

To the top of Parks Canada

As Parks Canada's centennial celebrations were getting underway, the agency's chief executive officer, Alan Latourelle (pictured in Torngat Mountains National Park in Labrador), sat down for a conversation with the editors of *Canadian Geographic*. The complete interview appears here:

CG Give us a sense of what the centennial of Parks Canada means for the agency.

A.L. For Parks Canada, and for Canada, it is really celebrating the first national park organization in the world. This is a country that had the foresight and leadership to be the first to build an exceptional system of natural and heritage places. J. B. Harkin [first commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch in 1911] and others before us set the way for a system plan that is representative of our country. So, for me, it is a celebration of who we are as Canadians and of the foresight and leadership of past heads of Parks Canada and past prime ministers.

CG How do you go about celebrating that? Tell us about some of the events planned for 2011 that will bring that to life?

A.L. It started this weekend with Winterlude here in Ottawa, where the opening ceremony included a project called the National Parks Project. Fifty musicians and filmmakers from Canada went through our national parks last summer and each produced a one-hour documentary. Some of the best were being showcased at Winterlude.

We want to connect Canadians to their stories, to our national parks, to our national historic sites, and invite them to celebrate with us. But we also want to bring our places to major urban centres, so Canadians who may not have the time or money to get out of cities really get to appreciate what we have in Canada.

We'll have celebrations in each of the parks and sites, too, and we are identifying and finalizing the list of the top 100 events. For example, we have a partnership with the Royal Canadian Mint to create a commemorative coin. We have several major initiatives like that.

CG With Parks Canada entering its second century, what major objectives and challenges do you face in the years ahead?

A.L. Completing the national parks system will always be a challenge. We are the generation that has the opportunity to complete this great system. Competing land use for these special places is still a challenge, but also offers great opportunities and rewards. As we move forward in completing the system, we are well on our way to achieving it in terms of partnerships with aboriginal communities and provincial and territorial governments.

Connecting Canadians to nature and history, broadly speaking, is still a challenge. And it is becoming more and more of a challenge because of leisure-time limitations that people have. People refer to a nature deficit and a history deficit in the younger generations, so we are working with young Canadians, one of our key audiences, to really connect them with the stories of Canada and the magnificent places of Canada.

As our knowledge increases on both heritage and nature, the complexity on the conservation front becomes more challenging. In the past, basically, if we could protect the wildlife from poaching, we met our conservation objective, in simple terms. Now what our science is showing us is that the relationship between species is the challenge. If you look at Banff, for example, as the elk population goes up, the wolf population follows and then the caribou goes down, because they all go into the same areas. How we manage that interrelationship of species and when we intervene, versus when do we let nature take its course, is a balancing act.

CG If you look back at the past 100 years, what would you say were some of the most significant milestones or turning points in the organization's history?

A.L. Establishing the first park organization started with national parks only, but once the organization was established, it was looking at reflecting the diversity of Canada geography and wilderness. But we were missing the stories of Canada, which are defining moments of our country. So the national historic sites program was put forward in 1917, again from an idea by Harkin. He also called for a tourism organization to be established in Canada because of what he saw as the benefits of

our national parks. So, I would say starting the organization was the first defining moment.

In the 1990s, there was a significant expansion in our legislative base, in terms of the new National Parks Act, the Parks Agency Act, and the National Marine Conservation Areas Act. And there were two time frames where we saw significant expansion of the system. In the 1970s, a lot of expansion in Quebec and in Eastern Canada, and in the past decade we expanded our system by 66 percent, in terms of land mass in our national parks and national marine conservation areas.

CG Was the expansion driven by recommendations from Parks Canada to the political side or the other way?

A.L. It comes from both. With the national parks, for example, we have a solid system plan to represent the 39 natural regions of Canada, Very few countries have a structured approach like that. We know which natural region is protected or is not represented yet, so we have projects going on in most of the unrepresented regions. So Parks Canada does the leg work. But our political masters play a very critical role, as does parliament.

CG The scope of the system is impressive, geographically, as well as in the range of science and history that Parks Canada is responsible for.

A.L. The diversity of our programs may not be widely known, because most people think of national parks only, but we have many national historic sites that are critical, such as the Rideau Canal, the Lachine Canal, the Fortress of Louisbourg. There is real diversity in our portfolio.

Among our marine conservation areas, Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park is a \$100-million-a-year tourism program that we manage in partnership with Quebec. It is a leader in terms of conservation and it represents the diversity of types of jobs in the agency, from underwater archaeologists to park wardens to conservation lab technicians. It's quite a diverse organization.

CG It is interesting that you speak first about the creation of the agency as a milestone. There must have been enormous challenges in building something from scratch that has such a wide purview.

A.L. We are fortunate that we have had a long history of achievement in Parks Canada. Establishing the agency and legislation officially helped to develop the credibility, but it is also a serious responsibility that we as current members of the Parks Canada team carry, because this is an organization we want to see in 100 years to celebrate the second centennial. Each of us builds on the work and the exceptional contributions of past contributors.

CG It is a terrific mandate to have, to be responsible for the conservation of natural places as well as the cultural and historical sides.

A.L. In the past, the link between nature and culture was very, very separate. We had heritage buildings or heritage places and we had national parks. As we worked with aboriginal communities up north, for example, there is no difference between the aboriginal history of use of the land and the natural use of the land, if I can put it that way. More and more, we are seeing the importance of ecological values and heritage values merging.

CG This brings to mind the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and National Marine Conservation Area, where the area goes from the seafloor to the mountaintops. Those lines that we draw between land and sea and history and nature are, in some cases, arbitrary.

A.L. I had the privilege of being there this summer with Guujaaw, president of the Haida Nation, and a lot of our team members. In fact, our superintendent in that park is Haida. Again, nature and culture are so intertwined. We have done some surveying work there which showed that some Haida villages are 150 metres under the water. So you can really see the origin of the place from the natural and cultural perspective.

CG Does the agency work with external groups, such as the Heritage Canada Foundation across the street?

A.L. We work with all types of partners and stakeholders. The "My Park Pass" program, for example, is a partnership with Nature Canada and The Historical-Dominion Institute.

CG How does Parks Canada balance the need to uphold its conservation mandate and at the same time operate in the real economic world, bringing visitors, generating revenue and paying the bills?

A.L. Generating revenue is a reality within the budgetary situation that we've always been in, but I must say it is never only about generating revenue. There are revenues that accrue to us as a result of visitation, but it is never the driving force. I always go back to the dedication clause in the National Parks Act written by Harkin in 1930: "The Parks are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment and such Parks will be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." To me, it's about protecting parks for Canadians and it's how we work with the public and our partners to get as many Canadians to experience their stories and diversity. If we do our jobs well, they become better stewards as a result of their visits.

CG One of the objectives is to acquire or conserve lands within the 39 ecological zones in Canada. How far along to that goal would you say Parks Canada is today?

A.L. We currently have 28 natural regions represented and over the next few years we have several parks that I expect will complete the feasibility study process to be able to move forward as new national parks. So, we are well on our way on the vast majority of the 39. At different stages, but well on our way or we have consultation process in place.

CG Mealy Mountains in Labrador is the one of the newest. Are there others you can you tell us about that are on the list?

A.L. Well we have several that we are working on currently: South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen, Gulf Islands National Marine Conservation Area, Strait of Georgia, Manitoba Lowlands, East Arm of Great Slave Lake, Sable Island, the expansion of Nahanni National Park Reserve. There are close to 10 that we are working on.

CG Beyond representing all of the regions, what other key factors would you say go into the decision to propose a new park or conservation area?

A.L. It is always grounded in representing natural regions, and the philosophy behind it involves both scientific assessment and viewing it as a gift for future generations, so that 100 years from now Canadians will be able to experience the diversity and the richness of Canada. So, the 39 regions are the starting point, but from there we look at opportunities within those and assess the best fit for representation and economic opportunity. We look at conservation opportunities that we would benefit from and also opportunities for education and working with aboriginal and local communities.

CG It's a complex set of criteria that you have to wrestle with.

A.L. It is, and none of them are the same. The realities are quite different. For example, in the 1970s, the federal government and Parks Canada went to the East Arm of Great Slave Lake and said they wanted to establish a park. They were thrown out of the area. The Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation was quite clear that they were not prepared to have the model that we had elsewhere at that time, so it stayed on the shelf for close to 30 years. I had the privilege to go and meet with the elders and the chief about seven years now. I spent a week on the land with them, getting to know the place, getting to understand their culture and the history of the place, and now we are working together to establish a national park there.

CG The creation of Mealy Mountains National Park followed a very different process compared to, say, Gros Morne National Park. This indicates that things that were learned over the years have been put into place.

A.L. We all learn from the things that have been successful and the things we should have done differently. Decades ago, in some cases, we established parks through expropriation, for example. We are not doing that now. We have become international leaders in working with aboriginal communities as key partners in the process. Nobody does that like Canada and like Parks Canada. The partnership between the Dehcho First Nations and Parks Canada on the expansion of Nahanni National Park Reserve is a key example of our leadership internationally. The same is true for the partnership between Parks Canada, the Haida Nation and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in terms of the Gwaii Haanas National Marine Conservation Area.

CG As a CEO, of course, the buck stops with you. When you look at the budgets you have today, how do they compare to 10 to 20 years ago? Do you feel Parks Canada is better resourced financially now than it was?

A.L. If you ask heads of national parks internationally, nobody has enough money, but that is always the reality. We are doing extremely well. When I look back 20 years ago, our budget was about \$295 million. When I became CEO in 2002, our budget was \$395 million. Currently it's \$800 million. About \$200 million of that is economic action plan investments, so our base is about \$600 million.

Clearly, our system has grown, but we are still doing fairly well federally in terms of investment. For example, we are investing \$90 million over the next five years in ecological restoration initiatives in national parks. Very few countries are putting in that type of investment, in terms of ecological restoration.

CG If you made a pie chart showing how you allocate your annual budget, how would it divide up?

A.L. Of the \$600 million, about \$125 million is for capital investment in our heritage or contemporary infrastructure — roads, bridges, campgrounds, canals, and the historical fabric. Of the remaining \$475 million, about 60 percent of it is salaries for our science programs and the services we offer to visitors. The remaining 40 percent is for goods and services that we purchase — vehicles, fuel to operate snowplows, all of our infrastructure, and so on.

CG With so many programs and competing interestst, it must be a complicated challenge to allocate the funding.

A.L. The investments we make in programs, conservation and services in each local community are important. There are jobs, economic benefits and local purchasing power. Parks Canada is a very decentralized organization, with 42 parks and 167 national historical sites, and even several communities in different sections of any given park.

If you look at Cape Breton Highlands National Park in Nova Scotia, there is Chéticamp and Ingonish, two very different communities, expecting economic benefits and employment from our operations. So how to divvy up the budget among all of these interests is always a challenge. And, again, through our

consultation processes with local communities, each of our parks and sites must ask what the long-term visions are and what the key priorities and strategies are. This is another area where few national park organizations are as effective at engaging the public respectfully and fully in terms of the management of our areas.

If you look at Banff National Park as a practical example, every year we have an annual planning forum — a day and a half — where we are held to account by our stakeholders and partners as to what we said we would do and did we achieve it. It is also an opportunity to engage them into the direction that we should be taking for those parks.

CG Where do the greatest demands come to you from the public, in terms of what they request of Parks Canada; for example: more visitor services or establishment of new parks or historic sites?

A.L. The South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen National Park proposal in British Columbia is a good example of a park that would be readily accessible to the public. It has tourism, economic and conservation benefits. But what we are seeing is a change in demands from Canadians as the demography of the country is changing. A lot of people in my generation are retiring and are relatively well off financially. The type of experience they are looking for is quite different compared to the past. They are looking for a wilderness experience in terms of the hiking or cross-country skiing, but they want a good meal and to sleep in a comfortable bed at night. Generally, that is the trend. So how we cater to that part of our population while still keeping the wilderness character of our parks is a challenge to us.

Young Canadians expect very dynamic experiences in our national historic sites, so how do we adjust to that? For example, we have new programs that use GPS technology, new programs with geocaching, and new programs in terms of exploring, where people walking through a national park or national historic site and learn, through technologies, about the exceptional stories of those places.

CG Speaking of national historic sites, could you speak to the challenges in encouraging return visitors and at the same time having new Canadians come to hear those stories?

A.L. When we started on the program of renewal of our historic sites, we thought we were the only country that have that challenge. Then we started to talk to our colleagues in the United States and other places and learned that everyone is facing a decline, not only in visitation but in connection to these places. What we are trying to do is renew this type of program, protecting the fundamentals that should not change but changing the nature of the experience, reflecting different interests by different groups. So we have a diversity of activities: there is the ongoing day to day programs and then there are special events or opportunities for Canadians to connect with these places.

Because a lot of the national historic sites are in urban settings, what we are really trying to do is create a gathering place for local communities and for Canadians to come and celebrate the best of what Canada has to offer.

CG And to heighten awareness of the value of heritage architecture.

A.L. Exactly. Those opportunities to talk about heritage values and to get out the stories of great Canadians and what they have achieved on behalf of all of us.

CG One Parks Canada program makes reference to creating new built-heritage conservation tools. Can you explain what that means?

A.L. This is a partnership we had with the federal, provincial and territorial governments to develop new approaches to conservation of built heritage in Canada. In one generation we have lost 20 percent. So, how do we stop that decline? Working with them, we are developing a historic places initiative. For example, we developed for the first time an inventory of heritage places in Canada. There are approximately 13,000 properties — I could be off by a thousand — listed on a register that is managed jointly by the provinces and territories. Together, we developed the standards and guidelines, so the average Canadian or private-sector business that wants to rehabilitate a heritage building knows the types of things they need to consider to protect the heritage fabric. Supplementing that, we have made a \$20-million investment in the non-profit sector in terms of a historic sites cost-share program. Through this partnership funding, the government of Canada helps protect national historic sites that are owned by non-profit organizations.

CG How important are collaborations — the need to work with partners — in fulfilling your mandate?

A.L. I don't think there is one single aspect of our mandate for which partnerships are not critical. It could be on conservation: for example, the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret to Grasslands National Park is a partnership with the World Wildlife Fund, Toronto Zoo, universities, the U.S. National Park Service and the U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Service. It's the same in terms of tourism: we offer an experience in the parks, but often people stay outside of the parks, and so how do we partner with local communities? When people visit Gros Morne, they are not only visiting the national park; they are getting a Newfoundland experience. So partnerships are key there. In terms of built heritage: none of us has enough funding with the cultural and heritage assets that we all have, so how do we partner in terms of best practices? Collaboration is critical. Outreach education is the same: the My Park Pass program is a partnership with the Historica-Dominion Institute, using their networks to get into the classrooms. So partnerships are part of our day-to-day life.

CG How are the challenges in managing the northern parks different from those in the south. I suppose the objective there is to ensure they are not loved to death, but at the same time you do want visitors to experience them.

A.L. We are learning and working with aboriginal communities and the territorial governments. Clearly, at this stage, the level of visitation is nowhere near what we see in our southern parks. But go back 125 years ago to when Banff was created; it was considered a wilderness area, where only the wealthy could go by train or a day or two horse-back ride to get to there. It is very similar if you look at Nahanni or some of the northern parks these days, but in 100 years it may be a totally different situation. So we are protecting the experience of the future.

Having said that, I will use Torngat Mountains National Park, the most recently legislated park we have, as an example. Working with the Labrador Inuit Association, we have established a base camp where, basically, scientists work. Parks Canada programs and visitation — in terms of tourism — are also run out of the base camp. Working with the Labrador Inuit Association, we provide an

experience with high-quality food being served and quite comfortable accommodations, which are temporary but available for some segments of the population. But like I did, a lot of people sleep in tents when they go there. That is where we are heading in terms of our northern park service: how do we work with northern communities to put basic infrastructure in place and attract more visitors? After all, these are some of the most exceptional places on the planet.

We are also trying to bring awareness of these parks to Canadians in urban centres, but there are opportunities to build respectful and sustainable infrastructure to accommodate more Canadians in the North.

CG It is apropos that you mentioned the Torngats, because our next question is about a more of a delicate issue. You may recall we sent a writer there for a cover story a couple of years ago. At almost every campsite or beach on his kayak journey along the coast, he encountered polar bears. He wrote about this and examined Parks Canada's policy on the use of firearms in parks. It is a serious dilemma: the safety of visitors versus sensitivity to wildlife itself.

A.L. It is a challenge in most parks, because different parks have different types of species and different risks. So as you travel in national parks, there is always some level of risk. What we do best, really, is manage that risk. It may be avalanches; it may be wildlife. How do we provide the best educational program and support system for visitors to truly experience these places?

We do have a unique challenge with polar bears in northern parks, but it provides an opportunity to work with the aboriginal communities. I also saw a lot of polar bears when I was at Torngat, but I was accompanied by an Inuit bear guardian, and it really added to the quality of my experience. They are there to protect against polar bears in an unfortunate circumstance — and it has not happened yet — but part of it is also that they are great stewards of the land and storytellers about the history of the Inuit people and their connection to the land.

CG So it can be turned into an opportunity.

A.L. It is a huge opportunity. The other element is that when we create national parks up north we do make a commitment to aboriginal communities of

economic and employment opportunities, and this is one small way of make that contribution economically as well.

CG Speaking of firearms and delicate questions, the issue of park wardens carrying sidearms seems to have faded from public consciousness. Are you satisfied with how this issue has been resolved?

A.L. We put in place an efficient, effective law-enforcement program. The objective was to get up to 100 people doing full-time enforcement, and I am very proud of the team we put in place.

CG Is it fully staffed?

A.L. Well we will never get to 100, because of people retiring and all kinds of changes that are occurring, but we have the program in place across Canada, and again, with some of the most professional and exceptional people you can find in wildlife enforcement.

CG So the responsibility has now been handed back from the RCMP to the wardens?

A.L. We have been back into law enforcement since the Cabinet decision two years ago, and carrying out our responsibilities very professionally. One thing that is unique about Parks Canada's law-enforcement unit in comparison to other law-enforcement units, in general terms, is that we have visitors in our places. We are there to take care of our visitors and for them to have exceptional experience, and we are there to protect our heritage and natural values. We want our warden community to be the friendly warden, because that is a trait of the agency and of the culture that we have had for over a century. But they are also the poachers' worst nightmare. When we do need to act, we are equipped and we are decisive in taking action.

CG How many people work for the Parks Canada?

A.L. About 5,000 people. Forty percent of them are seasonal. Most staff work on the visitor-services side in parks and sites across Canada. Plus our national office.

CG Do you feel understaffed, or is that the right level of staffing?

A.L. Well, if you ask any head of an organization, private sector or public sector, there can always be more. But we are well equipped to carry out the

mandate we have. Here and there, there are some challenges, like everyone. But it forces us to be more open to partnerships and strategic alliances and build on our strengths to achieve new heights.

CG You just mentioned the Cabinet a minute ago, How does your life change when the Environment Minister changes? Does that have a significant impact?

A.L. Parks Canada has a 100-year reputation of excellence, so as ministers change most of them are familiar with Parks Canada because of our history and what we have contributed to Canada. All of them, without exception, have been extremely supportive of Parks Canada. There is always an educational component: any minister may have been associated more with our heritage program or with our national parks or our marine conservation areas, depending on where they come from, but the one thing that is consistent from a ministerial perspective is strong, strong support and leadership for Parks Canada.

And this is somewhat unique within any federal program in any country, and it is the same in parliament. All parties are strong supporters. If you look at the legislation to expand Nahanni, it went through in record time and there was strong support from all parties, strong government leadership and strong bureaucratic leadership. There is a pride in Canada of our stories and of our natural places that is shared among all parties.

CG Everybody views them as national treasures.

A.L. Yes, exactly.

CG Do you think in a sense the parks agency and its mandate supersedes politics and is one of those rare things that, to some extent, is above the winds of change?

A.L. I don't want to get into politics so much, because that would be inappropriate, but the only thing I could say is that I see strong, strong commitment from all elected officials who are associated with our programs. And, I would say, we have a strong reputation among the Canadian population. As we travel for different reasons and attend meetings and people start doing small chat — "And so where do you work?" — as soon as you say Parks Canada, there is a level of excitement in the reaction of people and they are quite intrigued. And then they really, really want to

share their personal experiences of a park or historic site. So it's quite rewarding for us as team members.

But it is also a huge, huge responsibility that each of us carry, because we're carrying a reputation of 100 years which is solid and positive because of people who have come before us, and we owe it to the future generations of Parks Canada team members to maintain that reputation.

CG Tell us about your earliest memories of visiting a national park or historic site? What's your first memory?

A.L. Well, I grew up in Chambly, Que., until the age of 13. The fort was not open to visitors at that time — it was a heritage structure — but I still remember going near there and close to the river a lot and being excited and playing there.

CG Never sneaking into the fort, of course.

A.L. We can't say that now! But that place is part of my earliest experience of a heritage site.

When I went to the Fortress of Louisbourg during celebrations for the 250th anniversary of the last siege, I got to wear a period costume. You really feel the importance of history in this special place. And you get to experience it first hand. It is inspiring and it very rewarding.

I remember the first time I went to Banff. Coming from Eastern Canada, the sheer size of the mountains were just amazing.

The first time I was up to the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, when we tried to reconnect with the aboriginal communities to see if they had interest in a national park, we were supposed to take an eight-hour boat ride to meet at a sacred place. An hour and a half into the boat ride, huge waves came up, something like one-and-a-half-metre waves, so we had to go to the closest island and stay there. We were stuck there for three days because of the weather. And I was there with one of our team members, Bob Gamble, an exceptional individual, and 12 elders and chiefs. So we spent three days on the island, fishing and eating what we caught, that was all the food we had for three days. But living it first-hand and getting to know and understand aboriginal culture is, I would say, one of the most powerful experiences you can get in a national park. We went hiking and one of our team members was

speaking about his mother, who was born right there at a specific location in the park that we were walking by. You get the sense of the spirit of these places — they are not only ecological landscapes, they are really spiritual places to aboriginal peoples and to Canadians.

So we have a lot of great stuff happening across the country. But again, when you look at the system we have, we are celebrating the defining moments of Canada and the great Canadians who have come before us. That is what the national parks and historic sites are all about.

You don't only experience nature. You experience culture in the local communities. It could be the alpine life in the mountain parks, or the fishing communities in Atlantic Canada, or the northern parks, where it is really about the aboriginal or Inuit culture of life.