



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Proposal Response:

Developing a management plan for Bigwind Lake Provincial Park

ERO #: 019-7814

Parks and Recreation Ontario Submission

May 3, 2024

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About Parks and Recreation Ontario

Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) is a non-profit association with over 6,500 members that delivers services to more than 85% of Ontario's population. We are devoted to advancing equitable access to quality parks and recreation services for all Ontarians. PRO champions the health, social, and environmental benefits of parks and recreation through evidence-based practices, advocacy, and collaborative cross-sectoral partnerships. Our work includes policy and research, education, training and professional development opportunities, as well as our flagship quality standards program, HIGH FIVE® which includes a stream called the *Principles of Healthy Child Development*. We envision a future for Ontario where every person has equitable access to vibrant communities, sustainable environments, and personal health.

Introduction

We are writing to express our support for the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan. Additionally, we would like to state our unequivocal endorsement of the *Amendment to Ontario Regulation 316/07 under the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act 2006 to expand the boundary of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park – ERO 019-8310*. The Town of Bracebridge is an active and valued member of PRO, and we are grateful for continued investment in and expansion of parks and recreation opportunities in this region. Introducing a new provincial park in Ontario will provide Ontarians and out-of-province visitors with additional opportunities to engage in active living, while connecting to natural environments and cultural heritage.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks for the development of the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan. After reviewing the plan, it is clear that the Ministry extensively engaged with and sought guidance from relevant stakeholders, organizations, and community members. The plan is thorough and addresses many of the concerns, opportunities, and interests of Parks and Recreation Ontario. The following document provides commentary and additional considerations pertaining to the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan.

Acknowledgement & Recommendations

PRO commends the Ministry for prioritizing ecological integrity, accessibility, and Indigenous engagement throughout the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan. These priorities strongly align with PRO's mandate of advocating for equitable access to parks and recreation for all Ontarians. While we are largely in support of the preliminary management plan, we request that definitions and standards of accessibility are more comprehensive and provide absolute clarity. The opening of a new provincial park provides a unique opportunity to re-examine and re-establish work structures, requirements, and accreditations in Ontario Parks. Particularly among employees who interact with children, PRO recommends the Ministry to require specialized training in childhood

development, thereby ensuring high quality, age appropriate, and safe programming. Finally, we encourage the Ministry to engage with local municipalities and communities, particularly the District Municipality of Muskoka and the Town of Bracebridge, to determine the additional infrastructure and resource investments required to support an influx in tourism.

Clarifying Accessibility Standards

Recommendation:

Establish clear definitions and standards of accessibility that will be adhered to in the design and operation of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park.

PRO applauds the Ministry for prioritizing accessibility in the Bigwind Lake Preliminary Management Plan. Provision of accessible recreation and parks infrastructure and programming is integral to the health and well-being of all Ontarians. According to Statistics Canada, [approximately 27% of Canadians aged 15 and older experience one or more disabilities that limit their daily activities](#). As Canada's population ages, this number will continue to increase. Now more than ever, it is vitally important that accessibility is at the forefront of design in all parks and recreation infrastructure.

The opening of the first new full-service provincial park in 40 years presents a unique opportunity to set higher standards of accessibility for all future parks and recreation infrastructure in Ontario. The Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan references accessible design several times throughout the document. In accordance with Ontario law, we anticipate that Bigwind Lake Provincial Park will be compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). While AODA offers a satisfactory starting point for identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to access, PRO believes that accessibility standards within Bigwind Lake Provincial Park can be further enhanced through extensive consultation with individuals who have lived experiences of disabilities.

Creating accessible infrastructure within parks is sometimes at odds with preserving ecological integrity. Accessible features such as widened trails, increased accessible parking availability, and leveled campsites pose ecological disruptions and stressors, especially to sensitive ecosystems and species at risk. PRO knows the Ministry will conduct rigorous environmental assessments to determine where accessible infrastructure would be least harmful to the parks' varied ecosystems.

Implementation of childhood development training

Recommendation:

Require specialized training in healthy child development for Ontario Parks staff who lead programming for children and youth.

Each year, thousands of Ontarians engage in nature-based recreation in Ontario's provincial parks. It is well documented that spending time in nature has a [myriad of holistic health benefits](#) and contributes to feelings of connectedness and [care for the environment](#). For decades, Ontario Parks has enhanced these benefits by delivering educational programming that provides visitors with an in-depth understanding of the natural and cultural features that shape the land on which they hike, swim, and play. These programs are typically led by Park Naturalists or Discovery Rangers – a summer student position. Some programs delivered across Ontario Parks are specifically designed for children and youth. In particular, [Discovery Programs](#) offer a wide range of child- and youth-centered programming that directly links with Ontario school curricula. Throughout the spring and summer months, it is common for Naturalists and Discovery Rangers to deliver programming for school groups, day camps, and child and youth community organizations. [Recent job postings](#) indicate that training in healthy child development is not currently a requirement for employees in these roles.

Many municipalities, universities, and organizations across Canada that run programming for children and youth require staff to attain the [HIGH FIVE®](#) certification in [Principles of Healthy Child Development](#). For two decades, [HIGH FIVE®](#) has been the champion of quality assurance, ensuring that organizations meet the highest standards of excellence. The [Principles of Healthy Child Development](#) training is rooted in extensive research and hand-on experience, providing participants with essential learnings about designing quality programming that prioritizes healthy child development.

As a provincially run institution, Ontario Parks is held to a higher public standard of how they choose to train employees and provide exceptional education and recreation programs. The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park presents an exciting opportunity for the Ministry to revisit employment accreditation requirements and pilot new training. Implementing training in child development at Bigwind Lake Provincial Park, and across all provincial parks, would help to establish quality standards, setting the benchmark for excellence in accessible, inclusive, and engaging recreation and parks programming.

PRO would be pleased to openly dialogue and collaborate with the Ministry regarding the inclusion of the [HIGH FIVE® Principles of Healthy Child Development](#) course as part of training for Naturalists, Discovery Rangers, and other Ontario Park's staff positions that involve creating and delivering programming for children and youth.



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Invest in parks and recreation infrastructure for Town of Bracebridge and surrounding area

Recommendation:

Engage with local municipalities and communities to determine additional infrastructure and resource investments required to support tourism influx.

PRO fully endorses the opening of Bigwind Lake as a full-service provincial park. When in operation, Bigwind Lake Provincial Park will provide valuable outdoor recreation opportunities for Ontarians, out-of-province tourists, and local residents in surrounding areas. The Town of Bracebridge is an active member of PRO and we are excited at the prospect of increased access to recreation and parks in this region of the Province.

The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park will bring economic benefits to the region, such as, increased job opportunities and tourist spending. However, the influx of tourists will also place strain on existing municipal infrastructure, including parks and recreation. Therefore, PRO encourages the Ministry to engage with local municipalities and communities, particularly the District Municipality of Muskoka and the Town of Bracebridge, to determine the additional infrastructure investments and resources that will be required to support increased tourism following the opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park. Engaging local municipalities and communities in the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Management Plan will enhance park planning, holistically linking municipal and provincial parks and recreation systems.

Providing Feedback

PRO appreciates the invitation to provide feedback on themes established in the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan, including, unique recreational opportunities, enhanced retail experiences, Indigenous community involvement, accessibility and inclusion, and green infrastructure design. Please see our remarks below for feedback on some of these themes.

Unique Recreation Opportunities, Accessibility and Inclusion

Feedback 1:

Increase offerings of rentals to include accessible recreation equipment.

The Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan states that recreational equipment rentals such as canoes, kayaks, and bicycles will be offered at the park. In addition to these rental options, we suggest that accessible and adaptive recreation equipment be available for rental. This may include, but is not limited to, all-terrain wheelchairs, adaptive bicycles, and adaptive canoe and kayak accessories. In addition to providing these rentals, staff should be trained in how to properly fit and operate adaptive equipment. The addition of these rentals along with properly trained staff will create more inclusive and equitable experiences for all visitors who engage in recreational pursuits while visiting Bigwind Lake Provincial Park.



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Feedback 2:

Implement multiple formats of navigational and educational information.

According to Statistics Canada, [over 15% of Ontarians predominantly speak a language at home that is neither English nor French](#). Notably, Mandarin, Punjabi, and Spanish [are among the most common](#) non-official languages spoken in Ontarian homes.

To meet the needs of Ontario's diverse populace, PRO encourages the Ministry to develop and implement multiple formats of navigational and educational information. This may include, but is not limited to, producing park maps and brochures in multiple languages, and providing QR codes on interpretive boards that link to different language and audio recording options. We are aware that many interpretive centres across provincial parks in Ontario already provide multiple learning formats, such as audio recordings. However, multiple learning formats are less available on interpretive trail signage. The inclusion of multiple learning formats, especially on trail signage and interpretive boards, will create more equitable recreation opportunities by providing Ontario's diverse language speakers, and those who prefer or require audio formats, with opportunities for deeper learning and engagement.

Indigenous Community Involvement

PRO commends the Ministry for prioritizing Indigenous engagement in the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan. Throughout the development and implementation of the plan, PRO recommends a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to Indigenous community involvement. Below, we have outlined several possible areas of exploration to enhance Indigenous community engagement.

Feedback 1:

Develop park resources, interpretative materials, and signage in Indigenous languages.

Indigenous languages are vitally important to preserving Traditional Indigenous Knowledge Systems and cultures. The [Calls to Action](#) outlined in the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) dedicated an entire section to language and culture, calling upon governments to acknowledge Indigenous education rights and commit financial support to language revitalization and preservation. The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park presents an important opportunity to support Indigenous language revitalization through developing park location names, resources, interpretive materials, and signage in Indigenous languages. PRO recommends that the Ministry collaborates with local Indigenous communities to determine how Indigenous languages can best be incorporated throughout the design and operation of the park.



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Feedback 2:

Centre Traditional Indigenous Knowledge in natural heritage programming and ecological management.

Natural heritage education at provincial parks enhances visitors' understanding of the natural and cultural features of the land on which they live. Additionally, provincial parks play an important role in preserving the ecological integrity of Ontario's vast landscapes.

Historically, [natural heritage education](#) and [Western science](#) have diminished the significance and relevance of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge systems. The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park invites a crucial opportunity to centre Traditional Indigenous Knowledges in natural heritage programming and ecological management practices. The effectiveness of such initiatives will hinge upon extensive engagement with local Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. The Preliminary Management Plan references prescribed burns as a possible resource management tool. Prescribed burns present one opportunity to garner expertise from local Indigenous Knowledge Keepers in matters pertaining to ecological management. Efforts to centre Traditional Indigenous Knowledges in park operations, processes, and natural heritage education could be further augmented through the implementation of an Elder-in-residence program and/or intentional staff recruitment strategies (see Feedback 3 and 4).

Feedback 3:

Implement Elder-in-residence program.

Another possible avenue of exploration may involve the implementation of an Elder-in-residence program. This program could involve hosting an Elder to lead programming and workshops informed by Traditional Indigenous Knowledges. An Elder-in-residence program would expose park visitors to learnings about Indigenous ways of knowing, treaty histories, and inherent Indigenous rights. Furthermore, a program of this kind could create opportunities for local Indigenous communities to gather and engage in ceremonial practices within park boundaries. Of course, the development of an Elder-in-residence program would require further consultation with local Indigenous communities.

Feedback 4:

Develop strategy for intentional recruitment of Indigenous staff.

Ontario Parks provides valuable entry-level opportunities for students in the parks and recreation sector. However, for some youth, transportation limitations create barriers to employment. Therefore, we encourage the Ministry to engage with local Indigenous communities to establish a strategic plan for recruiting and supporting Indigenous youth interested in employment at Bigwind Lake Provincial Park. Plans may include facilitating or providing transportation or accommodation options for youth.



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Feedback 5:

Implement artist-in-residence program.

Several provincial parks across Ontario host artist-in-residence programs. These programs offer a valuable opportunity to demonstrate the linkages between art and ecology, providing visitors with enriching cultural experiences. Establishing an Indigenous artist-in-residence program at Bigwind Provincial Park would highlight the work of an Indigenous artist while also exposing visitors to Indigenous interpretations of Ontario's vast landscapes and traditions of outdoor recreation.

Feedback 6:

Prioritize park access for Indigenous communities.

In 2022, Ontario Parks announced, ["Indigenous people wishing to enter a provincial park within their territory to exercise their Aboriginal and treaty rights, day access is provided free of charge."](#) PRO applauds this decision and supports priority access for Indigenous communities and peoples to exercise their inherent treaty rights. Within the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Management Plan, PRO also encourages the Ministry to consider reducing and/or waiving fees for Indigenous community events taking place within Bigwind Lake Provincial Park. Bigwind Lake could serve as a pilot project, demonstrating the ways in which provincial parks can support Indigenous initiatives of community building and cultural revitalization. The development of fee structures for Indigenous community events would require further consultation with local Indigenous communities.

Feedback 7:

Optimize facility design for Indigenous community use.

Provincial parks house infrastructure that is well designed for community events and gatherings. The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park presents an opportunity to consult with local Indigenous communities to determine how community members and groups might use the park's facilities and infrastructure. As a result, we encourage the Ministry to collaborate with local Indigenous communities on the design features of facilities, so they are optimally designed to support Indigenous community events, gatherings, and ceremonies.

Feedback 8:

Streamline approval processes for Indigenous-led research projects.

Ontario parks are frequently the sites of academic research related to outdoor recreation, ecology, and cultural heritage. The opening of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park presents a unique opportunity to re-examine streamlined research approval processes, particularly for Indigenous-led research. Supporting Indigenous research within Bigwind Lake Provincial Park would be mutually beneficial, uplifting Traditional Indigenous Knowledge Systems while also growing public access to cultural and ecological knowledge of the park.



PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

Feedback 9:

Include consultation expenses in budgetary plan.

PRO commends the Ministry in consulting with Indigenous communities in the management plan of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park. Meaningful consultation is an ongoing relationship building process that must be a continual priority. Therefore, PRO recommends that a yearly Indigenous engagement and consultation budget be established in the financial plan for Bigwind Lake Provincial Park. Establishing this budgetary line will demonstrate the Ministry's commitment to Indigenous engagement and ensure that Indigenous community members are adequately compensated for their feedback and input in the design, plan, and operation of Bigwind Lake Provincial Park.

Conclusion

High quality, accessible outdoor recreation opportunities are integral to the health and well-being of all Ontarians. Provided for the benefit of both individuals and communities, parks and recreation are a public good, in the same ways as education or healthcare. Quality parks and recreation services need to be available to all Ontarians, sustainable and supported at all levels of government. The long-term sustainability of parks and outdoor recreation are only made possible through prioritizing ecological integrity, preservation, and management practices, especially those informed by Traditional Indigenous Knowledges. For this reason, we applaud the Ministry for the Bigwind Lake Provincial Park Preliminary Management Plan. We especially commend the Ministry for prioritizing accessibility and inclusion, ecological integrity, and Indigenous engagement throughout the proposal. We encourage that these priorities continue to be a central focus as the management plan is further developed.

We are pleased to discuss our comments further with the Ministry, should any clarity be required. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this important proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'S. Ane'.

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A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads 'Kim Gavine'.

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