

Harper Government Slashes Parks Canada; Trashes Canadian Heritage/History

With the cold winds of fall come the impacts of the Harper government's slashing of Parks Canada. Interpretive materials in the national parks and interpretive centres have been turned from dynamic live presentations into static displays. Most of the public and educational programming activities have been shut down. Most of the staff positions including history/heritage staff, archaeologists, naturalists, curators, and conservation staff positions have been eliminated. Many of the national parks and historic sites have greatly reduced hours. All of the collections and research information from across Canada are being shipped to understaffed warehouses in Gatineau, Quebec. In Manitoba, there will be no winter trails in Riding Mountain National Park and live interactions at Lower Fort Garry Historic Park will be confined to areas only within the walls of the fort itself and will be reduced to weekends only. This will result in the loss of blacksmith activities and the First Nations camp, both very popular with the tourists and local visitors. While these decisions result in reduced access, appreciation, and enjoyment of these facilities, they are miniscule compared to the large-scale cuts that have been undertaken! For example, in the Western and Northern Region office in Winnipeg (which covers Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the northern Territories), 65% of the local professional and technical staff positions have been cancelled! Others such as the conservators are being kept on for a couple of years only to organize the transfer of the artifact collections to Gatineau. Dedicated volunteers who have helped the hardworking staff have been told not to come in again. In the Winnipeg office, 8 permanent and several part time archaeologists will be reduced to only two people; the extensive accumulative knowledge of decades of commitment and expertise knowledge and hard, productive work of these former people will be lost. This is not about "cutting fat" since staff were constantly under pressure to meet numerous deadlines and to find partnerships to fulfill their goals with limited budgets.

All the documentation and collections are being moved to understaffed warehouses in Gatineau. Many of the few remaining staff are being given different jobs and demoted to part-time positions. For years, Parks Canada has maintained modest but high quality collections facilities in Winnipeg and five other centres across Canada with curators, researchers, collections staff, biologists, interpreters, and conservators to look after these many priceless heritage items. Now, all of that work and care over the last century will be lost as the collections are moved and the facilities are closed down or reduced dramatically. As recently as two years ago, 5,000 heritage items were transferred

to Winnipeg so that they would be accessible in the area where they belong. Now they are being packed up and shipped back east. Suddenly, all the artifacts from York Factory in the Churchill area and other sites in the North as well as the various sites in the south, are being boxed and sent to Gatineau. This centralization of collections, records and reports is taking place right across Canada. Now, there will be only 8 archaeologists to look after the endangered, fragile artifacts from all of these sites across Canada. Interestingly, they did keep the handful of underwater archaeologists to search for items such as sunken ships. The local Conservation Department staffs who have spent years repairing and looking after artifacts, such as organic items from the Northern permafrost, are now being transferred for short-term periods to packing up and moving the collections. These collections will no longer be accessible for research and analyses unless one travels to Gatineau; and even there, there will not be enough staff to help access them nor look after them. Nor will they have the knowledge that has developed in the regional centres. Do you recall the ending in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" where the box containing the priceless ark was deposited in a vast warehouse manned by one person with a forklift, only to be forgotten forever? You get the picture. It is also rumoured that rare items such as early First Nations clothing and other unique items will be sold to cover the costs of displacing and centralizing these collections, which does seem implausible given the recent decision to sell off large numbers of Canadian art works by the Foreign Affairs Department.

The elimination and reduction of staff will leave phenomenal gaps. In the past, large numbers of Canadian citizens were able to draw on the collective knowledge, in terms of getting this historical information and images, and examining rare and unusual artifacts. Researchers, educators, and family historians will no longer have access to this knowledge. Any family heirlooms will be sent to Gatineau where there will be few who can provide the necessary expertise. In Manitoba, there will be only 2 local archaeologists to monitor ALL the national parks and national historic sites in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Territories, to supervise recovery of sites in danger, to advise site wardens, and to help develop programs and exhibits in these centres. There will be NO staff to monitor and maintain important sites such as York factory, so they will face accelerated disintegration. There will be NO archaeologists to monitor, protect and recover the eroding ancient coastal Inuit sites in the North that are a result of current increases in erosion. There will be NO ONE to monitor site destruction and advise site managers on how to incorporate the knowledge from recovered cultural items and ecological heritage into interpretive exhibits to enhance visitor experience. Clearly, these resources will suffer significant permanent destruction.

Visitor centres are being down graded. In addition to the impacts at Lower Fort Garry and Riding Mountain, other centres such as Riel House, and St Andrews Rectory, as well as the Motherwell Farmstead and Fort Battleford in Saskatchewan, will lose their lively, interesting costumed animators and interactive programs. Now, as visitors go to Riel House, an important family site of one of our western leaders, they will be given self-guided fact sheets by temporary staff, a less than stimulating activity for children and visitors. The permanent staff that used to be available to develop programmes and activities for the new children's Variety Heritage Adventure Park that opened this passed June at The Forks National Park in Winnipeg have been terminated or re-employed. Similar developments are taking place from Signal Hill in St John's to Jasper National Park. There will be no one to develop new ongoing educational programs. For several years, Parks Canada staff had been developing the Educational Outreach Programs, exciting interpretive programs for children that were related to school curricula; these have been scrapped across the country. Site managers and maintenance people have been laid off or given seasonal or reduced work hours. These developments will reduce the local family and tourist experiences as families and tourists find signage and pamphlets no substitute for interpreters and animation actors. Attendance will very likely decline considerably, thus giving the government an excuse to close some of these heritage facilities permanently in the future.

It is strange that the Government under Stephen Harper would want to reduce Parks Canada centres and eliminate others such as Dartmouth, as these are the engines that drive developments at the national parks and national historic sites, which are major tourist attractions, when tourism is an important economic development. A recent economic study in 2011 of Parks Canada has shown that attendance been increasing and has been very profitable, generating \$3.3 billion dollars to the Canadian economy in 2008/09, a year when the general economy was declining. For every dollar spent on Parks Canada, two dollars are recouped in foreign tourist contributions and 40 cents in taxes. This is not about balancing the budget; it is about deciding unilaterally, without consultation, that a major part of our Canadian heritage is not sufficiently important nor of sufficient interest to be supported federally. The government has decided that only a few select topics such as the War of 1812 that they deem to be important are worthy of support.

As an aside, why do people from all over the world flock to Italy, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Turkey, Greece, to name a few, if not to soak in their incredible heritage sites? Why then would Canadian government dramatically reduce the desirability of many of Canada's most important heritage sites?

These cuts are being carried out in all of the Parks Canada regions from coast to coast. Some 600 skilled, knowledgeable people are being terminated. Interpretive animators in 27 parks are being laid off. One hundred years of commitment and investments by all previous federal governments in 42 national parks and 167 national historic sites are being eliminated or reduced severely. The Conservation staff for all of Canada will be reduced from 33 people to 8 people. There will be only 8 archaeologists to monitor the 218 national parks and about 37 million hectares of federal crown lands. We will become an instant heritage/history "wasteland" if the federal government continues its' slashing of Parks Canada. The cost to replace these devastating impacts, when more intelligent minds can try to repair this damage, will be staggering. As Rick Mercer has said in his recent book and a recent (Oct.1) article in MacLean's Magazine it is time to rant! As he has been told, silence is taken as public agreement with what is being done in these federal decisions among the Ottawa minions!

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For more information contact the Canadian Archaeological Association at <http://canadianarchaeology.com/caa/draconian-cuts-parks-canada>

If you are concerned about the demise of our Canadian heritage/history, then you need to make your concern known. Contact the following:

Your MP and any others you know
Stephen Harper, Prime Minister pm@pm.gc.ca
Peter Kent, Minister of the Environment minister@ec.gc.ca
James Moore, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages
james.moors@parl.gc.ca
Alan Latourelle, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Canada alan.latourelle@pc.gc.ca
Thomas Mulcair, Leader of New Democratic Party and federal Leader of the Opposition thomas.mulcair@parl.gc.ca
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party elizabeth.may@parl.gc.ca

Also important to express your concerns in the local media such as letters to newspapers, radio, TV.