

When the world comes to you: celebrating 125 years



An Algonquin and area moose meanders through a rich field of grass and other snackable treats. / NATE SMELLE Staff

By Angela Long

It's a place that inspires great works of art, films, books, even a symphony. It's home to hundreds of bird species, thousands of plants, dozens of mammals. It's the subject of nearly 2,000 scientific research papers.

For 125 years Algonquin Provincial Park has been Ontario's place of superlatives. Its first provincial park. Its biggest. At 7,723 square kilometres, it's one and a half times the size of Prince Edward Island, containing 2,500 lakes and 1,500 kilometres of canoe routes. Established in 1893 when the Ontario government acted upon a recommendation of the Royal Commission to protect watersheds, preserve fish and wildlife, control human settlement and logging, and provide a health resort for Ontarians, the park now attracts more than half a million visitors a year from all over the world.

But not many visitors know much about the people whom Royal Commission chairman Alexander Kirkwood wished to honour in the park's world famous name: the Algonquins.

"History has showed us that the name is all anyone wanted us to have to do with the park," Algonquins of Pikwakanagan Chief

Kirby Whiteduck said in a 2012 TED Talk.

Kirby Whiteduck presented hundreds of years' worth of historic journal entries, surveyor reports, government documents and petitions to prove his people have inhabited the park for millennia. Their lives were "disrupted and forever altered," he said, first by the clear-cutting practices of logging companies in search of the area's great white pine, and then by the enforcement of the park's boundaries.

"They told us, 'We can't have Indians living in a park,'" Kirby Whiteduck says in a recent telephone interview.

One way to celebrate the park's 125th anniversary would be to acknowledge this legacy, Kirby Whiteduck says. "We'd like non-Indigenous people to know that Algonquin Park is named after the Algonquins. It's our territory and it's part of who we are." In addition, the Algonquins of Ontario would like their land-claim negotiations, which date back to 1763, to establish this ownership and create a co-management framework for the park. They'd like to see developments such as an Indigenous cultural heritage centre, similar to the Algonquin Park Visitor Centre which opened during the park's centennial celebrations.

But mostly, says Kirby Whiteduck, his people "wish to be respectful of the park itself. The land and the resources, the water, the trees. To us the territory within the park is part of our sustainability as a people, and we want to ensure it's there for the long term. We want to show respect, as we have over the centuries."

Ontario Parks, the branch of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry that administers provincial parks, claims to share a similar vision for its more than 340 parks. Laura Meyers, Ontario Parks 125th anniversary co-ordinator, says, "It's important to look on our past to be able to look into the future to where we're going."

Part of this future includes funding for Indigenous partnership projects across Ontario, says Meyers. At Algonquin, the 125th celebrations will see the installation of audio on the interpretative panels of a peace and reconciliation totem pole raised by the Algonquins of Ontario in 2015, with elders telling stories in their Indigenous language. The pole, carved from a hundred-year-old eastern white pine, symbolizes a new way forward, says the Ontario Parks website. A plaque acknowledging the Algonquins of Ontario's gift of the totem pole reads: "Let it stand."

Even those who mark their time in Algonquin Park in decades rather than centuries appreciate the park's potential for transformation. Algonquin Outfitters marketing director Randy Mitson, who has worked for the nearly 60-year-old company for 15 years, four of those as a canoe guide, sees Algonquin as constantly evolving. You begin by driving along the Highway 60 Corridor, he says, then another time you camp for a night. Eventually you canoe in the back country for 21 days.

"But even once you get past the?oh?there's another moose?the park still has things to keep you interested."

Mitson calls these things "hidden gems," located in the 99 per cent of the park only accessible by canoe. "I'll tell you a little story," Mitson says. But he tells many more. He talks of a "deep space" research station protected by security cameras and guard dogs, former POW camps, the location of Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson's Jack Pine. He talks of a bear cracking the windshield of his truck, eating the horn out of the steering wheel and his Ontario road map. He talks of a British tourist arriving by cab from Toronto Pearson International Airport with nothing but a wallet and a toothbrush, and a dream to see Algonquin.

More and more people share such a dream, says Mitson. "The world comes to you," he says. Brazilians, Japanese, Germans. First they dream of Canadian Shield, small-mouthed bass, and howling wolves, and then, in the sheer immensity of thousands of kilometres of wilderness, Mitson says, they begin to dream of something else. "You open up," he says. "The park develops along with you. It grows with you."