



Backcountry Protected Areas of the Muskwa-Kechika: *Strategic Management Plan*

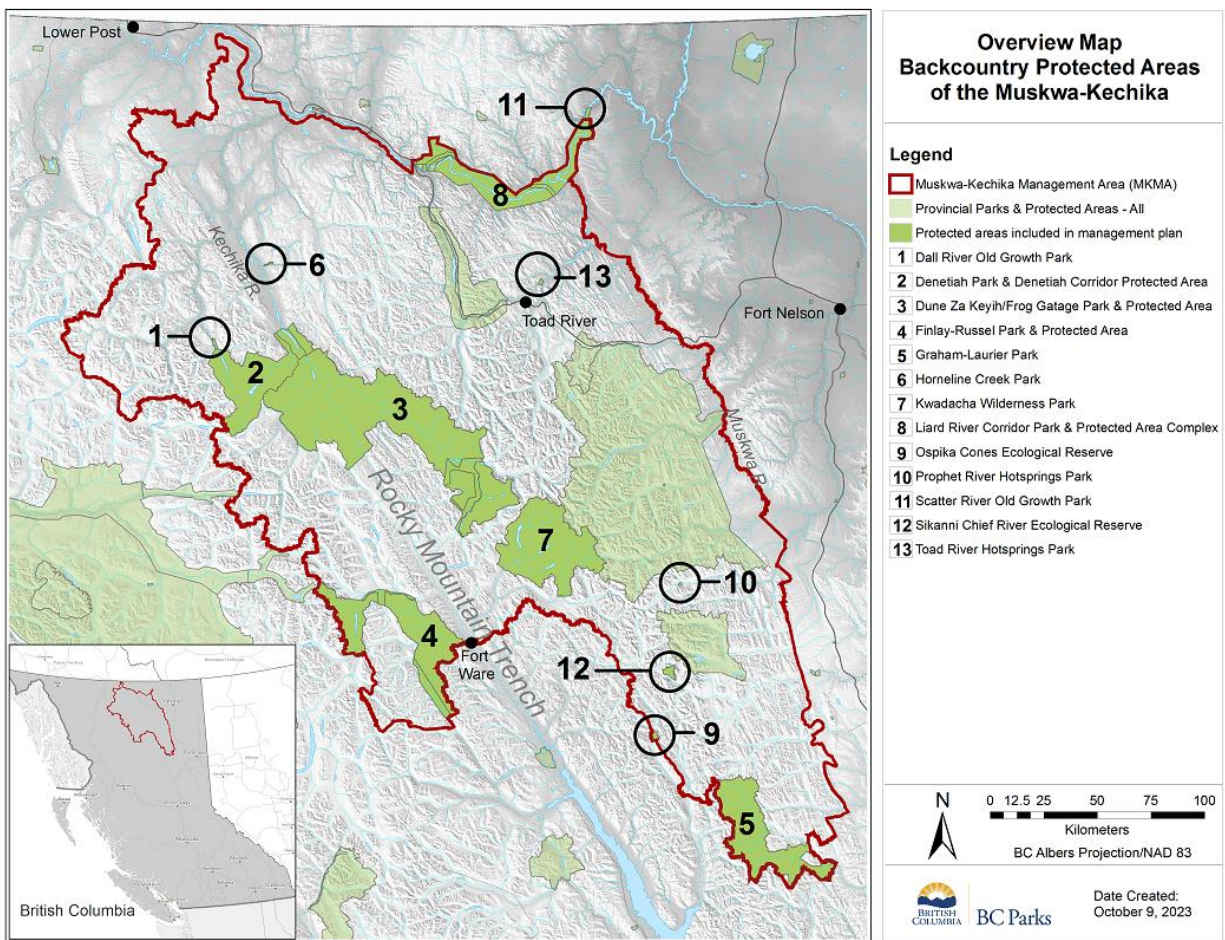
What We Heard Summary Report of Public Input, July-Sept. 2024

Background

In April 2020, BC Parks initiated a management planning project to develop and refine existing management direction for 13 backcountry protected area complexes (parks, protected areas, and ecological reserves) in the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area (M-KMA).

The draft Backcountry Protected Areas of the Muskwa-Kechika: Strategic Management Plan was developed by BC Parks with input from the public, stakeholders, and First Nations. It was shared with the public in July 2024 for feedback.

In April 2020, and again in July-Sept 2024, BC Parks offered public engagement opportunities to collect input from interested individuals to help shape management direction for these protected areas. This document summarizes the results of the 2024 public engagement.



Engagement and Consultation Process

To facilitate meaningful opportunities for the public to provide input into the management of the backcountry protected areas, multiple methods were used to promote participation, using in-person and online approaches. Two-phases of public engagement occurred: initial project engagement in 2020 and engagement on the draft plan in 2024.

In the spring of 2020, BC Parks initiated this planning project by hosting an initial public engagement phase to scope issues and collect insight from protected area users and other interested parties. BC Parks directly emailed special interest groups, local government, park use permit holders and other stakeholders. These groups were invited to participate in individual meetings with BC Parks staff and engage via an online survey. The public was notified by posts on the BC Parks website, BC Parks social media and fliers in communities. This early engagement opportunity helped BC Parks assess the level of community interest and identify key issues and opportunities. The initial survey results are posted on the project website (<https://helpshapebc.gov.bc.ca/m-k-backcountry-management-plan>).

In the spring of 2024, BC Parks planned the second phase of public engagement to share the draft strategic management plan with the public and collect feedback. An early start to the wildfire season in the region postponed public engagement sessions to the summer months (July-Aug). Engagement included online and in-person components. These opportunities were advertised in multiple ways: via presentation to the local Northeast Roundtable meeting, direct email to stakeholders and publicly posted on the project webpage, on posters located in select communities, and on BC Parks' social media channels.

Stakeholder Engagement

BC Parks informed the Northeast Roundtable in June 2024 with key dates and opportunities for the public engagement process to review and provide feedback on the draft plan. Stakeholders were emailed at the beginning of the engagement period to invite them to participate in the public engagement opportunities and/or an individual meeting with BC Parks staff.

Online Engagement

The Let's Talk BC Parks online platform at HelpShapeBC.gov.bc.ca was used to provide information and updates regarding the project and contact information for BC Parks staff. The draft plan was posted to the website for public review and between July 2nd and Sept. 16th, 2024, an online survey was used to collect feedback from participants. Additional responses were collected via email.

Virtual open houses occurred on Aug. 14th and Sept. 5th via Teams video meeting. Participants registered with BC Parks staff in advance of the meetings.

In-Person Engagement

Four opportunities to engage with BC Parks staff were provided in August 2024. BC Parks held community engagement sessions at the Toad River Community Hall (August 21), Fort Nelson Recreation Centre (August 22), Fort St. John Festival Plaza (August 23), and staff attended the Fort St. John Farmer's Market (August 24). Participants asked questions and shared their perspectives on various issues and interests and had the opportunity to record their thoughts and suggestions while on-site. Hard-copy surveys were available for participants to complete.

Indigenous Engagement

BC Parks is consulting with all First Nations with interests in this area. This consultation is active and ongoing. While the results of this consultation will not be summarized as part of this report, it has and will continue to inform the development of management guidance for these protected areas.

Who We Heard From

Summary of Participation	
Visits to the project webpage (https://helpshapebc.gov.bc.ca/m-k-backcountry-management-plan)	910
Engaged online participants (registrants who interacted with the information or participated in the survey)	308
Online survey participants	72
Hardcopy survey participants (completed at in-person events)	1
Emailed/written responses	7
Virtual engagement participants (Aug. 14, Sept. 5, 2024)	9
In person engagement participants (Aug. 21-24, 2024)	60

Postal code data collected from online survey participants	
Northeast BC	73%
Lower Mainland & Vancouver Island	14%
Elsewhere in British Columbia	7%
Alberta	3%
Elsewhere in Canada	3%

What We Heard – Public Engagement

The following is a summary of the prevailing themes and topics of interest that emerged from the public engagement process, both online and in-person. The results of the public engagement process will be considered along with the input BC Parks receives from First Nations, feedback from partner agencies, and other stakeholders to refine the draft strategic management plan for the backcountry protected areas.

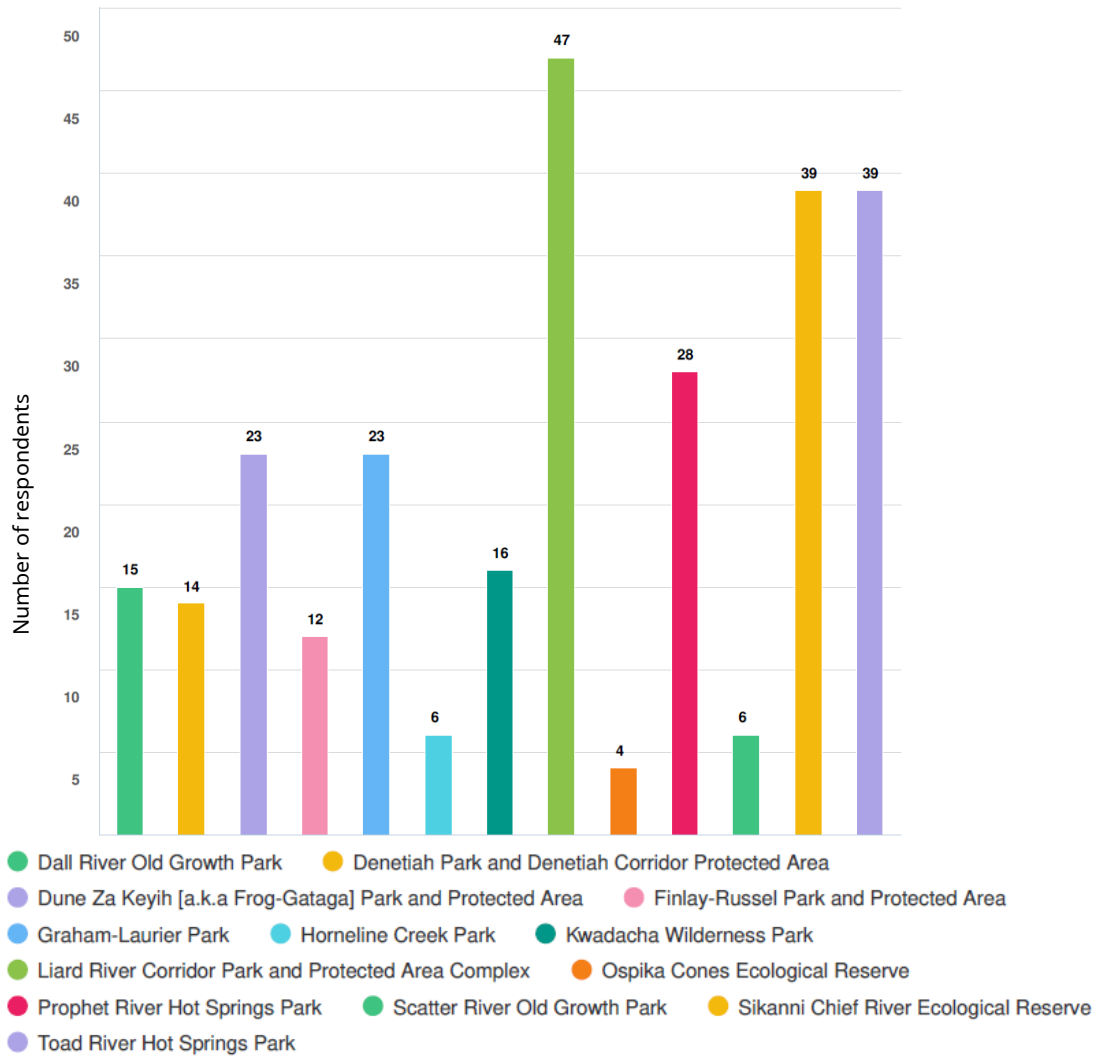
Survey Response

Most survey respondents (90%) reported having visited one of the protected areas. The most visited protected areas were reported to be Liard River Corridor, Sikanni Chief River Ecological Reserve, Toad River Hot Springs, Prophet River Hot Springs, Graham-Laurier and Dune Za Keyih.

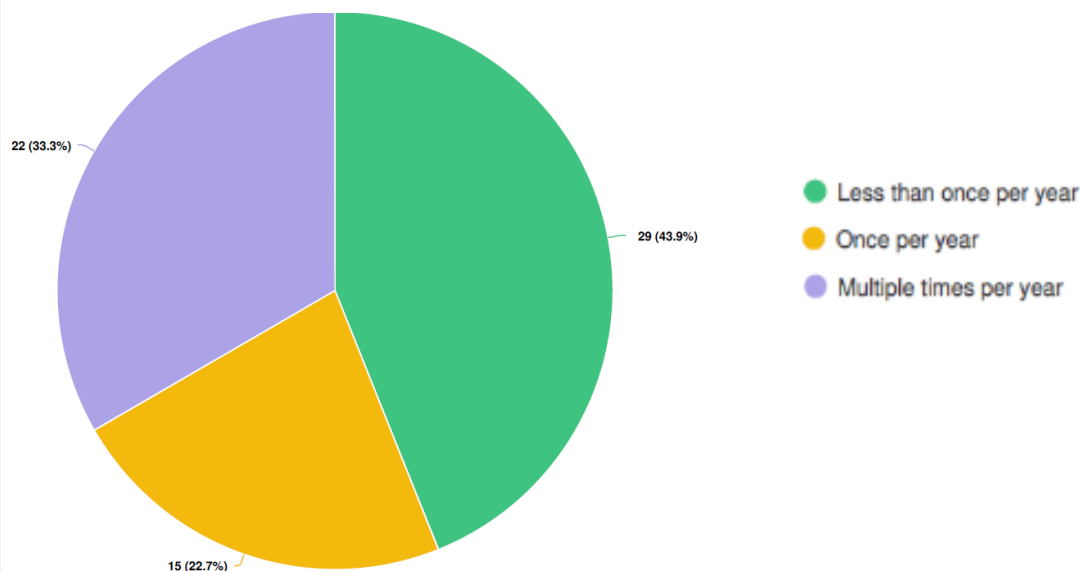
Most (44%) of all survey respondents reported visiting one or more protected areas less than once per year and one third visit multiple times per year. Visits occur most often in the fall and summer. The most survey respondents visit for less than 10 days (39%) or less than 5 days (33%).

The top 5 activities survey respondents participate in are camping, fishing, nature appreciation/enjoying solitude, hiking, hunting (over 50% of respondents for each activity). Between 40% and 50% of respondents participate in photography, watching wildlife/birds, and motorized/mechanized activities (e.g., ATV, biking, snowmobiling, boating).

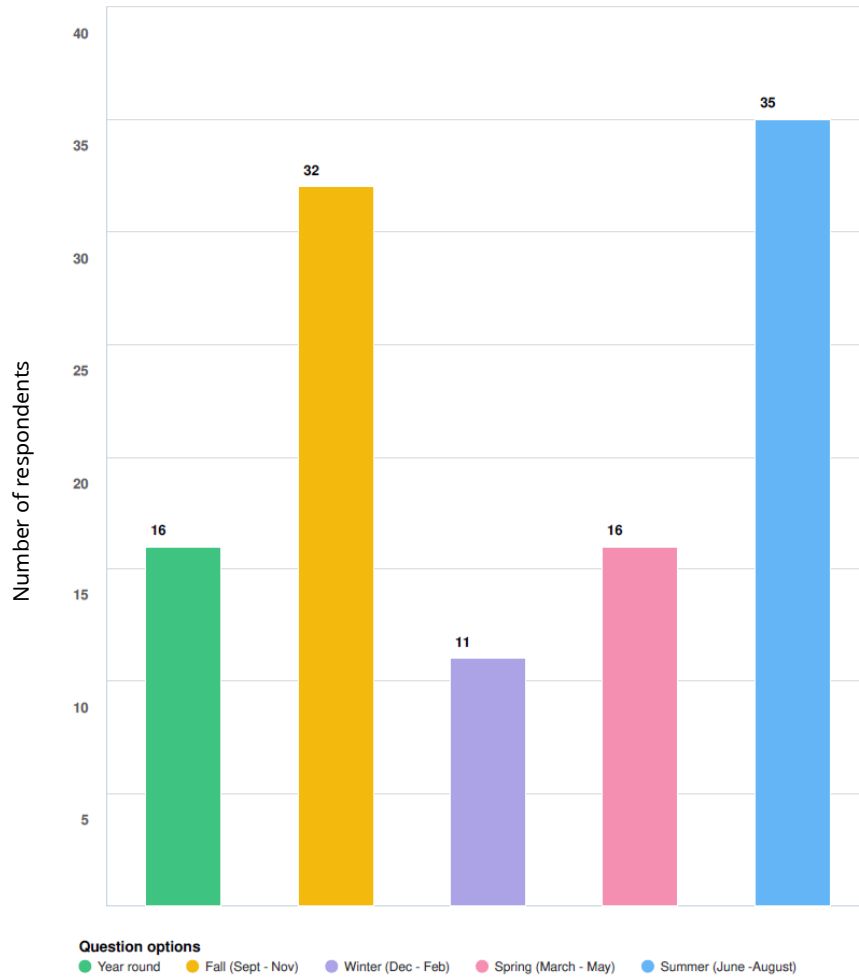
What Parks were visited?



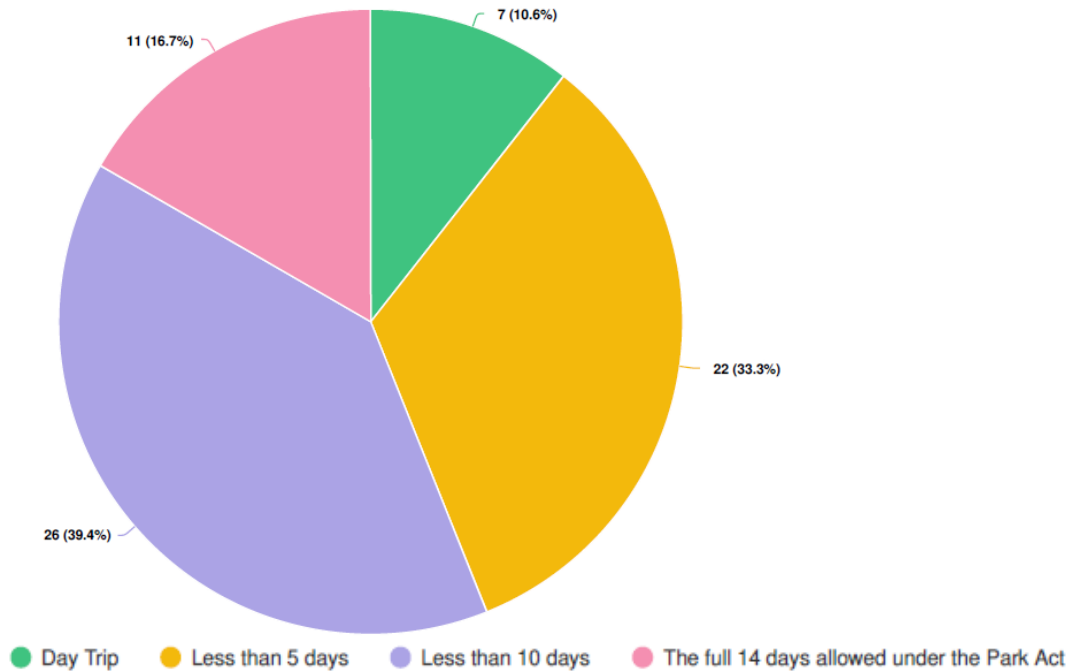
How often have you visited one or more of these backcountry parks?



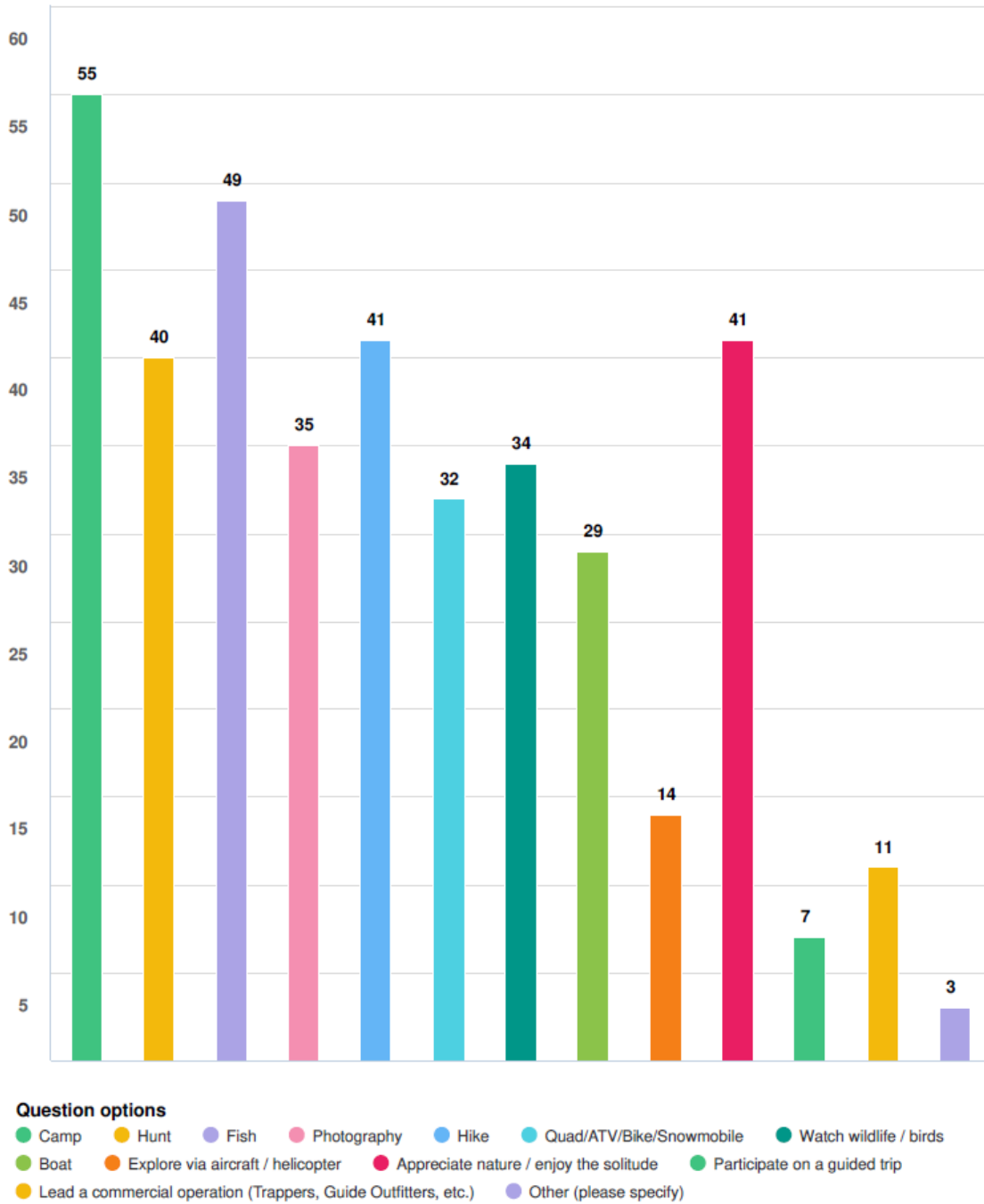
What season(s) do you visit?



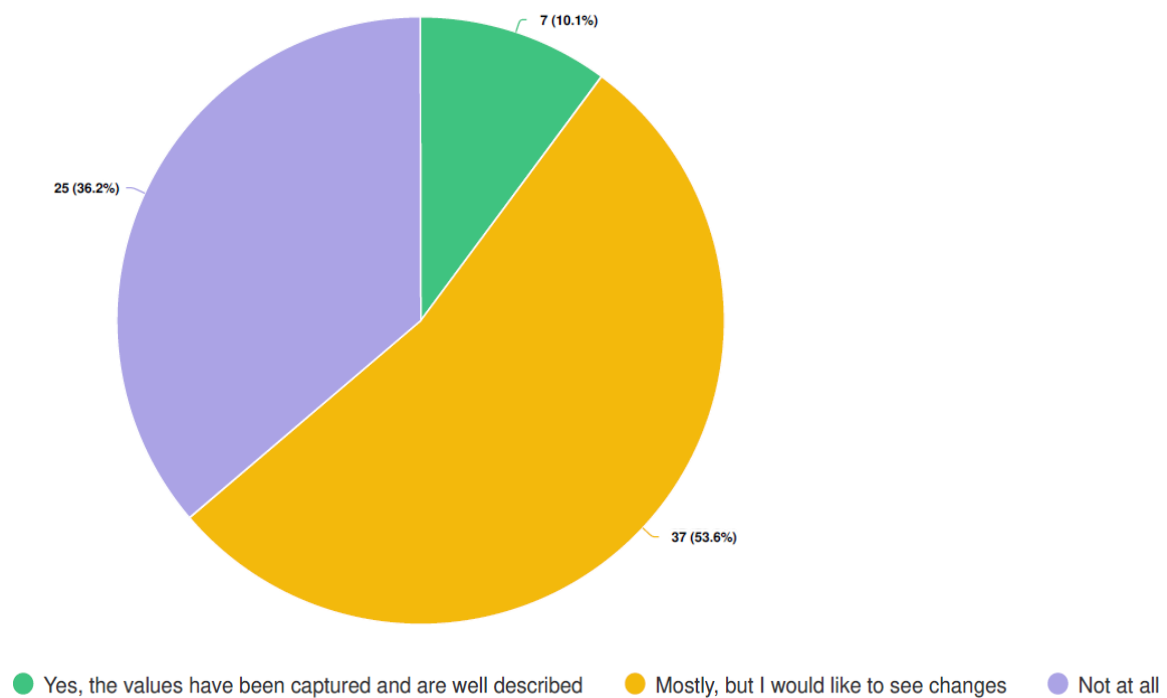
How long is your typical visit?



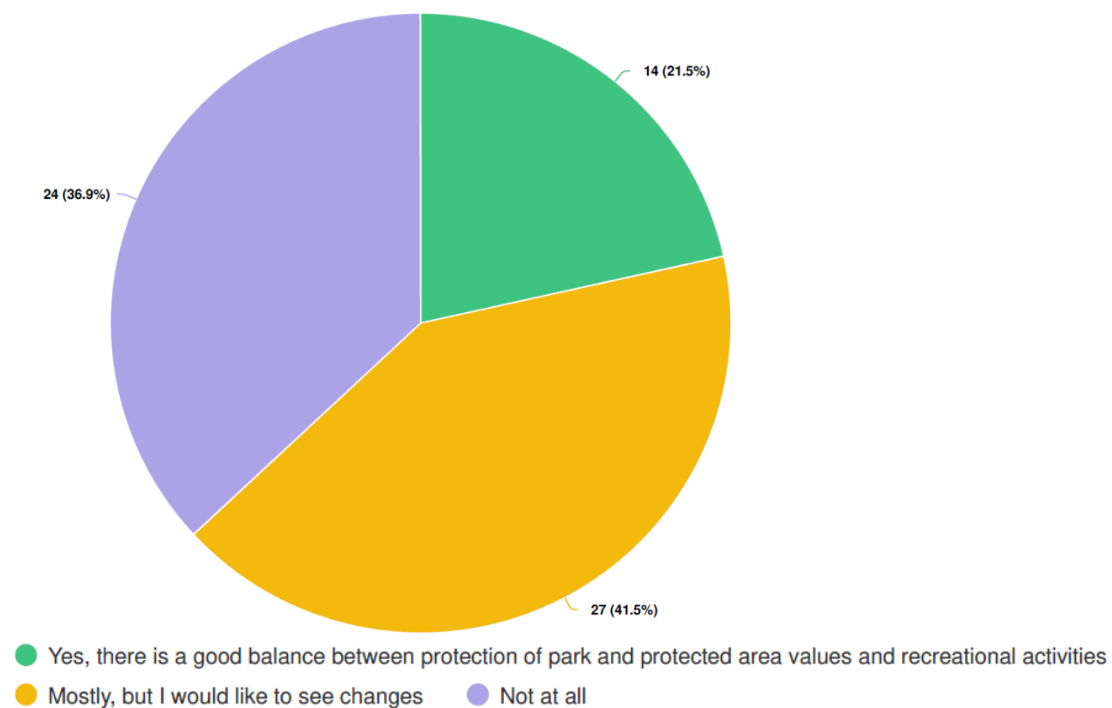
What activities do you already participate in when you visit a backcountry park?



In your view, does the draft plan adequately outline the key values of the included parks and protected areas?



After reviewing the draft plan, do you think it provides good direction for protecting ecological and cultural values while also providing for recreational activities?



Prevailing themes from surveys, in-person and virtual sessions, letters, and emails

Generally, public and stakeholder engagement identified a few significant revisions to be made to the draft plan and several minor edits. The following themes were identified during engagement:

Restrictions on public access

- A number of people commented that public should be able to have access to the protected areas. Concern was expressed that access was being taken away or managed by permit.
- All of the protected areas will remain available for access by the public without getting a permit, except Ospika Cones Ecological Reserve. The plan proposes a legal closure for Ospika Cones. No specific comments regarding this Ecological Reserve were submitted; however, BC Parks will reconsider whether this ER should be closed to access or instead monitored for impacts at this time.

Vision Statement

- It was noted multiple times during engagement that all people of BC are not represented in the vision statement. Some people felt that the representation of local residents was not reflected in the plan.
- BC Parks will work to revise the plan to better represent all segments of the population, specifically in the vision statement.

Snowmobiling & Other Motorized Access

- Graham-Laurier Park - A variety of stakeholders identified snowmobiling in Graham-Laurier Park to be an important activity.
- Finlay-Russel Park – Winter snowmobiling to Rainbow Lakes was identified as an important activity.
- Many people noted their interest in allowing snowmobile access, in general.
- It was noted that the plan should include more information about the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Recreation Plan and clarify why motorized use is or is not allowed.
- Many people noted that they support non-motorized activities and/or limiting motorized use to current levels.
- BC Parks is working with interested groups to create winter recreation zones for Graham-Laurier and Finlay-Russel Parks that are in line with the vision for the backcountry protected areas while also continuing to allow winter recreation in appropriate areas. The strategic plan does not allow snowmobiling in the remaining 11 protected areas in alignment with the strategic vision of a pristine wilderness. Other motorized activities (i.e., off-road vehicles) will continue to only

be allowed on existing Access Management Area routes as defined by the *Wildlife Act, Public Access Prohibition Regulation*.

Prescribed Fire

- Prescribed fire was noted to be lacking detail in the plan. Many participants recognized that prescribed fire will continue to be an allowable use in the protected areas, but that the plan should include history of fire disturbance and more clearly address prescribed fire.
- BC Parks will revise the strategic plan to clarify information on fire disturbance history and implementation in the protected areas. The accompanying Ecosystem Overview Assessment describes the history of natural fire in the protected areas. The strategic management plan references this document, to keep the plan as concise as possible. Additionally, the Muskwa-Kechika Management Plan (2009) addresses prescribed burning. References to these accompanying documents will be added to the strategic plan.

Wildlife

- It was noted that grizzly bears are discussed in more detail than other wildlife, creating apparent bias.
- Missing reference to key species – trout, Stone's sheep.
- Restrictions on domestic animals need to be clarified (e.g., sheep and goats).
- Concern was noted about timing of wildlife surveys.
- BC Parks will revise the strategic plan to address these concerns.

Road Development

- It was suggested that the language in plan regarding road development is too strong. Instead of using the word "prohibit" road development, it was suggested that the language be softened as there could be exceptions in the future for industrial access, safety, and emergencies.
- BC Parks will review this section in the plan and reconsider the language.

Commercial Infrastructure

- Those that commented found commercialization to be low and agreed with the management direction that existing infrastructure should keep current footprints but not increase the size.

Recreation Infrastructure (trails, campgrounds, structures)

- It was noted by a few people that infrastructure should be allowed for public use in high traffic locations but prioritize keeping the protected areas pristine.
- If new structures are built, they should only be done so if BC Parks is able to maintain them.
- Many people would like new trail development to be considered.

Horse Use

- Language in the plan was noted to be too restrictive to horse travel
- BC Parks recognizes the importance of horse use in the protected areas and will review the language in the plan to ensure horse use is appropriately addressed.

Carrying of Firearms

- It was noted multiple times during open house sessions that firearms should be allowed for wildlife protection purposes.
- The Park Act does not allow the carrying or discharge of firearms (or bows) except during lawful hunting season with the appropriate license or as authorized by a Park Officer.

Visitor Education

- There were concerns raised about unprepared visitors in the protected areas.
- Information on safety in the backcountry, responsible recreation, wildlife safety is available on the BC Parks website.

What's Next

Feedback from the various opportunities for public input is being reviewed and considered along with the results of our consultation with First Nations. The next step is revising the draft management direction, based on what we heard, and preparing the final strategic management plan. The final plan will go through a thorough internal review process and will be shared with First Nations. It will be posted to the Let's Talk BC Parks project website and the BC Parks Management Planning website once it has been approved. At that point, BC Parks will begin implementing the plan.

Let's Talk BC Parks project website: <https://helpshapebc.gov.bc.ca/m-k-backcountry-management-plan>

BC Parks Management Planning website: <https://bcparks.ca/about/management-plans/>