

GEOCACHING IN ONTARIO'S PROTECTED AREAS

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Abstract

As of March 17, 2003, there were 292 provincial parks and 161 conservation reserves regulated in Ontario. This represents a combined protected area of 7.587 million ha. The number of protected areas continues to grow through Ontario's Living Legacy. The provincial parks and conservation reserves in Ontario supply residents and tourists with a wealth of outdoor recreation opportunities. Many recreational activities have a long tradition in protected areas such as backcountry canoeing, car camping and hiking. A new recreational activity called "geocaching" is occurring in Ontario's protected areas. The intent of this paper is to provide a description of the activity, document the extent to which it is happening in protected areas and discuss the management and policy implications.

Introduction

Ontario has an extensive system of protected areas. As of March 17, 2003, there were 292 provincial parks and 161 conservation reserves regulated under the *Provincial Parks Act* and the *Public Lands Act* respectively. The size and number of protected areas continues to grow through *Ontario's Living Legacy*. The total extent of these protected areas, comprising over 7.5 million ha, provides residents and tourists with numerous recreational activities in a variety of settings (urban to wilderness). Many of the recreational activities have a long tradition within protected areas. Activities such as backcountry canoeing, car camping, and hiking are examples of long standing recreational activities. "Geocaching" is a new recreational activity that is being pursued by people in Ontario's protected areas.

What is Geocaching?

Essentially, geocaching can be described as a modern day form of orienteering. For the purposes of this paper, geocaching is defined as:

"an activity in which participants use a global positioning system (GPS) to find a predetermined location or cache. Typically, a physical cache is placed at the GPS coordinate for the participant to find. Caches contain items that are exchanged by participants and typically a log book. Participants log the locations and findings of caches at a number of popular websites."

Part of the fun of geocaching is deciphering the cryptic notes and hints posted on websites

to help people find caches. Maps, word puzzles and other means are used to direct people's search. Typically, a physical cache will consist of a plastic container hidden from view and located close to an existing trail.

Who Geocaches?

Based on personal communication with geocachers, information searches using the World Wide Web, and a field trip to a geocache in Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park, the recreational activity seems to appeal to wide variety of users. Enthusiasts include young and old, families as well as organised groups. Some people enjoy collecting and exchanging the trinkets found in the cache container. Other people enjoy the challenge of the search, while still others combine the activity with bird watching or as a form of exercise.

Which Protected Areas have Geocaches?

At the time of writing in March, 2003, there were a total of 55 geocaches in Ontario's protected areas. A total of 49 were found in provincial parks and another six were found in conservation reserves. Currently, the majority of geocaches are found in provincial parks in greater southern Ontario. Geocaches are mainly found in Natural Environment Class parks but are also found in Wilderness, Waterway, Recreation and Nature Reserve classes of parks. A total of 15 geocaches are located in Algonquin Provincial Park. The geocaches in Algonquin are located along the Highway 60 corridor as well as in the interior of the park. Five of the six geocaches in conservation reserves are found in northern Ontario. For a graphic representation of the distribution of geocaches in protected areas see Figure 1.

What are the Management and Policy Implications?

Geocaching is a rapidly growing recreational activity that is happening around the world on public and private lands (www.geocaching.com). Management response by park agencies to geocaching is varied. A number of park agencies, such as the U.S. National Park Service and Minnesota State Parks do not allow geocaching. Other state and municipal agencies have attempted to control the activity through a policy and permit process. Some park agencies such as the Cleveland Metroparks have started to place their own geocaches in an attempt to embrace the new activity as well control the activity through a permit process for geocaches.

A number of management issues seem to be common to park agencies. Location of the geocache is a common concern among park managers. Park agencies are concerned that geocaches could be placed in sensitive locations where natural and cultural features could be damaged. A related issue is the development of small trails off the main trail system to geocache locations and thereby adversely affecting vegetation and species habitat. Proliferation of private geocaches is also a management concern. Cleveland Metroparks found that the number of private/unauthorized geocaches had tripled between the summer

The appropriateness of a geocache in a sacred site or spiritual site is also a point of concern for park managers and Aboriginal sacred people. Recently, it was decided to remove a geocache from Maple Mountain in Lady Evelyn Smoothwater Provincial Park.

Liability is also a concern for park agencies. Dangerous locations for geocaches could pose a risk for people seeking geocaches and present liability issues. Another issue seems to be the selection of a container for the cache. Many agencies specify a clear container with no dangerous items. In the United States, the use of ammo boxes as a convenient watertight container is generally discouraged.

Under the *Provincial Parks Act* a number of regulations prohibit unauthorized digging and the depositing of items in provincial parks. Currently, Ontario Parks is working on guidelines to help ensure that geocaching in provincial parks is an authorized activity that is both safe and minimizes any potential negative impacts on the environment.

Conclusions

Recreational activities in protected areas will continue to evolve and change with the expansion of the protected area system in Ontario, new technologies and changes in society. Park agencies around the world need to be aware of the changes in recreational activities and respond with appropriate management actions.

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