PUBLIC COMMENTARY ON ONTARIO'S PARKS SYSTEM:

NATURE NARRATIVES AND WHERE THEY COME FROM

By Daniel Romm

A nature narrative is a conceptualization of the value of nature. 'Nature', however, is socially constructed so that ontological constructions of nature determine understandings of nature's value. A germane expression of nature narratives is found in parks because of the historical importance of parks in environmentalism and parks' connection to the concept of 'wilderness'. Commentaries on parks then reflect particular nature narratives. To map the nature narratives of parks, this study conducts a deductive discourse analysis of public commentary on Ontario's parks system found in the Environmental Registry, an online database of proposed changes to the parks system in which the public may comment. The analysis deconstructs commentary to deduce their discursive underpinnings and identify pervasive nature narratives. This study argues that comments on entries regarding parks on the Environmental Registry reflect nature narratives that alternatively see nature's value as instrumental for recreation, intrinsic for preservation, instrumental for work and habitation, or multifaceted and varied. Further, this study argues that various actor-groups enlist their constituent actors to mobilize narratives towards particular ends. In this way, a discourse analysis of comments reveals the narratives of actor-groups more than those of individual actors. These findings problematize an understanding of the 'public' as either too homogenous and too heterogeneous, highlighting the importance of nuance in analysis.

> This land like a mirror turns you inward /
> And you become a forest in a furtive lake; /
> The dark pines of your mind reach downward… /
> There is something down there and you want it told.
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> – Gwendolyn MacEwan, Dark Pines Under Water

Introduction

Nature is reflexive for MacEwan[12] and other nature commentators, many of whom understand that "nature is never just nature" (Eisenberg, 1998, p. 244). This understanding is not uncommon; many scholars explore "nature" as a social construct (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014, p. 121).[3] "Nature", understood as a social construction, then defines conceptualizations of humans' ideal role in nature (Proctor, 1996, p. 284). Commentaries on human-nature relations inevitably reflect these ideals through nature narratives. Parks and attitudes towards them are especially germane expressions of nature narratives because of the historical importance of the parks movement in environmentalism as well as parks' connection to the concept of "wilderness". This has led many authors to examine the discursive underpinnings of parks oftentimes as a surrogate for all of nature, allowing commentaries on parks to reflect particular nature narratives.

I examine such commentaries through Ontario's Environmental Registry, an online database of proposed changes to legislation, regulations, and instruments of Ontario's environmental regime, on which the public may comment to the authority behind the proposal (SO 1993, c28). Using a deductive discourse analysis of the Environmental Registry, I assay the ideals presented within public commentaries to identify common nature narratives. The discursive underpinnings of comments reveal a set of pervasive narratives about parks, and importantly, connote the historical construction of these narratives. I categorize comments on entries regarding Ontario's parks in the Environmental Registry into one of four nature narratives that see nature's value as: instrumental for recreation, intrinsic for preservation, instrumental for work and habitation, or multifaceted and varied. A discourse analysis of comments reveals the narratives of actor-groups more than individuals. I therefore argue that various actor-groups enlist their constituent actors to mobilize narratives to fulfil particular objectives.

I begin by defining my methodology. Following this, I examine the findings of my analysis. I consider the ontological construction of two nature narratives before discussing each narrative individually. I then discuss the important role of actor-groups in shaping discourse as discovered

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1 Cronon (1996a) introduces Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature with an appeal for the humanities to be given more clout regarding the environment. Similarly, Roos and Hunt's (2010) Postcolonial green: Environmental politics and world narratives, and DeLoughrey and Handley's (2011) Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment are grounded in the humanities. As LeGrace (2011) notes within DeLoughrey and Handley's collection, arts play a formative role in ecology (63); Neumann (1998) also makes note of the importance of images of nature (15). Many authors, including Cronon himself (1996b: 72) note that the roots of ecological narratives are partially within the arts (Handley, 2011; Kirk, 1969, p. 6; Grove, 1995, p. 11). It is with respect for this tradition, as well as for the pomp of the seminal texts of ecological critique, that I begin with MacEwan's Dark Pines Under Water poem, and subsequently explore the connection of this poem to my arguments.
2 MacEwan's full poem is as follows: "This land like a mirror turns you inward / And you become a forest in a furtive lake; / The dark pines of your mind reach downward, / You dream in the green of your time, / Your memory is a row of sinking pines. / [paragraph break] / Explorer, you tell yourself, this is not what you came for / Although it is good here, and green; / You had meant to move with a kind of largeness, / You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream. / [paragraph break] / But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper / And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper / In an elementary world; / There is something down there and you want it told."
3 Many authors explore proofs for the social construction of nature. See Cronon's (1996b) Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature for a collection of essays on the subject.

through my analysis. I conclude by reflecting on the significance of my findings, problematizing an understanding of the "public" as either too homogenous or too heterogeneous, arguing instead for further nuance.

Methodology: Constructing Discourse

To construct my arguments around discourse, I use three source types: comments made on the Environmental Registry, proposals on the Registry, and secondary sources.[4] Dryzek (1997) offers that discourse is composed of an ontology, assumptions of human-nature relations, actor-groups and their objectives, and key rhetoric (p. 16). Using a deductive approach, it is possible to identify one of these factors if the others are known; in this way, one may determine actor-groups and their objectives if ontology, assumptions of human-nature relations, and key rhetoric are known. I use this approach to explore the reoccurring narratives within the comments. My argument is built from an analysis of all available comments on the Environmental Registry under the "parks" category, the count of which is 1088 representing 11% of the total comments made between April 20, 2005 and February 22, 2017. This analysis only reflects online comments and does not include in-person consultations.

The structure of my analysis was a three-step qualitative process. I first gathered and reviewed all available comments to form the four aforementioned coding categories for nature narratives. From my observations, I identified the assumptions of human-nature relations and the key rhetoric used within narratives. Second, I categorized comments by their sources: individuals, actor-groups, and government bodies. Actor-groups denote an organization of some collection of actors outside of governmental bodies that mobilize discourse through nature narratives to affect desired change. While actor-groups are often non-governmental organizations, they may also be businesses, hobby associations, or informal networks – families and friends. Following Dryzek's (1997) construction of discourses and Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendation (p. 544), I use secondary sources to detail the ontology of the narrative. Third, I carefully re-read all comments from individuals and noted trends in the respective coding categories in which they fell. Whenever a narrative trend was observed within a case, I attempted to locate the source of that narrative within comments from actor-groups using the deductive method. Through this process, I identify some actors and the motives behind their narratives to construct as complete a picture of discourse as possible.

Nature Narratives: Pines in a Lake

As MacEwan's pines delve into the reflective lake, so too are our understandings of nature formed reflexively. Nature is made to matter in relation to ourselves, so that nature is most often defined in contrast to humans (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014, p. 122; Neumann, 1998, p. 25). Accordingly, of the four narratives I identified within comments made to the Environmental Registry, all but one depend on a dichotomous view of nature as separate from human. With this in mind, I define the narratives in terms of their understanding of human-nature relations. Secondary sources help to identify commonalities between comments within a narrative by outlining the ontology of a narrative. For example, a comment mentioning "beauty" and a comment mentioning "wilderness" connect through the "wilderness as sublime" narrative identified in various texts (for example: Grove, 1995; Slater, 1996). Through this process or narrative definition, I identify and operationalize four nature narratives: nature as having instrumental value for recreation, intrinsic value for

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4 To refer to entries on the registry, I cite the registry number associated with each case, beginning with ER#. To refer to comments on entries on the registry, I cite the comment number associated with the comment, beginning with C#, followed by the registry number.

preservation, instrumental value for work and habitation, and nature's value as multifaceted and varied. The same historical ontological construction underpins the former two narratives—that is, the "objects" or "entities" upon which the narrative acts. I begin by discussing this ontological construction—the national park ideal—and continue by exploring the first two narratives that rely on this construction. The two remaining nature narratives, which do not share that historical ontological construction are discussed afterwards.

National Park Ideal(s)

It may surprise both hunters and "planet fetishers" (Eisenberg, 1998: 283) that the narratives they embody share the same historical ontological construction. Historical ontological construction here refers to a social construction, undergirded by historicity, of "nature" as a knowledge domain. The construction of such an ontology may be conceptualized as a three-step process: first, the "wilderness" imaginary is constructed through an erasive frontier;[5] second, this "wilderness" is made sacred, legitimizing its protection; third, the "wilderness" imaginary is protected, commonly through what Neumann (1998) defines as the "national park ideal" (p. 9).[6] These narratives differ in the particular "national park ideal" they pursue, which is related to their understanding of the value of nature—as either instrumental or intrinsic. Both narratives, however, remain underpinned by the history of this construction.

The construction of the "wilderness" imaginary through an erasive frontier emerged from the American frontier mythos, discourses of primitivism, and the colonial erasure of Aboriginal occupation. The American frontier mythos "imagineers" wilderness as a frontier for heroic men to conquer and domesticate. As America's remaining "wilderness" became increasingly scarce, the imperative to preserve the "frontier experience"—one of rugged men and primitive living—emerged (Cronon, 1996b, p. 76-78). Eisenberg (1998) argues that notions of primitivism, through cultural reference to primitive wilderness myths, serve an imaginary of a pristine landscape (p. 284). The pristine imaginary remains prevalent: one commenter, supporting the prohibition of landing aircrafts in park grounds, argues that landing planes "does [not] inspire to mind the pristine and serene environment that Ontario Parks has worked so hard to protect" (C#115319:ER#010-4507). Neumann (1998) notes that the discourse of the pristine is fundamentally erasive (p. 122; also Handley, 2011, p. 117). In the Canadian colonial context, conceptualizing land ownership through European definitions served to classify land occupied by First Nations as wilderness, justifying appropriating land for European settlement (Blomley, 2004). To make this point, Eisenberg (1998) refers to a Tuscarora Indian chief's quote: "The West wasn't wild until the white man got there" (p. 307).

This newly constructed wilderness became the subject of the Romantic movement, which abandoned a portrayal of wilderness as frightening in favour of a portrayal of wilderness as sacrosanct.

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5 Here I draw on Pow & Neo's (2013) understanding of imaginaries as social and political aspirations, based on which landscapes can be "imagineered" towards particular desired landscapes

6 Neumann (1998) defines the national park ideal as "the notion that 'nature' can be 'preserved' from the effects of human agency by legislatively creating a bounded space for nature controlled by a centralized bureaucratic authority" (p. 9). Neumann continues, arguing that "national parks are historically and culturally contingent representations of a particular nature aesthetic" (p. 11). I appropriate Neumann's term slightly (though Neumann might not disagree with this adoption) to allow for multiple 'national park ideals' that depend on different understandings of the value of nature

This legitimizes regimes protecting the now sacred wilderness (Cronon, 1996b, p. 72-75). The use of sacred is intentional – Romanticism's religious elements prominently feature in this shift in sentiment. Many scholars identify the biblical fable of Eden as formative to Romantic nature.[7] As such, the Romantics interpreted wilderness as a closeness to God (Cronon, 1996b, p. 73). Slater (1996) notes that narratives evoking Eden remain prominent in conservationism (115), though often this is evident through the rhetoric of the sublime rather than direct religious references. One commenter mentions "the feeling of wilderness on these lakes" (C#140718:ER#011-5560); another writes "serene surroundings and purity of air, quiet time for contemplation and natural beauty" (C#160757:ER#011-9984). Through this discourse, wilderness is made sacred and what is sacred must be protected.

To protect the wilderness imaginary, conservationism often pursues a national park ideal. Kirk (1969) identifies one early national park ideal, noting that Canada's parks system originally aspired to establish elite tourist resorts (p. 72); the same is true for America's early parks (Cronon, 1996b, p. 78). Kirk identifies another early national park ideal as aspiring towards protecting a pristine nature, quoting Canada's first Parks Commissioner, who argued that because of parks, "primitive beauty may remain untouched and unscarred" (1969, p. 70). Despite sharing the same historical ontological construction, here are two disparate park ideals: the former understanding nature's value as intrinsic, the latter as instrumental for recreation.

The First Narrative: Nature's Value as Instrumental for Recreation

The first narrative sees nature as having instrumental value for recreation. This narrative aspires towards a national park ideal that Eisenberg (1998) might classify as "planet management," an approach that "sees the earth as a garden that we are to dress, keep, and humanize" (p. 286). This narrative construes recreation as a means of knowing nature. One commenter agrees, arguing against a cycling ban, suggesting that "mountain bikers cherish the opportunity to explore [nature]" through that activity (C#104206:ER#PB05E6008). Along the lines of understanding nature through recreation, another commenter refers to "activities such as angling, hunting, and trapping" as "natural heritage activities" (C#813123:ER#012-4102). Appeals to "heritage" and "tradition" are common and central to this narrative, perhaps because of the prominence of the aforementioned frontier mythos and the primitivism discourse, which historically were reflected through the national park ideal.

Indeed, recreation activities are the "traditional uses" (as one commenter puts it; C#115813:ER#010-4911) that parks were designed to preserve as part of the "frontier experience". In tandem with appeals to tradition and heritage, this narrative's intimate connection to history serves to place wilderness in a liminal position outside of history (Cronon, 1996b, p. 79), so that (re)experiencing the garden of Eden—through recreation—is particularly plausible. To obtain this liminal position, instrumentalists understand the "wild" in a teleotic sense. Eventually, the "wild" is to be domesticated through the West's project to recover a lost Eden (Merchant, 1996, p. 147, 134). Domestication in this case means making wilderness an Edenic garden in which to play.

7 Many authors cited within this essay consider the fable of Eden in different ways. Merchant (1996), for example, walks the reader through the justifications for domination and management of nature through Genesis (p. 134). Neumann's (1998) refers to the role of Eden in subjugating Africa's 'wilderness' several times (see p. 128, p. 177). Grove (1995) looks at "Edenic island discourses" throughout the book and even more directly considers Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe as connecting nature and Providence. Eisenberg (1998) produces a tome dedicated to the subject. This is said to highlight the popularity of considering Eden in environmental discourse.

The Second Narrative: Nature's Value as Intrinsic for Preservation

The second narrative sees nature as having intrinsic value, aspiring towards a national park ideal that endeavours to dichotomize activities as "natural" or "not natural". The distinguishing of activities between the two is often arbitrary. One comment remarks about the natural wilderness of park grounds in support of conservation, only to request altering this nature: "anything you could do to get rid of the fragmites would be a bonus" (C#142544:ER#011-6833). Another comment compliments a park's serenity, stating that they "prefer it the way it is" only to later request more picnic tables and the introduction of wild turkeys (C#160757:ER#011-9984). Comments following this narrative lean towards a diametric opposition of what they perceive as inappropriate instrumental uses of nature. One comment proclaims that "ATVs do not belong in these places of serenity and natural [sic]" (C#115925:ER#010-4911). The question, of course, is what uses of nature are permissible within this framing.

As Proctor (1996) notes, that humans should not intervene in nature "is not just some conception of nature; it is also a conception of the ideal role of humans in nature" (p. 284). By defining some activities as intervening and some as permissible in nature, commenters within this narrative rely on a constructed "nature" as "a stable external source of nonhuman values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity" (Cronon, 1996a, p. 26). Such judgements are many and clear in comments. Referring to policy permitting horseback riding and biking, one commenter argues that: "Such non-conforming and incompatible uses should not be allowed as they threaten park values" (C#110994:ER#PB01E3003). Persistent through comments within this narrative is a value-laden dichotomization of natural and not natural activities.

The Third Narrative: Nature's Value as Instrumental for Work and Habitation

The third narrative sees nature as having instrumental value for work and habitation. Comments following this narrative tend to either consider the objectives of environment and development as reconcilable, or scorn environmental protection in favour of other land uses. The former has roots in Pinchot's resource management approach (Dryzek, 1997, p. 10) but today manifests mainly through the sustainable development movement. One commenter argues that "Algonquin Park Leaseholders have a… history of environmental responsibility, and have always prided themselves on being 'stewards of Algonquin'" (C#206080:ER#012-8560). Here, habitation within a park is seen as supportive of conservation goals. Proctor (1996) similarly quotes a logger who asserts that "[loggers] have probably gained a respect for the forest and the land that few people will ever know" (p. 270-271). White (1996) agrees that working and/or living in nature provides a means of knowing nature, recognizing the merit in an instrumental valuing of nature.

At the same time, White (1996) also warns against a romanticism of work and habitation in nature, offering that doing so does not necessarily ensure environmentally responsible behaviour (p. 185). Most comments following this narrative do not strive towards the happy coupling of environment and economy. One comment argues that "The focus appears to be on… [appeasing] environmentalists in Southern Ontario instead of supporting the people who live (sic) and use these lands in the North" (C#114755:ER#010-2514). At the same time, the work deemed acceptable in parks oftentimes depends more on colonial impositions of what work is "traditional" rather than any ecological basis (for example see Neumann, 2003, p. 248). The Canadian parks system similarly permits work and habitation within parks, provided that it conforms to certain standards.

The fourth narrative sees nature as having multifaceted and varied appeals resulting from a complex understanding of nature. The ability to address environmental topics with a high degree of nuance is enabled by this complex understanding of nature. For example, one commenter notes that people "may value a variety of tangible and intangible aspects of protected areas" (C#120718:ER#010-5767). A comment from Conservation Ontario begins by stating that "Land use negotiations involving diverse interests can be a complex and challenging task" (C#114765:ER#010-2514) and continues to consider the diverse interests of multiple stakeholders. For these commenters, nature is not understood in any one way; nature is, in Ellis's (1996) words, non-essentializing.

Comments within this category largely come from organizations—from Conservation Ontario, from Stewardship Councils, from government departments, and other such groups—who may have the positionality and wherewithal to incorporate nuance and complexity. Individuals who make such comments seem to have some educational background on environmental topics. One such commenter notes their background in fire management within the Ministry of Natural Resources after arguing for the consideration of First Nations' interests within the policy framework (C#130419:ER#011-1892). Comments within this narrative are typically long-form and present several specific policy recommendations.

Discussion: Who Is the Individual? Troubling the Source of Narratives

Above I have identified the historical-ontological sources of the four nature narratives found within public comments. The question, then, is what publics embody these narratives. Through my analysis, I found that comments from individual actors seemingly acting independently instead often originate from and reflect the narratives of actor-groups. In this way, actors often should be considered constituents of distinct "actor-groups" rather than independent actors. To determine whether an actor should be considered a "constituent" or independent, I considered the rhetoric and ontologies of comments.

Usually, this determination is glaringly obvious and the "parent" of an actor-group's narrative is easily identifiable. One case, for example, has all available comments challenging a ban on mountain biking (ER#PB05E6008). Comments in this case share similar language, presenting mountain biking as "sustainable", "low-impact", and healthy. For another case, the source of the comments is a conservation organization titled "Ontario Nature". This is easily found as Ontario Nature's comment is echoed in other comments: one quoting Ontario Nature, another sharing the same argument, and all others including "the Carolinian zone of Southern Ontario" (ER#PB01E3003). Evidently, some actor-group is enlisting its constituent actors to promote a particular narrative. This trend is common among all cases reviewed; for most cases, the majority of comments belong to an identifiable actor-group.

In this way, understanding public comments as representing "the public" becomes problematized—instead, it is some publics pursuing particular interests such that the line between "individual" and "actor-group" is blurred. Occasionally, this result in actors, linked via an actor-group, overwhelming the public commentary on an entry. The most blatant case is regarding the Proposed Amendments to the Algonquin Park Management Plan (ER#010-4911). For this case, 93% of the 234 comments were nearly identical. This case has the fifth most public comments submitted and the second most online comments submitted. This demonstrates the potential for an actor-group

to enlist enough constituents to drastically alter the discourse of a topic. While I began my analysis with the a priori assumption that public comments constitute public opinion, expecting to discern "a" public opinion on parks, and by extension on nature. Evidently, it is rather that nature narratives are rife with history and that comments made by actors also reflect their actor-network.

Conclusion: Pervasive Narratives and a Multiplicity of Pines Under Water

> Explorer, you tell yourself, this is not what you came for /
> Although it is good here; and green /
> You had meant to move with a kind of largeness, /
> You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream.
> – Gwendolyn MacEwan, Dark Pines Under Water

This paper examined public comments on parks in Ontario's Environmental Registry and identified four conceptualizations of nature's value that form the narrative landscape of the parks system: as instrumental for recreation, intrinsic for preservation, instrumental for work and habitation, or multifaceted and varied. By integrating literature, this analysis foregrounds the history of these narratives. Furthermore, by identifying discourses using Dryzek's (1997) construct, the actor-networks behind comments are revealed. This analysis first identified different conceptualizations of nature's value. That these are varied demonstrates a heterogeneous public, or publics. Concurrently, the finding that many seemingly independent comments share one source demonstrates some degree of homogeneity within the public.

Following the geography adage that "everything is infinitely complex", there are limitations to understanding the public as overly homogenous or as overly heterogeneous. The comments are linked both to larger nature narratives flush with history, and also often to an actor-group to which the commenter belongs. MacEwan's poem begins with a reflection through nature ("This land like a mirror turns you inward") and concludes with a grand realization of some deeper, latent meaning ("There is something down there and you want it told"). It is fitting that for geography, we begin by reflecting on nature, but in place of a grand realization we instead conclude with an acknowledgement of many meanings, implicit and explicit, and sources historical and contemporary. Perhaps we should take the liberty of homage to MacEwan's Dark Pines Under Water, and alter the last line to read: "Many things are down there and you want them told". For publics' perceptions of parks, and on nature by extension, we recognize the influence of history, the intricacies of understanding "a public", and most significantly, the importance of nuance in analysis.

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Part of Ontario's budget reveal today... Part of Ontario's budget reveal today includes an announcement that municipal governments will be permitted to make their own individual decisions about whether people can drink in parks. Toronto as a city has long expressed interest in legalizing the activity, with the mayor often throwing his support behind the idea as well. Former city councillor Mary Margaret-McMahon helped push legalization forward, and many in the municipal government were behind the idea. Along with this announcement, the province also introduced other alcohol-related laws, most of which should come into effect wit Ontario is home to an incredible landscape of pristine lakes, rivers, and forests, which are made easily accessible by the provincial and national parks spread across the province. Families often enjoy the front country campgrounds, many of which are located on popular lakes with beaches. Those looking to hike and canoe will find a range of trails and waterways through spectacular scenery, some of it within an easy drive from the main cities of Southern Ontario. Backcountry enthusiasts looking for remote wilderness adventures may want to head further afield to the areas north and west of Lake 3 Parks development in Ontario dates back to the creation of the Algonquin Park2 in 1893 and Rondeau in 1894. General provincial parks legislation was introduced some 20 years later, in 1913. The Interim Report on Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy: Protecting What Sustains Us (2008) refers generally to a range of public and private initiatives associated with biodiversity, and specifically to both federal and provincial protected areas within the province. These areas, it is noted, include 651 regulated or recommended areas that "have been created to conserve ecosystems that represent all of Ontario's natural regions, to protect significant elements of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage, to maintain biodiversity, and to provide opportunities for ecologically sustainable recreati Answer: Ontario Parks is strongly recommending that visitors make advanced reservations to limit contact during transactions and campsites may be limited and not guaranteed upon arrival without a reservation. Reservations can be made two ways: 1. Online at reservations.ontarioparks.com, or 2. By phone at 1-888-668-PARK (7275) - open daily from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Eastern Time, 363 days a year. Question: Can I make a change to my reservation without incurring a change fee? Answer: Yes, Ontario Parks is offering free changes to your 2020 reservations, depending on availability. If another date or location is unavailable, Ontario Parks is offering penalty-free cancellations.