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LET'S TALK SABLE ISLAND!

What We Heard
Phase One Public Consultation
April 2019

Ce document est également disponible en français.



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1 Introduction and background

About Parks Canada

Parks Canada manages Canada's system of national historic sites, national parks, national marine conservation areas, and Canada's first national urban park. The mandate of the Parks Canada Agency is:

To protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage, and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure ecological and commemorative integrity of these places for present and future generations.

This mandate includes protecting natural and cultural resources, facilitating inspiring experiences for visitors, and providing public outreach education. Parks Canada plans and manages for the three aspects of its mandate using an integrated approach.

Parks Canada's goal is to make Canada's places and stories more relevant to Canadians as described in the Agency's vision statement:

Canada's treasured natural and historic places will be a living legacy, connecting hearts and minds to a stronger, deeper understanding of the very essence of Canada.



About Sable Island National Park Reserve and its management plan

Sable Island National Park Reserve (NPR) was established as Canada's 43rd national park in 2013. The NPR is intended to protect and present 31 km² of land within the Atlantic Coast Uplands Natural Region of the national park system. The NPR includes: the world's largest breeding colony of grey seals, six known endemic species, and an iconic population of naturalized horses that have been present since the mid-1700s. Prior to park establishment, Sable Island had been stewarded with year-round human presence under the jurisdiction of various government departments for over 200 years.

In accordance with the *Canada National Parks Act*, a management plan must be developed for Sable Island NPR. The management plan proposes a strategic management approach that aims to integrate the three elements of Parks Canada's mandate: resource protection, public education and visitor experience. Management plans are developed through consultation with Indigenous people, and through the engagement of partners, stakeholders and the public. Sable Island NPR's management plan will be submitted for approval by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and is intended to serve as the key accountability document to Parliament and to Canadians.



2 Consultation process

Overview of *Let's Talk Sable Island!* consultation process

In order to facilitate meaningful opportunities for the public to contribute to Sable Island NPR's management plan, a two-phased consultation approach has been developed to promote participation by all Canadians, locally and nationally, using a variety of in-person and online approaches and methods.

- Phase one consultation (October 26 2018 – December 09, 2018) focused on refining elements of the vision and exploring opportunities and challenges related to park management, prior to the development of a draft management plan.
- Phase two consultation (coming winter or spring 2019) will provide the public with an opportunity to review and comment on a draft management plan.

Recognizing both the need and challenge of engaging youth (aged 18–24), special consideration has been given to increase their participation in public consultation.

Phase one consultation activities

A variety of approaches were developed to collect feedback from stakeholders, Canadians locally and nationally, and youth. Four principal topics were explored, including:

- i) refining the vision for Sable Island NPR;
- ii) understanding ecological health;

- iii) guiding sustainable visitation; and
- iv) sharing Sable Island NPR's natural and cultural history.

Stakeholder workshop

The Sable Island NPR stakeholder workshop was held on October 25th, 2018. Over 35 individuals representing a wide range of sectors and communities attended, including: federal and provincial government, non-government organizations, industry, academia, tourism, heritage, culture and the arts. A summary of feedback received during the stakeholder workshop can be found at www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca.

On-line consultation

An on-line engagement platform – www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca – was developed to facilitate the collection of feedback through a diversity of tools, recognizing the varied needs and preferences of individual participants.

- **Survey:** Provided participants with an opportunity to voice their opinion in a convenient and structured way.
- **Forum:** Created a space for discussion, dialogue, and debate. Participants shared their experiences with others, asked questions and had conversations in a safe and interactive environment.

- **Stories:** Provided space for participants to share stories about their connection to Sable Island NPR.
- **Ideas:** Virtual 'post it notes' for participants to add ideas to a collective board, and to build on the ideas of others.

Group Kits

Developed to facilitate discussion amongst friends, family, colleagues, students, or board members, the kits were ideally suited for group discussion about the future management of Sable Island NPR, and enabled a coordinated response from multiple individuals.

Youth engagement

A 'Youth Advisory Panel' was established to engage youth in the development of consultation content, and to better understand their needs and expectations. Feedback from the Youth Advisory Panel was specifically used to inform the development of the Group Kits, which were envisioned to be a 'youth friendly' means of encouraging peer to peer engagement. Group Kits were distributed to Parks Canada Campus Clubs across the country.



3 Who we heard from

The many thoughtful responses received during the *Let's Talk Sable Island!* consultation process are a testament to the strong connection Canadians feel for this special place. Consultation with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia is ongoing, pursuant to the Terms of Reference for a Mi'kmaq-Nova Scotia-Canada Consultation Process.

Comments for phase one public consultation were encouraged from October 26 to December 9, 2018 through www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca. Canadians also submitted feedback via email and at the stakeholder workshop. In total, Parks Canada received approximately 2,096 responses to our request for input, including:

- Over 1,153 engaged participants at www.letstalksableisland.ca / www.parlonsiledesable.ca;
- Approximately 35 participants at the Sable Island NPR stakeholder workshop in Halifax;
- 13 Group Kits representing feedback from 428 participants, including submissions from six Campus Clubs across the country; and
- 480 emails from members of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), in response to a notice that CPAWS posted on its website calling for the highest level of protection of Sable Island NPR, minimal impacts from visitor activities, and a ban on all exploratory gas and oil activities.

Postal code data provided upon registration at www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca indicated that more than 99% of participants were Canadian, with representation from 12 Canadian provinces and territories. The majority of participants were residents of Nova Scotia (60%), followed by Ontario (10%) and New Brunswick (5%). The majority of participants (88%) reported that they had never been to Sable Island NPR.

People of all age groups registered for consultation (Figure 1). The level of participation by youth (aged 18–24), who are typically under-represented in consultation, was likely due to targeted initiatives to promote their participation, including promotion through university campus clubs and social media.

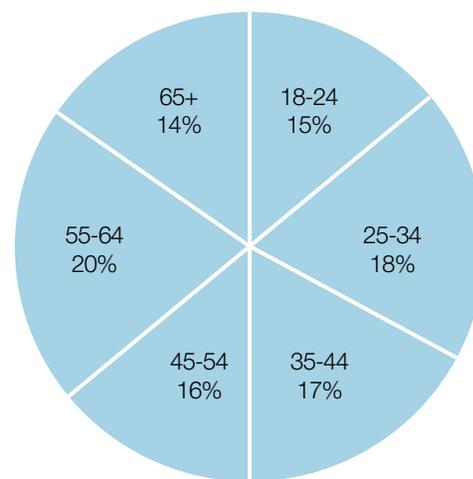


Figure 1. Age groups of participants, self-reported during registration at letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca.

4 What we heard

The feedback provided to Parks Canada is organized under the four topics that were explored through public consultation:

- i. Refining the vision for Sable Island NPR;
- ii. Understanding ecological health;
- iii. Guiding sustainable visitation; and
- iv. Sharing Sable Island NPR's natural and cultural history.

Comments and feedback received through all sources in the *'Let's Talk Sable Island!'* phase one online consultation process were carefully considered, analyzed and summarized, as presented in the topic summaries below.

4.1 Refining the vision for Sable Island National Park Reserve

Draft elements of Sable Island NPR's vision were developed by Parks Canada in consideration of:

- What we heard during consultation with the public and Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia at the time of park establishment;
- What we have learned through experience and ongoing discussions with partners, stakeholders, and the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia since park establishment.

Five draft vision elements were presented to the public as part of the online survey, and participants were asked to rank each element from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important).



Participants were also given the option to describe their vision for the Island if they did not see their ideas reflected in the vision elements presented.

The level of importance attributed to the draft vision elements varied, however nearly all participants reported that the protection of the ecosystem is of the highest priority in their vision for Sable Island NPR into the future (Table 1). The vision element related to 'visitation' was viewed as least important, with 40% of participants responding that this element was 'important' or 'very important' to them. Many participants expressed concern that visitation could potentially impact the Island's natural and cultural heritage, while others felt that the word 'bucket list' implied an exclusivity that would make visitation inaccessible for average Canadians.

Draft vision elements	Importance
A place where the protection of the ecosystem is a top priority; where Parks Canada is trusted to manage natural and cultural heritage through thoughtful consideration of a variety of perspectives and knowledge bases	96%
A centre for research in the off-shore, where government, non-government organizations, and academic pursuits contribute to the advancement of science and conservation issues on Sable Island and globally	71%
A place for virtual exploration and discovery, where captivating natural and cultural heritage content inspires imagination and is innovative in its use of technology	59%
A small and remote national park that demonstrates a commitment to innovation in its use of green technology to ensure an efficient operation in a dynamic offshore environment	58%
A bucket list destination for visitors, where once in a lifetime experiences can lead to a sense of wonder and inspiration; where well-managed visitation is supported by partners and helps protect the natural and cultural heritage of the Island	40%

Table 1. Vision elements presented in order of importance according to the percentage of respondents who indicated the vision element was 'important' or 'very important'.

Many participants expanded on their visions for Sable Island NPR and often expressed diverse views and levels of familiarity with respect to Parks Canada’s mandate. Despite divergent views expressed on topics including visitation and how to best ensure the protection of Sable Island NPR, three themes emerged from the analysis of participants’ visions for Sable Island NPR, including:

- i) a vision for protection;
- ii) a place to be understood and shared through research and art; and
- iii) the “dream” of Sable Island.

A vision for protection

Nearly all participants felt protection is central to the vision of Sable Island NPR. The underlying principle to guide future programs and operations on Sable Island NPR expressed by participants was that protection of the environment, including its natural and cultural

heritage, must be the first priority. In exploring future opportunities for visitors to experience Sable Island NPR in particular, many participants indicated that Parks Canada must ensure potential impacts are carefully considered and mitigated before activities are initiated.

A place to be understood and shared through research and art

Many participants accept and expect that opportunities to visit Sable Island NPR will be limited, for reasons of environmental protection as well as the inherent challenge of accessing such a remote location. Creating, prioritizing or limiting opportunities for visitation to artists, researchers, and other knowledge producers, is one way that some participants felt their vision for a protected Sable Island NPR could be achieved, while also increasing our understanding and ability to share its natural and cultural heritage with others.

4.2 Understanding ecological health

The analysis of feedback relating to ecological health revealed that protection, above all else, is consistently the highest priority for participants. When asked which features of Sable Island NPR's ecosystem they felt were the most important to protect into the future, participants rated a high level of importance (over 90% agreement) for all of its ecosystem features, including: endemic species, vegetation, freshwater ponds, sand dunes, grey seals, and horses. In addition to stating their expectation for a high degree of ecosystem protection for all of Sable Island NPR's features, three themes emerged in feedback relating to ecosystem health, including:

- i) understanding and minimizing human impacts;
- ii) the importance of monitoring and long-term research, and;
- iii) understanding and protecting Sable Island horses.

“ We believe the health of the ecosystem is the first priority! ” – Parks Canada Campus Club

Understanding and minimizing human impacts

The potential impacts of visitation were top of mind for many participants, including: the introduction of invasive species, visitor interactions with wildlife (especially horses), and visitor interaction with sensitive habitats (e.g., grasses and sand dunes). Specific concerns relating to visitor impacts are elaborated upon in the 'Sustainable Visitation' topic summary. In general, many participants expressed a desire to learn more about the immediate and cumulative effects of human impacts to ensure the sustainability

of visitor experiences. Some participants also expressed concern about other human impacts, including offshore oil and gas, on-island infrastructure, and the accumulation of waste.

“ There is tremendous value in preserving Sable's most unique and natural environment, including its landscape and all unique life forms inhabiting the island. In whatever Parks (Canada) decides - from research opportunities, to promoting the visitor experience, to facilitating historical and cultural and artistic activities, a priority objective should always be to do this in a manner that maintains the ecosystem's ecological integrity. ” – Participant

The importance of monitoring and long-term research

Many participants recognize the uniqueness of Sable Island NPR, both in terms of its local biodiversity (e.g., horses, migratory birds, species at risk), as well as its location in the North Atlantic Ocean. As such, Sable Island is seen by many as an ideal study location for a variety of topics relating to: (a) site-specific conservation issues and natural heritage studies on horses and other wildlife, and; (b) large-scale or global issues such as climate change, airborne pollution, and ocean plastics. There is also recognition and support for the continuation of long-term environmental monitoring programs, for example the collection of climate data.

Understand and protect Sable Island horses

Participants repeatedly recognized the naturalized horse population as a highly valued and iconic component of Sable Island NPR. Protection for the horses is a high priority for many participants, who see value in this

What we heard (continued)

population scientifically, sentimentally, and emblematically as part of their vision for Sable Island NPR. When given the opportunity to expand on their interests relating to the horses of Sable Island NPR, over 55% of participants felt that it is most important for Parks Canada to learn more about the factors that influence horse population health and size, compared to other areas of horse research, specifically: the interaction of horses with species at risk (16%), the interaction of horses with island vegetation (16%), and the interaction of horses with humans, including visitors, staff and researchers (13%). There were varying views on how best to manage the horses, from providing care to individual horses to abstaining from any human intervention whatsoever.

“ Recognize that the horses are a major attractant that trigger people’s interest in the Island, leading them to want to learn more and ultimately care about protecting the Island. ”
– Friends of Sable Island

4.3 Guiding sustainable visitation

The topic of visitation to Sable Island NPR generated significant feedback online. Nearly all participants emphasized the need for visitor experience opportunities to be well-managed and for potential impacts to be monitored. However, with assurances in place that visitation would be compatible with and supportive of Parks Canada’s conservation goals, many participants expressed their desire to visit Sable Island NPR. Popular experiences and motivations for wanting to visit the park included: wildlife viewing (especially horses), photography, to explore personal connections to the Island’s cultural heritage, and to experience a sense of wonder, remoteness or solitude.

Protecting Sable Island NPR’s natural and cultural heritage was the highest priority for most participants, however, and this not only influenced their selection of which experiences they felt could be offered sustainably, but also which experiences they would choose to enjoy first-hand if given the opportunity (Figure 3). Topics that generated particular interest in the feedback include:

- i) guided vs. self-directed tours;
- ii) overnight experiences;
- iii) who and how many visitors.

“ It has been a dream of mine for almost thirty years to visit Sable Island. While I have no immediate plans to visit, I hope to one day make the trip and in a responsible way that does not negatively impact the wildlife. ”
– Participant

Guided vs. self-directed experiences

Participants were most comfortable with and most interested in experiencing Sable Island NPR as part of a small guided group. Feedback suggests that for some, their comfort level and preference for guided tours related directly to the perception that guided experiences would enable Parks Canada to better manage the potential impacts of visitation, especially when combined with the development of guidelines relating to visitor behaviours (e.g., interaction with wildlife, ‘leave no trace’, remaining within designated areas to protect vegetation). Whether guides were envisioned as either Parks Canada staff or employed by a third party, many placed emphasis on training and certification for guides as a means to ensure a high quality experience that had minimal impacts on the environment.

What we heard (continued)



Figure 3. How comfortable are you that the following activities can be offered in a way that does not impair the conservation of natural and cultural heritage on the Island? Blue bars represent responses from 1,074 participants asked to rank their comfort level from 1 (not comfortable) to 5 (very comfortable). Percentages to right of bars reflect percentage of participants who reported that they would select a given activity if they had one opportunity to visit Sable Island NPR (responses from 848 participants).

“All visitations should be guided to protect the island. This includes research projects. Sable Island could hold undiscovered cultural objects and should be managed to protect the environment and any cultural objects/features.” – Participant

Overnight experiences

The quantity and overall direction of feedback received about overnight experiences changed over the course of the consultation process, which may have been influenced by significant media coverage towards the end of the consultation period that focused on this topic. Prior to this media attention, participants expressed a desire to participate in well-managed overnight experiences, and raised few concerns. Following the media coverage, many participants expressed concern over potential impacts related to the provision of overnight experiences that included: interactions with wildlife (especially horses), the need for infrastructure, demand on resources including water and power, and the potential for accumulation of waste and garbage.

There were no significant differences in how comfortable participants felt about overnight

experiences in a tent compared to roofed accommodations, or their preference to participate in one over the other (Figure 3). In either case, most participants felt that the scope of the overnight offer, including supporting infrastructure, should be limited. Those who did support the facilitation of carefully-managed overnight experiences were attracted to the opportunity for reasons including: the uniqueness of the experience, to deepen their sense of understanding and connection to place, the ability to experience a sunrise and sunset, the sense of solitude and remoteness, and the



What we heard (continued)

value of a multi-day trip given the cost of travel to the Island. Several participants suggested that a multi-day experience could be achieved through other means, for example through accommodations provided on a ship anchored off-shore.

Who and how many visitors

The interrelated topics of who is allowed access to Sable Island NPR and how many people should be permitted were raised by multiple participants. For many, the question of how many people visit each year is an extension of their desire to protect the Island. Higher levels of visitation were associated with potential impacts to sensitive vegetation, wildlife (especially horses), cultural resources, and the need for increased infrastructure. Some participants felt that the best way to mitigate these potential impacts was to limit the number of visitors; this sentiment was variably expressed as establishing an annual cap or quota, or defining a ‘carrying capacity’ for the Island. Others felt that defining a set number of visitors would be arbitrary, and that a better approach would be to closely monitor and respond to any potential impacts.

While many participants expressed the need to be cautious in the facilitation of future visitor experience opportunities, there was also recognition that people want to go to Sable Island NPR and that this experience should not be prohibitively costly to access. Several suggestions for how to remedy issues related to the exclusivity of access were proposed, including: the development of volunteer and internship opportunities, off-setting travel costs for lower-income visitors through user fees, or a lottery system to ensure fairness. Through these means, many felt that a greater diversity of people would be able to experience Sable Island NPR first-hand, which would ultimately support Parks Canada’s mandate.

4.4 Sharing Sable Island NPR’s natural and cultural history

Sharing Sable Island NPR through outreach opportunities that are accessible online and from the mainland was recognized as a solution to the inherent challenges of physically travelling to the park reserve. For some, outreach was viewed as an important component of protection, as providing high quality opportunities to

Media Tool	Overall	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Documentary films, television, etc.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Parks Canada website	2	5	5	4	2	2	2
Facebook	3	2	4	2	4	4	5
Museum or art exhibit	4	4	3	3	6	5	4
YouTube	5	3	2	6	3	6	6
Books, magazines, newspapers	6	6	6	5	5	3	3
Activities in your community	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
Twitter	8	8	8	8	8	8	8

Table 2. How likely would you be to use the following tools to remotely connect to Sable Island NPR? Ranked survey response from 1,074 participants, presented by age group. Rank 1 represents the most popular; rank 8 represents the lowest in popularity.

What we heard *(continued)*

experience the Island from off-site could provide an alternative to on-site visitation. When asked how they would most like to learn about Sable Island NPR through outreach, participants showed interest in a variety of outlets and opportunities. Preferences varied by age group (Table 2).

“Canada’s national parks are the places where we, as a country, tell the world that there is something amazing here and we are going to protect it.” – Participant

Participants suggested several other ways to connect with Sable Island NPR online. In particular, streaming live video (i.e., web cams) from the Island, ‘adopt a horse’ type programs, Instagram, and opportunities to connect online with staff who are physically on the Island were repeatedly suggested.

Opportunities to connect with Sable Island NPR from the mainland were also of interest to participants. For many, the desire for a physical presence on the mainland was attributed to the

benefit of hands-on and sensory experiences. While a Sable-specific visitor centre or exhibit was suggested by several participants, the idea of having a physical presence on the mainland was not limited to a dedicated, permanent facility, or to a facility operated by Parks Canada. Many suggestions involved collaboration with third parties, for example permanent or travelling exhibits at local museums or galleries, and outreach booths. Developing in-school programming and curricula for youth at public schools, providing opportunities for community presentations, and guest lectures at universities and colleges, were also popular suggestions. A common theme amongst these suggestions was the idea that visitors to the island - including researchers, artists, staff and others - are well positioned to share their personal experiences with those who may not have the chance to travel to Sable Island NPR themselves.

“Off-island visitor experiences are crucial for telling the story of Sable Island. Bring the island to the people, rather than the people to the island.” – Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

Overall, participants viewed the availability of a diversity of ways to connect with the park as important, as they identified many different topics of interest and audiences for outreach. Popular topics regarding the park that participants expressed interest in learning more about included: the impacts of environmental change (geomorphological and climate change), the impacts of human disturbance, history and heritage (e.g., archaeology and shipwrecks), and horses (e.g., population health, as well as natural and cultural significance).



5 Next steps

A draft management plan will be prepared taking into consideration the comments received through phase one consultation activities, as well as ongoing consultation with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. The draft management plan will be made available for public comment during phase two of consultation at www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca.

For updates on the management planning process, register and check back regularly at www.pc.gc.ca/sable, www.letstalksableisland.ca and www.parlonsiledesable.ca, or follow us on Facebook, www.facebook.com/SableIslandNPR.

