IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2017 **(archived)**
Finalised on 10 November 2017

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Gros Morne National Park. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Gros Morne National Park

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Canada
Inscribed in: 1987
Criteria:
(vii) (viii)

Site description:
Situated on the west coast of the island of Newfoundland, the park provides a rare example of the process of continental drift, where deep ocean crust and the rocks of the earth's mantle lie exposed. More recent glacial action has resulted in some spectacular scenery, with coastal lowland, alpine plateau, fjords, glacial valleys, sheer cliffs, waterfalls and many pristine lakes. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2017 Conservation Outlook

Good with some concerns

The outlook for Gros Morne National Park is good, with some concerns about the state of the native forest in Gros Morne National Park, the management of snowmobiling in the park, and the on-going potential threat from oil and gas development in the region. The site’s protection and management system and its implementation are mostly effective, however, the State Party has not implemented the 2014 or 2016 recommendations of the World Heritage Committee to complete an SEA and create a buffer zone around the park. While the park’s geological outstanding universal values and the majority of scenic values are not being impacted at this point in time, biodiversity values remain at risk.

Current state and trend of VALUES

Low Concern
Trend: Stable

Geological values and the majority of scenic values are well-preserved and not being impacted by any serious threats.

Overall THREATS

Low Threat

Threats to the geological values of the site are low. The outstanding beauty of the coastline could be compromised by oil exploration in the future. Progress is being made in addressing the threat to the native forest from hyperabundant moose, however this remains a serious concern. Incomplete implementation of the park snowmobiling plan poses a threat to the park’s biodiversity and to the experience of non-motorized park users.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Some Concern

The legal protection and management framework is strong and the site engages with neighbouring communities. However, the World Heritage Committee’s decision recommending Canada put in place a buffer zone around the park has not been implemented, and implementation of the management plan for snowmobiling in the park is incomplete.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

► An area of exceptional natural beauty

Criterion:(vii)

An outstanding wilderness environment of spectacular landlocked, freshwater fjords and glacier-scoured headlands in an ocean setting (World Heritage Committee, 2015).

► An internationally significant illustration of the process of continental drift

Criterion:(viii)

• The rocks of Gros Morne National Park collectively present an internationally significant illustration of the process of tectonic plate interactions along the eastern coast of North America and contribute greatly to the body of knowledge and understanding of plate tectonics and the geological evolution of ancient mountain belts.
• In glacier-scoured highlands and spectacular fjords, glaciation has made visible the park’s many geological features. There are classic, textbook examples of monumental earth-building and modifying forces that are unique in terms of their clarity, expression, and ease of access.
• The area is geologically diverse with areas of Ordovician sedimentary rocks, Precambrian granite and gneiss, Palaeozoic serpentinized ultra-basic rocks, gabbros, volcanic and Lower Palaeozoic sedimentary rocks, exposed oceanic crust, mantle, a section of ancient Mohorovicic Discontinuity, and other distinctive geological features

(World Heritage Committee, 2015; Parks Canada, 2009).

Other important biodiversity values

► Plant and faunal diversity

Gros Morne's coastal location, climate, unique and varied geology and dramatic topography shaped by periods of glaciation over 2 million years have created a diversity of habitats, including an arctic-alpine environment on the plateau, boreal forest dominated by balsam fir on the slopes and inland valleys, a large area of serpentine barrens, and an extensive coastal lowland.

These support 36 distinct vegetation types and communities, with vascular species and bryophytes, representing about 60% of Newfoundland's insular flora, including approximately 100 species considered rare on the Island of Newfoundland. Faunal diversity resembles an oceanic rather than continental-shelf island and is markedly reduced compared with the mainland). Arctic hare, woodland caribou, and Newfoundland marten are three mammal species of particular interest in the park. Gros Morne is a significant breeding site for harlequin duck, blackpoll warbler, common tern and arctic tern, a nesting site for bald eagle, rock ptarmigan and American tree sparrow, and a stopover for migrating shore birds. Anadromous Atlantic salmon and arctic char are found in park waters and also in permanent freshwater form in certain landlocked lakes on the Long Range Mountains. (IUCN, 1987; Parks Canada, 2009)

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

Low Threat

Threats to the geological values of the site are low.
There remains serious concern about the impact of hyperabundant moose on forest health. After seven years, the moose management program has reduced moose densities to near the threshold identified for a healthy balsam fir forest ecosystem, and vegetation is showing some early signs of recovery, however the overall status of the forest remains poor.
Snowmobiling in the park has likely increased beyond limits set out in the park's snowmobile management plan, although the monitoring system is inadequate to track numbers definitively Arctic hare populations in the area have declined significantly, which is a cause for concern.
While forest harvesting around the park has declined in recent years, and deferrals have been put in place to the northeast of the park, a new major hydro-electric transmission corridor will further fragment ecosystems to the north and east of the park.

► Utility / Service Lines

Low Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)
Outside site

Two high voltage hydro transmission lines (138 kV and 69 kV)—the only lines supplying the northern portion of the Great Northern Peninsula—run the length of the park lowlands. Because trees are stunted by the coastal climate, the power lines, and the wide cut corridors, are visible for most of their length. These lines require multiple vehicle access points for maintenance. A telephone line also runs parallel to a hydro line in the sensitive Tablelands area.

► Utility / Service Lines

Data Deficient
Outside site

A major new 1,100 km, 900 megawatt High Voltage direct current (HVdc) transmission line (Labrador Island Link) with an average corridor width of 60m is being constructed to the north and east of the park to transmit power

from a new hydro-electric project in Labrador across the island of Newfoundland. Due in part to public concern about its impact on the Gros Morne's natural beauty, the transmission line was routed outside the park. However, this new corridor may be visible from some parts of the park, particularly the northeastern corner, will fragment habitat used by caribou and marten, disrupt the connectivity between Gros Morne National Park and the Main River Waterway Park, and will result in easier access and potentially greater harvesting pressures on wildlife north and east of the park. (nalcor Energy, Muskrat Falls project overview)

► Housing/ Urban Areas

Low Threat
Outside site

Cottage lots have been made available on enclave land the community of Rocky Harbour, which is surrounded by the park. This development is close to the base of Gros Morne Mountain. A road has been built to service them. This area is now damaged by all-terrain vehicle use, and the disruption is compromising important autumn feeding barrens for caribou, black bears, and moose. Damage has so far been restricted to the enclave lands, but the development is visible from highlands within the park. Some cottages are along the shore of Deer Arm Pond, which is used by Atlantic salmon. There is pressure to allow motorized boats on the lake.

► Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

Data Deficient
Inside site, localised(<5%)

Parks Canada is currently implementing a major infrastructure program in national parks. In Gros Morne this includes widening a section of highway, expanding parking lots and campgrounds, diversifying accommodations, dredging a section of Western Brook Pond, and widening, realigning and hardening trails. This program will upgrade visitor services, and in some cases could enhance ecological integrity through projects like culvert replacements, however it has not been subject to public consultation or an assessment of its impacts (including cumulative impacts) on park values.

► Invasive Non-Native/ Alien Species, Hyper-Abundant Species

High Threat

Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

Introduced moose are hyper-abundant and have no significant predators on the island of Newfoundland (wolves were extirpated in the 1930s). Moose browsing has reduced or stopped forest regeneration in a significant area of the park, resulting in balsam fir and mixed wood forests being converted to open areas dominated by grasses and shrubs, including exotic invasive species such as Canada thistle and coltsfoot. (>40 km2) (Burzynski et al., 2005; Parks Canada, 2009). High moose population may also have led to high predator populations, increasing stress on the native woodland caribou of the park.

► Logging/ Wood Harvesting

Low Threat
Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

Wood harvesting for domestic use by local residents for two generations was a condition in the federal-provincial park establishment agreement. While this removes a relatively small amount of wood, the harvesting puts an additional strain on the park's forest. Extensive patch logging within the park and within the enclave communities has affected the look of the forest and communities, and provides an opportunity for invasive plants and animals to gain a foothold in disturbed habitat areas. Harvesting removes older lichen-covered conifers which are an important secondary winter food source for woodland caribou. It also increases the proportion of early-succession stage forest which encourages moose browsing.

► Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

Data Deficient
Inside site, throughout(>50%)

An agreement to manage and cap snowmobile use in the park according to a plan crafted through a multi-stakeholder process in 2005, has not been implemented. The cap has likely been exceeded, areas off-limits to snowmobiles are not being fully respected, and monitoring is inadequate to determine status or impacts on park resources. For example, there is no air quality monitoring, very little vegetation research, and no accurate measure of the number of snowmobile trips in the park, as per the plan. This activity

affects the scenic values of the park, the experiences of other recreationists, and could be putting stress on sensitive species in high use areas. Impacts on woodland caribou and Arctic hare are of particular concern (2015 monitoring showed that the hare population had declined to an all-time low) (Parks Canada, 2009; Parks Canada Information Centre for Ecosystems, 2017). Areas of prime Arctic hare habitat are being heavily snowmobiled.

► Logging/ Wood Harvesting

Low Threat
Outside site

There was extensive logging along the southern and eastern boundaries of the park, affecting the viewscape both outside and inside the park, and connectivity for some migrating and dispersing species. This cutting has abated in recent years, although it is still occurring and is visible from route 430 and the scenic look-off. In 2014 the provincial government released a 10-year forest strategy that includes a deferral of industrial harvesting within a large intact landscape area adjacent to the northeast boundary of the park (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014). This will help maintain landscape connectivity and caribou habitat, although it will be transected by a major new electricity transmission corridor (see below).

Potential Threats

High Threat

Potential petroleum exploration activity in the vicinity of Gros Morne remains a possibility and would be of major consequence to the property’s exceptional natural beauty and biodiversity if it were to go ahead.
Changes in extent and duration of ice cover and in frost-free season due to climate change could affect the site’s ecosystems, and coastal erosion could impact its geological features.

► Oil/ Gas exploration/development

High Threat
Outside site

Potential petroleum exploration activity in the vicinity of Gros Morne remains a possibility and would be of major consequence to the property’s

exceptional natural beauty and biodiversity if it were to go ahead.

A 2013 proposal to drill within an enclave community surrounded by the park did not go ahead because the province announced an operational “pause” on any exploration involving hydraulic fracturing in late 2014, and the offshore regulatory authority did not renew the company’s exploration license. While this “pause” on hydraulic fracturing remains in place, there is no assurance it will be maintained in the long-term, nor does it apply to conventional oil and gas exploration.

There are active exploration licenses south of the park (Lark Harbour in the Bay of Islands area), and about 80km offshore (the Old Harry prospect). Preliminary research shows that currents in the Gulf of St. Lawrence could transport spills from these projects to the park (Bourgault et al, 2014). While there is currently no opportunity to bid for licenses offshore directly adjacent to Gros Morne, there is no mechanism in place to prevent the bid system from re-opening this area in the future.

Petroleum industry activity along the Gros Morne coastline would compromise the integrity of the property’s outstanding natural beauty, while potential oil spills associated with exploration and development could damage the natural beauty and harm marine and coastal biodiversity.

► **Habitat Shifting/ Alteration, Storms/Flooding**

High Threat
Inside site, throughout(>50%)
Outside site

Changes in extent and duration of ice cover and frost-free season could affect the site’s ecosystems.
Erosion from extreme weather events could impact coastal geological features.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Some Concern

The park encloses several communities, most employees live in these towns, and the park is one of the largest employers, both directly and indirectly. There are opportunities for communities and individuals to interact with park management and usually relationships are constructive. Parks Canada hosts a “Mayors Forum” approximately four times per year for mayors of enclave communities. The park co-operating association (a non-profit volunteer “friends” organization) helps to forge strong ties between people and the park. The snowmobile advisory committee has fewer stakeholders involved than in the past, and no longer includes environmental NGOs in its membership. However, lack of public consultation, especially regarding infrastructure development, is a concern. Consultation amongst local communities and councils has been adequate, but consultation with the broader public who often represent other points of view, has been severely lacking. The planned development of larger parking areas and upgrading of Western Brook Pond access trail to accommodate more visitors has not gone through any kind of public consultation process. A single member currently represents non-snowmobilers. The moose hunt in the park has allowed hunters to use snowmobiles in areas previously off-limit to snowmobiles.

► Legal framework

Some Concern

The legal framework for the park itself is strong, centering on the Canada National Parks Act and federal Species at Risk legislation. However, changes to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act in 2012 mean that Parks Canada is no longer legally obligated to conduct environmental assessments for projects in national parks, although a federal review of this framework is currently underway. Furthermore, there is currently no legislation in place to prevent oil exploration from occurring in the community enclaves or in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

► Enforcement

Some Concern

There are three full time enforcement positions for the field unit (three

national parks and three national historic sites, which includes Gros Morne), however one is currently unstaffed. This past season, enforcement in the backcountry was limited due to being short staffed, and as a result snowmobilers were frequently entering no snowmobile areas.

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Some Concern

There is no buffer zone around the park, and no legal mechanism to formally integrate Gros Morne into management of the broader landscape. Informal dialogue occurs between Parks Canada and the provincial government and Parks Canada provides comments on environmental assessments for development proposals near the park.

► Management system

Mostly Effective

There is a legal requirement for the park to develop a management plan which is approved by the federal Minister and tabled in Parliament. The plan must be reviewed every 10 years, and a review is due to be completed in 2020, having been delayed by one year.

► Management effectiveness

Mostly Effective

There is an ecological integrity monitoring program in place, and the results have been presented to local communities. There has been no publicly available State of Park report published since 2005. There has been no management effectiveness assessment conducted for the park.

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Some Concern

Decisions issued by the World Heritage in 2014 and 2016 related to potential petroleum development in the vicinity of the property have not been implemented.
In 2014 the Committee acknowledged the province’s announcement of a moratorium on petroleum development using hydraulic fracturing, but noted that this did not provide long-term security for the site. They requested that

Canada complete a strategic environmental assessment of the impacts of petroleum development on the OUV of the property, and establish a buffer zone around the property before a moratorium was lifted.
In 2016 the Committee issued a follow up decision noting that the 2014 recommendations had not been implemented, and disagreeing with Canada's assessment that existing legislation and regulations provide adequate long-term protection for the property. The Committee reiterated its recommendation that a strategic environmental assessment be completed, and that a buffer zone and wider protection measures be put in place before the moratorium on hydraulic fracturing is lifted.
To date, these recommendations have not been implemented.
The "moratorium" referred to by the Committee is not a legal or long-term measure, but rather a "pause" put in place as an operational decision of the Province's Department of Natural Resources. This decision only applies to petroleum exploration using hydraulic fracturing, not to conventional oil and gas development. (NLHFRP, 2016)
In June 2016, a Panel examining hydraulic fracturing in Newfoundland and Labrador recommended that the operational "pause" on issuing licenses for petroleum exploration using hydraulic fracturing be continued. They also recommended that a buffer zone be created around Gros Morne National Park, citing overwhelming public support for the idea based on public opinion polling (NLHFRP, 2016). To date the provincial government has not responded formally to these recommendations.

► Boundaries

Mostly Effective

The park boundary is clearly cut in most high-use areas (the lowland). Parts of the eastern boundary are very hard to discern, with no markers visible.

► Sustainable finance

Data Deficient

Data deficient

► Staff training and development

Data Deficient

Data deficient

► Sustainable use

Mostly Effective

The Gros Morne Institute for Sustainable Tourism, a shared initiative of Parks Canada and Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, operates out of the park and trains tourism operators from throughout eastern Canada in sustainable techniques for communities.
The park incorporates some “green” and sustainable techniques into its operations (solar powered fans, biological waste processing for washrooms, efficient heating and cooling systems, etc.).

► Education and interpretation programs

Mostly Effective

The quality of personal interpretation declined in recent years but this seems to be improving. Gros Morne continues to be a partner in outdoor education programs, and while the provincial government has cut its outdoor education program, the Qalipu First Nation has joined as a partner.
Many visitors interact with commercial and other non-Parks Canada staff through tour boats, the Bonne Bay Marine Station and other venues in and around the park.

► Tourism and visitation management

Mostly Effective

Mostly effective, but there is a need for sustainability with increased visitation - hiking and walking is one of the top activities for people visiting Gros Morne National Park, and trail infrastructure is inadequate to handle the increased numbers. A longer-term strategy is required for issues such as the construction and maintenance of environmentally suitable pit toilets, hiking and walking trails (including maintenance programs, carrying capacity, future demand, etc), and carrying capacity on backcountry routes.

► Monitoring

Some Concern

There is an ecological integrity monitoring system in place, although public reporting has diminished over the past decade, with no new State of Park report produced since 2005. Resources are inadequate to fully deal with monitoring and threat remediation, for example, there is a lack of adequate monitoring of snowmobiling activity, Arctic hare, and caribou.

► Research

Mostly Effective

Mostly effective

Overall assessment of protection and management

Some Concern

The legal protection and management framework is strong and the site engages with neighbouring communities. However, the World Heritage Committee's decision recommending Canada put in place a buffer zone around the park has not been implemented, and implementation of the management plan for snowmobiling in the park is incomplete.

► Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Some Concern

The World Heritage Committee's decision recommending that Canada put in place a buffer zone around the park to safeguard the site from potential petroleum exploration activities has not been implemented. There are inadequate mechanisms for cooperatively managing the area around the park.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

► An area of exceptional natural beauty

Low Concern
Trend:Stable

Scenic values are currently well-preserved, however, there is a possibility that oil and gas development could compromise these values in the future. In winter, snowmobiling activity is compromising the experience of some non-motorized recreational users.

► An internationally significant illustration of the process of continental drift

Good
Trend:Stable

Geological values of the site are well preserved.

Summary of the Values

► Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

Low Concern

Trend: Stable

Geological values and the majority of scenic values are well-preserved and not being impacted by any serious threats.

► Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values

High Concern

Trend: Stable

Biodiversity values are at risk from hyperabundant moose and invasive exotic plants, although there are early signs of improvement due to management measures. The park documented a significant decline in Arctic hare in 2015, and there is concern about the well-being of caribou populations. Motorized access to backcountry areas may be a factor.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Outdoor recreation and tourism

Gros Morne is the most important tourism draw in western Newfoundland, and is the centerpiece of the province's billion dollar plus tourism industry. In 2015 there were 207,000 visitors to Gros Morne, an increase of 12.5% over the previous year, and more than double the visitation at any other destination in the province (NLHFRP, 2016). The direct and indirect effects on the economy of the Island are of major importance. Scenes within the park have been used as the advertising icons for the province for many years. The park continues to attract visitors from around the world.

► Traditional agriculture

Certain local residents have the right to personal harvest of firewood, boat building timbers, and snowshoe hare.

► Legal subsistence hunting of wild game

Being able to assist the park in the removal of over-abundant moose has been beneficial to local and regional hunters and their families.

► History and tradition, Sacred natural sites or landscapes, Cultural identity and sense of belonging

Gros Morne has become a cultural hub in western Newfoundland, hosting annual festivals and events featuring artists, writers, musicians, theatre, much of which is inspired by the beauty of the land and seascape, and the traditional way of life on the west coast of Newfoundland.

Summary of benefits

The site provides significant direct and indirect economic benefits to the region, is the centrepiece of Newfoundland and Labrador's billion dollar tourism industry, and has become a centre for arts and culture in western Newfoundland.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	Parks Canada		Moose management program
2	Parks Canada		Piping plover nest site protection
3	Parks Canada	From: 2009 To: 2015	Beaver colony monitoring (periodic)
4	Parks Canada		Resident winter bird monitoring
5	Parks Canada	From: 2015	Brook trout thermal habitat assessment
6	Parks Canada	To: 2016	Snowbed monitoring

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