island is maintained for search and rescue operations and there is an emergency landing for the offshore industry, which currently operates a number of natural gas platforms in the vicinity of the island.



Main Station acts as the island's administrative and communications centre. Most of the island's infrastructure is located here, including several generators, fuel tanks, a water treatment plant, vehicle storage sheds and staff and visitor accommodations. Up to six people live on the island year round, but the population increases at different times of the year with visits from scientific groups and casual visitors.



Towards a National Park for Sable Island

On May 18, 2010, the Honourable Jim Prentice, Canada's former Environment Minister and Minister Responsible for Parks Canada, and the Honourable John MacDonell, Nova Scotia's former Minister of Natural Resources, announced that the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia will take the necessary steps to designate Sable Island as a national park under the *Canada National Parks Act* for the benefit of current and future generations.

Following the Ministers' announcement in May, a public engagement process was undertaken by Parks Canada in order to collect public input on the proposed national park for Sable Island. This process was guided by four objectives:

- To familiarize the public, stakeholders and others with Parks Canada's mandate, vision, system of protected places and process for park establishment and planning.
- To familiarize the public, stakeholders and others with Sable Island, its natural and cultural history and current situation.
- To give the Mi'kmaq, the public and a diverse range of stakeholders an opportunity to provide Parks Canada with their vision for the future of Sable Island as a national park.
- To identify opportunities and challenges associated with management, operations and conservation of Sable Island as a national park.

Consultation began in June to secure comments and views on the recommendation to designate Sable Island as a national park. Opportunities for the public, stakeholders and partners to participate have included: open house sessions, bi-lateral meetings, workshops, email, written and on-line submissions and a toll-free number. A formal process of consultation is also underway with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia.



Sable Island and its isolated sand dunes hold a special place in the hearts and minds of Canadians. Nova Scotians feel a particular tie to Sable, as it figures prominently in their history and looms large in their imaginations. The passion and great interest Canadians have in Sable Island was evident in the submissions Parks Canada received from across Canada and even abroad, expressing support and highlighting ideas, concerns and visions for the future of Sable Island as a national park.

Who We Heard From

The volume and quality of responses Parks Canada received are a testament to the strong link that many Nova Scotians and Canadians across the country feel for this special place. Three open house sessions were held in Halifax region in June. Over 200 people attended these events, many taking the time to have in-depth discussions with Parks Canada staff and to write their comments in detail. For those further afield or unable to attend a session in person, opportunities to become involved were advertised in newspapers province-wide and nationally on Parks Canada’s homepage on the web.

Between participation at the open houses, online submissions, emails, letters and telephone messages, Parks Canada received approximately 2800 responses in total to our request for input. Early in the public engagement process (June and July 2010), we received 235 detailed submissions as a result of the open houses and launch of the public engagement process. Many of these included responses to a set of questions available at the open houses and posted online asking people about their vision for a national park for Sable Island. Later in the summer, in response to a notice posted by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), a further 950 emails were received emphasizing support for a national park for Sable Island, the importance of strict conservation measures to protect the island, including limiting visitation, and expressing concern about petroleum exploration. A further 1600 emails were received in response to an awareness campaign by the

parkscanada.gc.ca

what's your vision for Sable Island?

Get involved!

Parks Canada is holding open houses where you can learn more and share your ideas about how Sable Island can be protected and appreciated as a national park. You can also participate by visiting our website and sending us your comments by August 15, 2010.

Sable Island is a unique treasure with a long and fascinating history. All Canadians have a role to play in ensuring the future of this iconic place for the benefit of present and future generations. Share your ideas!

Attend an Open House:
TUESDAY, JUNE 22, 2010
THURSDAY, JUNE 24, 2010
 TIME: 3pm - 8pm (presentations at 4:30pm and 7pm)
 LOCATION: Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, 1675 Lower Water Street, Halifax

SATURDAY, JUNE 26, 2010
 TIME: 9am - 1pm (presentation at 10:30am)
 LOCATION: Pier 21, 1055 Marginal Road, Halifax

Visit our website:
www.pc.gc.ca/sable

Send us an email:
sable@pc.gc.ca

Call:
 1-888-773-8888

TOP: S. COFFEN-AMOUT
 BOTTOM: D. LIDGARD

Parks Canada Parcs Canada

Canada 100



International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) expressing a consistent message of support for a national park on Sable Island and urging for protection of grey seals.

In addition to comments from the general public, eight organizations also submitted detailed letters as part of the public engagement process. These groups represent a diverse range of interests and organizations, from industry interests (petroleum, fisheries), to environmental groups and animal rights organizations.

What They Said

In general, we heard that Canadians:

- support the proposed national park designation;
- feel that it is important to maintain the ecological integrity and protect the cultural resources;
- are interested in visitor experience opportunities on the island that are limited in scope and scale and are well-managed;
- want off-island experiences and educational opportunities;
- are seeking careful management of natural resources, including petroleum; and
- are concerned about wildlife management, particularly seals and wild horses.

More detail regarding a vision for a future national park on Sable Island and a number of key themes which emerged from the input is outlined in the following section.



Photo: N. Falardeau, Parks Canada



Photo: D. Harvey, Parks Canada



Photo: N. Falardeau, Parks Canada



Vision for a National Park

Participants at the open houses and online were asked to describe their vision for Sable Island as a national park - what they would like the future of Sable Island National Park to be in 2025.

Most people envision a national park on Sable Island as a place where protection figures prominently and is the overriding management consideration. Protection for both natural and cultural resources were mentioned, although the vast majority of those who commented on protection focused on natural resources, with many noting that their ideal for Sable Island in future would be that it remain as “natural” as possible with limited development and visitation. Almost everyone noted that the protection and management of resources should remain as it is today, with a few respondents hoping that higher levels of protection will be in place by 2025.

When thinking forward to the future, many recognized that the remote nature of the island means that most people will not be able to physically visit Sable Island. For many, their vision includes a significant focus on off-site experiences and outreach education opportunities. With suggestions ranging from IMAX 3D films to live-stream webcams to more traditional museum exhibits and classroom projects, many ideas were proposed to help the public learn about and appreciate Sable Island from afar. A number of respondents expressed a desire to see the history and cultural heritage of Sable Island commemorated and shared broadly. One unifying theme that did emerge among the diverse suggestions was that people should not have to visit Sable Island in order to learn about and connect with it.

Natural, raw beauty, free-roaming wildlife, walking in the sand dunes, solitude, isolation, serenity... these words were frequently used by respondents in describing their vision of an ideal experience if they were able to visit Sable Island National Park. Many described an ideal experience as a visit with a small group on an interpretive tour, or as a volunteer contributing to a research or conservation project while learning about and experiencing the island. Responses from people who have visited Sable Island previously often described their experience as unique, “once in a lifetime” or transformative. Some people noted that their ideal experience would not require being on-site, rather they felt that an ideal experience would be to “visit” the island virtually.

“In the year 2025 I hope the state of natural and cultural resources on Sable is very similar to what they are today. Everything that Sable Island is needs to stay as is- its beauty, its nature (fauna and flora), its purposes (scientific research...etc). Protection of all of this is paramount to it becoming a protected national park.”

“[people will appreciate] ...the Island’s uniqueness and sensitivity, its cultural history as well as natural history.”

“I can only imagine the wonder of walking the vast beaches of Sable, smelling the salt air and the feel of the wind on my face and to hear the surf as it crashes on the shore. To marvel at the plants and wildlife, ponies, seals etc; to soak in the vastness and isolation of the place would be a once in a life time experience.”



Support for a National Park on Sable

“This designation will provide stronger conservation measures for the island than currently exist and will bring Sable Island into a family of well-managed national parks across Canada of which all Canadians can be proud.”

Nova Scotians locally and Canadians across the country have demonstrated overwhelming support for the designation of Sable Island as a national park. While some people have expressed concern that a national park may bring unnecessary or undesirable changes to Sable Island, such as more development, changes in research activities and unsustainable numbers of visitors, most feel that by proceeding with care and developing a thoughtful management plan, the long-term protection of this Atlantic jewel will finally be assured.

Public Access

The most frequently cited topic was related to future public access to Sable Island. While many of these references supported the idea of public access to Sable Island, almost all emphasized the need for well-managed and regulated opportunities for visitor experience. Moreover, many noted that the protection of natural and cultural resources should take priority over public access, ensuring that on-going visitation levels remain environmentally sustainable.

“I have always wanted to visit Sable Island and expect to – some day. I expect it will be under very controlled circumstances... my souvenirs will be photographs and the memory of an exciting journey into the Atlantic.”

Maintaining Sable Island As It Is Now

“Move slowly, there is so much to learn from those who are custodians of the island now. Take their expertise to heart.”

While most respondents view the designation of Sable Island as a positive step towards long-term protection, many also credit the status quo at Sable Island for what they describe as the existing “wild”, “pristine”, “balanced” and “unique” environment. Many people expressed a desire to see the existing operations of Sable Island maintained following a national park designation. Some respondents also expressed concerns that the designation as a national park may result in what the respondents viewed as undesirable new developments. Examples mentioned included: interference with the natural processes, the construction of infrastructure and changes to established research practices and activities.



Virtual Visitors and Public Outreach Education

There is overwhelming support and interest in opportunities for Canadians and others interested in Sable Island to discover its wonders through innovative outreach education, state-of-the-art technology and through use of the creative arts to bring the Sable Island experience to homes, schools and communities.

Recognizing the remoteness of the island and the challenges of access, the idea of bringing the Sable Island experience to the mainland was enthusiastically suggested by many people. Suggestions ranged from webcams offering continuous live-stream footage of the island to an IMAX 3D film to immersive interpretive opportunities offering hands-on experiences. A number of respondents were also very enthusiastic in their desire to see the human history of Sable Island presented and shared as broadly as possible.

“People in Canada are curious about Sable Island; they have heard about it and want to know more. Few in Canada do not know something about Sable Island, and they have a real romantic feeling about it. To really communicate the idea and the reality of Sable Island, Parks Canada needs to facilitate the creation of art on and about the island... I’d like to see Parks provide a venue for this art though a virtual or actual gallery.”

Expectations of a National Park Designation

Most of the respondents were positive and supportive of a national park designation for Sable Island, while others expressed concerns about the potential effects of the designation for the future of Sable Island. Interestingly, in both cases, comments expressing support of and concern for the proposed national park centered primarily on the same issue: protection of natural and cultural resources. Indeed, many of those in support of the national park designation commented that this is likely the best way to ensure on-going protection and conservation on Sable Island, while those concerned mainly question the possibility of balancing ecological integrity with the visitor experience opportunities and associated services and facilities, that are commonly offered at Parks Canada sites.

“The issue of accommodation might necessitate some construction on the island, but hopefully this could be undertaken as a ‘green project’ utilizing the best in renewable resources.”

Protection of Horses and Seals

Sable Island has long been known for its population of wild horses. Many people commented that they are a unique and iconic feature of the island and as such their protection is of paramount importance. For those who commented on horses, all emphasized that the horse population should be allowed to remain wild with no active human management.



“The fauna and flora on the island should be respected and protected, including grey seals and horses. To date, the wildlife on Sable Island has managed itself. It does not need human intervention to manage populations or protect the biodiversity.”

The island’s status as breeding ground for the world’s largest population of grey seals also prompted numerous submissions. Concerns about grey seals, and their interactions in the broader marine environment, have led the commercial fishing industry and the marine management community to explore possible management options. Parks Canada received hundreds of emails urging that seals and all other wildlife be protected in the national park and not subject to population control. Others expressed an equally passionate view that the national park designation for Sable Island should not preclude science-based management options, including population reduction.

Petroleum Activities

The subject of petroleum activities in the vicinity of Sable Island was raised by a many people. A small number of the detailed submissions received early in the public engagement process and during the open houses referenced oil and gas exploration and development. This topic figured more prominently in numerous emails and online submissions received later in the summer. Virtually all of these comments voiced concerns about future petroleum drilling near the island and the risk of environmental damage. It is noteworthy that the majority of these comments opposed all petroleum exploration near Sable Island, while some suggested that strong legislation and safeguards are required before proceeding with any future developments in this area. There appears to be unanimous support for a ban on drilling from the island itself and within one nautical mile, as per the long-standing policy of the Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board.

“Like many Canadians, I am delighted that Sable Island may become a National Park and intrigued by the possibility of visiting it. Making sure that visitors don't overwhelm a fragile site does, of course, have to be a major consideration in planning for the park. However, an even bigger consideration is protecting it from oil and gas exploration. We've seen more than enough pictures from the Gulf of Mexico. We don't want the sequel to be filmed on Sable Island.”

“... Since the onset of oil and gas activities in the vicinity of Sable Island in the early 1960's our industry has recognized the unique and sensitive environmental aspects of the Island. We support ongoing measures taken by Parks Canada that will continue to assure the Island's protection.”



Input from Organizations

In addition to the general public, Parks Canada also has received extensive input from organizations representing a wide range of interests, including environmental organizations, protected area advocates, animal rights groups, researchers, commercial fishing, petroleum and tourism industries, educational organizations and historical societies, among others. Several organizations submitted detailed briefs for consideration as part of the public engagement process while others expressed their views during face-to-face meetings. Given the range of interests, comments were diverse. However, a common thread was the strong recognition of the special natural and cultural features of Sable Island and support for a national park as a means for ensuring long term protection for this iconic and special place. Many of the points raised by organizations were consistent with those mentioned by the general public and summarized earlier in this report.

“... The EAC [Ecology Action Centre] has worked with the Green Horse Society and other groups and individuals for the last seven years to ensure that the federal and provincial governments protect Sable Island and maintain the Sable Island Station. We believe that a year-round human presence on the island is key to protecting the island’s ecology as well as protecting its cultural heritage.”

Key themes that emerged from the submissions made by organizations included:

- recognition of the cultural significance of the island - its special place in the hearts and minds of Nova Scotians, its link to their identity, sea-faring history and connection to the offshore;
- ensuring ongoing opportunities for research, both natural and cultural;
- careful management to ensure protection of the ecosystem and cultural heritage;
- the importance of the island as a safe refuge for aviation and boating safety and for evacuation from offshore platforms in the event of an emergency;
- strong views urging for protection of grey seals and other wildlife in the national park;
- concern about the impacts of grey seals on the commercial fishing industry and whether population control could be carried out on Sable Island once it is a national park;
- concerns about petroleum exploration and development activities, including: ensuring that the industry is not adversely affected; concerns about drilling in the area and potential environmental impacts; and implications for other future national parks;
- partnering with other organizations with a similar mandate for public outreach education to communicate broadly about Sable Island; and
- a desire to remain engaged and to participate in the development of a future management plan.



Next Steps

National parks are a special type of public lands administered by the federal government under the provisions of the Canada National Parks Act. Although there is a sequence of steps followed for identifying, selecting and establishing new national parks, each situation is different, and the final result reflects the individual circumstances and the involvement of all those parties that are directly affected.

Feedback gathered from individuals and organized groups during the Sable Island public engagement strategy will help to inform the establishment of a national park for Sable Island as the process moves forward. The next steps in this process are described below:

- Conclude consultation with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia regarding establishment of a national park for Sable Island;
- Canada and Nova Scotia negotiate a federal-provincial park establishment agreement and a new bill is introduced in the House of Commons to designate Sable Island as a national park.
- Negotiate a memorandum of understanding to transfer administration and control from Fisheries and Oceans Canada to Parks Canada.
- Once legislation is in place, Parks Canada would assume the operations of Sable Island. The transition to prepare for this would include staffing, resource inventories, and an evaluation of the state of the island.
- Develop a management plan with the involvement of the Mi'kmaq, our partners, stakeholders and the public. The management plan will include a vision, key strategies, objectives and actions for protection, visitor experience and public outreach education.



Photo: J. Tompa, Parks Canada

For more information

Sable Island is a unique treasure with a long and fascinating history. All Canadians have a role to play in ensuring the future of this iconic place for the benefit of present and future generations.

The volume and quality of input received is indicative of the special place that Sable Island holds in the hearts and minds of Nova Scotians and Canadians across the country. Parks Canada would like to thank all those who took the time to share their ideas, knowledge and passion for Sable Island with us through this public engagement process.

For more information and to access ongoing updates as we work towards park establishment, please visit our website – www.pc.gc.ca/sable. You can also contact us at:

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Ce document est aussi disponible en français.



Photos: (left) Environment Canada; (centre) J. Tompa, Parks Canada; (right) D. Austin, Parks Canada