

Was the 2017 Discovery Pass good Environmental Policy?
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Background:

As part of the Canada 150th celebrations, the federal government waived the entrance fee for all national parks in 2017 through its Discovery Pass program prompting increased visits to these parks. However, in its 2016 ecological impact report, Parks Canada determined that more than one third of assessed ecosystems in Canada's national parks were in declining health. The purpose of this research was to determine whether free access to our national parks was good environmental policy.

Did the Free Pass trigger increases in Park visitations?

Yes. The 2017 Discovery Pass did trigger an increase in national park visitation. Nationally, visitations increased nine percent. Largest percent increases and increases in absolute numbers were recorded in mid-sized parks (100,000 to 500,000 visits annually). The mountain parks (Banff, Jasper, Yoho, Kootney, Mount Revelstoke/Glacier National Park) accounted for 55 percent of the total national park visits. Banff and Jasper National Parks saw some of the largest increases in absolute numbers, approximately 122,000 and 121,000 visits annually, though not all mountain parks followed this trend.

Did the increase in Park visitations result in higher rates of enforcement actions?

Yes. Overall, there was a 17 percent increase in incidents from 2016 to 2017. A Spearman's rank correlation test and a simple regression analysis both suggested a strong positive correlation between visitations and incidents. In the three largest categories of incidents in Banff, Jasper and Yoho National Parks, only camping regulations saw an increase in 2017. In these parks however, warnings under the wildlife regulation, such as for feeding wildlife or disturbing wildlife, recorded an increase of 38 percent from 2016.

Were the increases in visitation and enforcement actions associated with ecologically fragile parks?

Uncertain. Using the Park Canada's most recent ecological integrity reports on our national parks, each park was given an average score from 0-2 which signified its overall health. There was no clear correlation between the number of visitations or incidents and ecological integrity. Banff and Jasper saw some of the highest visitation and incident rates in both 2016 and 2017. While Banff saw a slight improvement in overall ecological integrity, Jasper showed a decline moving the 17th most fragile park the 8th. However, in 2018 the number of mountain parks with at least one poor and declining ecosystem increased, from three of seven in 2016 to six of seven in 2017.

Results

The results of this project suggest there is no clear answer in determining whether the 2017 Discovery Pass was a good environmental policy. Even though our national parks did show an increase in visitation and enforcement rates, confounding factors such as increased prudence in giving out warnings during the 2017 season, climate change, wildlife fires and other variables could have impacted the data. Furthermore, while incidents did increase in 2017, many were contained within campsite limits and may have minimal ecological impacts.

However, this research does note that many of our most visited national parks have declining ecosystems which may be a result of increasing levels of tourism, and subsequently, development. In-depth research should build on this, focussing on specific parks in order to examine the relationship between visitations and park ecological integrity. It is important that scientific monitoring be given the resources needed to ensure our parks are being used sustainably so that future Canadians can continue to enjoy these important spaces while still preserving the integrity of these wildernesses.