

Seeking Social Equity in National Parks: Experiments with Evaluation in Canada and South Africa

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Many national parks and protected areas worldwide are operating under difficult social and political conditions, including poor and often unjust relations with local communities. Co-management regimes, an increased emphasis on the involvement of indigenous people in management and conservation strategies, and efforts to address tenure have emerged as a result. Yet, controversy over what constitutes an appropriate role for local people persists, and little research has been conducted as yet to systematically evaluate the extent to which parks are socially (and not just ecologically) effective. Our research was a first attempt to evaluate the efficacy with which a purposive sample of six national parks in Canada and South Africa address three central criteria of equity: resolution of land tenure, maintenance of livelihood opportunities and access rights to park resources, and decision-making authority in park governance. The evaluation utilised a 4-point ordinal scale. All but one of the case study parks is found to be achieving or moving toward equity.

Given the contested nature of a large number of protected areas, as well as their current status in negotiations of redress in some nation states, we anticipated that the settlement of land claims would be the most important criterion in determining overall park equity in this study. If a land claim had been settled, we anticipated that the park would perform very well on all other aspects, including access to resources, employment, and governance. This expectation was not supported by the results. This finding is important as it underscores the need for park managers to provide livelihood and employment opportunities and involvement in park governance processes, regardless of the state of any land claims in process or completed. Parks with settled land claims (however acceptable) must still account for and strive to be effective on the other two criteria.

Pertaining to the access criterion, Waterton Lakes in Canada and the Kgalagadi in South Africa, performed poorly because the neighbouring indigenous groups were

required to pay regular access fees into the park unless it was for a cultural (e.g., vision quest) purpose. This left one respondent feeling like they were being “treated like tourists like anyone else”. In the South African parks, an added hardship emerged in the form of threats to livelihoods due to damage causing animals, a point that was largely irrelevant to the Canadian parks. While several of the Canadian parks had programs to encourage the maintenance of cultural ties to the park lands, there did not appear to be the equivalent type of cultural camp in the South African parks.

Lastly, a few parks have been co-managed in name only. Yet, parks with more comprehensive co-management and support from neighbouring indigenous groups demonstrate higher equity scores across a variety of indicators, while parks with lower levels of co-management do less well. To be considered equitable from an indigenous perspective, protected areas managers must protect indigenous property and access rights, while involving them in protected area management and decision-making (including co-management or its functional equivalent where appropriate) on a fair and equitable basis.

Women from the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations explaining the uses of moose meat from a moose killed by local hunters during a cultural camp called “Healing Broken Connections” in Kluane National Park, Yukon Territory, Canada



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