



WESTERN BROOK POND PROJECT UPDATE

OCTOBER 2018

WE ARE LISTENING

Parks Canada wants visitors and residents to know we have heard their concerns about Western Brook Pond regarding potential impacts to the environment, valued characteristics and visitor experience. These are important matters central to the future of the park and surrounding communities, and will be among the topics discussed during upcoming consultations on the Gros Morne National Park management plan. In the meantime, in an effort to respond to the questions being raised about Western Brook Pond, we would like to provide the following information.

PROJECT GOALS

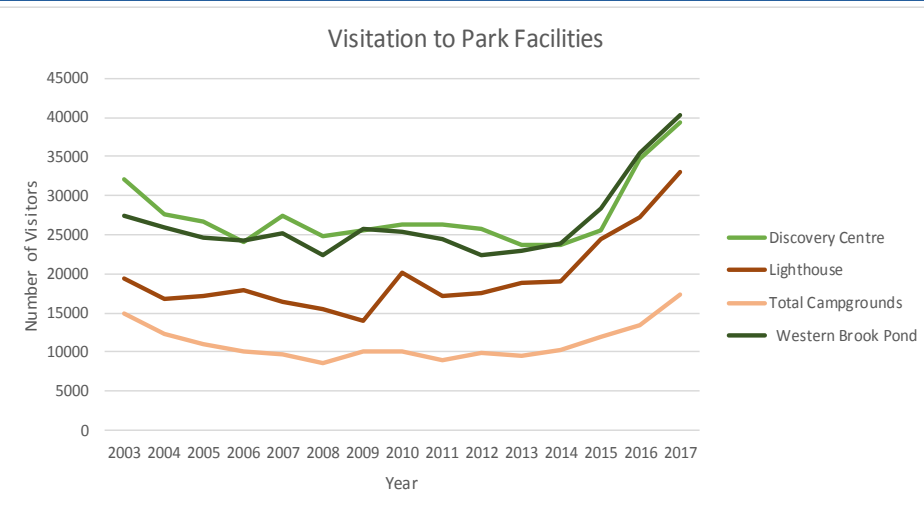
It has been suggested the work at Western Brook Pond was done to accommodate tour buses and will lead to hotels and parking lots pond-side. This is not true. Although the trail has been described as a road, it was not built to the standard of a road. To do so, the bog would have to be excavated to bedrock and fill added. Instead, geo-grid textile was laid on top of the bog to support the trail. It can accommodate some motorized vehicle use but cannot sustain regular traffic. So, why was the work done?

The trail was upgraded to:

- Address the deteriorating condition of the trail;
- Accommodate the level of pedestrian traffic;
- Create additional experiences for visitors (e.g., cyclists);
- Facilitate access for those with mobility issues;
- Ensure a safe route for the transport of supplies; and
- Improve emergency response times and services.

VISITATION IS INCREASING

Visitation to Western Brook Pond has grown significantly in recent years. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of people enjoying the boat tour went from 23,000 to 40,000. This is a trend reflected in other areas of the park (and in the province as a whole), highlighting the importance of effectively managing visitation to mitigate potential impacts to ecological integrity and visitor experience.



The natural beauty of the coastal lowlands of Gros Morne National Park remains intact along the trail at Western Brook Pond. Irises and Pitcher Plants can still be seen along the trail, as well as an abundance of wildlife and other plant species.



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THE TRAIL WAS DETERIORATING

There has long been a trail into Western Brook Pond. Following the establishment of the park and with increased visitation, it evolved into a trail serving primarily to provide access to the boat tour. Forty thousand visitors walked the trail between May and October 2017, making it one of the busiest trails in the park (rivalled only by the Tablelands Trail).

The trail has changed over the years. The previous boardwalk/gravel trail was built in 1992-3 and over the last 25 years, had become part of the Western Brook Pond experience. Hence, the disappointment of some at its replacement. But the trail required frequent and ongoing emergency repair. It was failing. The boardwalk was sinking into the bog and sections of the trail were prone to flooding, creating environmental concerns as well as making it unpleasant and sometimes unsafe for visitors.



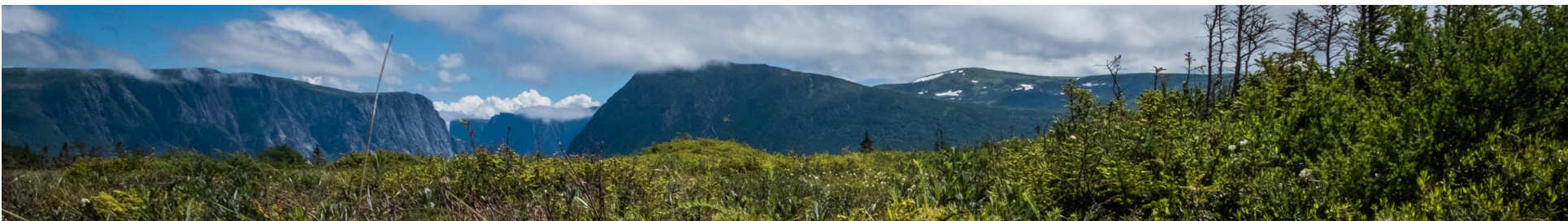
These photos (left and above) show some of the sections of Western Brook Pond Trail prone to flooding, where boardwalks were sinking into the bog. More than two-thirds of the trail was already a gravel path.

Parks Canada is investing more than \$3 million to upgrade the facilities at Western Brook Pond. The goal of the project is to have a trail that is safe, sustainable and accessible, all while protecting the environment.

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

The narrow trail could not accommodate foot traffic during peak periods when more than 700 people a day headed in to the boat tour. It was also inadequate for transporting supplies, including fuel, to the dock. There was a serious risk that an ATV carrying fuel – or a person requiring medical attention – could end up in the bog. While not a frequent occurrence, it has happened. Slip and fall incidents involving visitors were also a concern:

“You probably heard about the lady who tripped and fell on the boardwalk. Well, that was me. I guess the boards were a little uneven and slightly water logged so down I went. Someone finally got a golf cart to transport me the rest of the way to the parking lot to meet up with the ambulance. There really was no other way of getting me to the ambulance and I appreciated it. The long and the short of it is that I broke my kneecap but was looked after extremely well at Norris Point Medical facility.” - E.C.



THE TRAIL WAS NOT ACCESSIBLE

A number of years ago, Parks Canada, with assistance from outside experts, conducted an accessibility assessment of Western Brook Pond Trail. It was deemed unsuitable to be made wheelchair accessible due to its length, grades, turns and loose gravel surface. The recent trail work has provided an opportunity to address some of these obstacles by reducing grades and turns. Over the coming year, the trail surface will be finished to remove more of the impediments to accessibility.

This August, staff toured the park with representatives of the Coalition of Persons with Disabilities NL. We have requested recommendations to improve accessibility and look forward to working with them to make Gros Morne National Park more inclusive.



VISITOR COMMENTS

Over the years, Parks Canada has received numerous letters, emails and comment cards about the inability of some visitors to experience what is considered by many to be the highlight of their trip. Between May and August of this year, the boat tour operator has received 2,500 inquiries regarding accessibility.

“My wife and I are physically challenged but we had hope to take the West Pond Boat Tour.... we feel Parks Canada should be able to provide an alternative route to reach what is described as one of the highlights of Gros Morne Park. While we understand the reasons it is impossible to provide equal access to all for the hiking trails, the walkway to West Pond was purpose built but without apparent regard to persons with physical challenges. We believe this issue should be recognized and addressed...” - R.B.

“Disappointing, sad, frustrated, angry. I travelled from London, Ont. to do the tour. No accommodation made for disabled persons. I have travelled 4000 km to come here for this boat tour, only to be told no way a disabled person can get to the boat. Parks Canada shame on you. There is no reason why you cannot provide access. Shame on you. No one can traverse a 3 km walk in a wheelchair expecting someone to push you. Shame on you. Fix this!” - S.G.

“We visited Western Brook Pond with 2 relatives who had travelled a long way to visit this world renowned site. We were appalled to learn that there was no means of transfer to the boat which was approx. 1.8km away. Since our relatives have health issues they were unable to walk this 1.8km. We find this situation unacceptable and as tax payers find it inexcusable. This is a National Park funded by the tax payers of Canada & it goes without saying that all citizens of this country and for that matter citizens of any country, regardless of their physical abilities, should be provided with a means of transfer to access this site. We trust this matter will be taken seriously and addressed. It is an embarrassment to our Country!” - F. & M. P.

UNDERSTANDING IMPACTS ON ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

Protecting and improving ecological integrity (health of the park) is the first priority for Parks Canada. Park staff conducted an environmental assessment for this project, examining the environmental components contributing to the area’s ecological integrity which could potentially be affected, including:

- Wetland hydrology
- Terrestrial and aquatic wildlife
- Wetland and forest vegetation
- Introduction of foreign material
- Water quality

The environmental assessment considered all aspects of the project and identified more than 40 mitigations to address potential impacts. Given the mitigations and the limited area to be affected, it was concluded that the work at Western Brook Pond would not impact the ecological integrity of Gros Morne National Park.

ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY:
“a condition that is determined to be characteristic of its natural region and likely to persist, including abiotic components and the composition and abundance of native species and biological communities, rates of change and supporting processes.”





NEXT STEPS AT WESTERN BROOK POND

Work at Western Brook Pond is not yet complete. Construction halted in the spring to allow public access during the busy summer season and is planned to resume this fall. This will require closing the trail to the public for safety reasons. During the next phase of the project, the following work will be undertaken:

- Reconstruction of the wharf which has less than 5 years of safe and reliable service remaining;
- Replacement of the siding and roof on the boat house; and
- Limited dredging along the channel to the boat house to provide safe and reliable access for vessels.

As always, continuous monitoring will be carried out to ensure strict compliance with prescribed mitigations to protect the environment (for example, any in-water work will be isolated within a silt curtain to prevent sediment from leaving the work area).

Once this work is complete, final work on the trail is planned to resume early next spring to:

- Restore vegetation along the trail;
- Finish the surface to create a smooth, compacted trail tread;
- Install rest areas and viewpoints; and
- Establish the final trail tread width.

The trail is scheduled to reopen to the public in May 2019. Final landscaping and installation of interpretative signs will also begin at this time. This work will be ongoing throughout next year but will not interfere with visitor use.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

If you still have questions about the work happening at Western Brook Pond, please contact us by phone at 709-458-2417 or send an email to grosmorne.info@pc.gc.ca

In the coming months, Parks Canada will also be conducting public consultations to solicit feedback on a new management plan for Gros Morne National Park. We would like to hear your views, opinions and suggestions on the future of this treasured place. Stay tuned for information on how to participate.

Management plans are important documents that guide the management direction of a national park. The management plan for Gros Morne will address priority areas for Parks Canada and Canadians, such as continuing to protect the natural and cultural resources, creating new ways of sharing the stories of Gros Morne and enhancing visitor experiences, and increasing collaboration with Indigenous and local communities as well as interested stakeholders.

