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Plan quality and plan detail of visitor and tourism policies in Ontario Provincial Park management plans

Paul F.J. Eagles [a,*], Julia Coburn [b], Bobbie Swartman [a]

[a] Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 3G1
[b] School of Planning, University of Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 3G1

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ABSTRACT

Visitor and tourism management is a major component of parks and protected areas. Management plans are important public accountability documents. Research on the policy content of those documents is lacking. This paper uses the concepts of plan quality and plan detail to assess the scale and depth of visitor and tourism policies within park management plans of Ontario Provincial Parks. The research found low levels of plan detail for most of 30 identified areas of visitor and tourism policy in the management plans. However, the overall park organization often had such policies identified in park agency policy documents other than the park plans. The research concludes that these plans are not good plans, due to low levels of plan quality and plan detail, at least in regard to visitor and tourism policies. Suggestions are made on the factors causing this policy void and methods to improve planning practice in the future. The paper provides a method and definitions, with 5 levels of policy detail, which provide more guidance for planners than heretofore available. This research should enable a much more precise definition of policy detail for visitor and tourism policy in plans than has occurred in the literature to date.

Management implications

Legislation and policies provide guidance for visitor and tourism management by a park management agency, but are often weak in providing detail of plan content. This paper shows how an investigation of plan quality and plan detail can provide a new structure to guide such planning.

- A list of 30 management categories provides normative prescriptions for the creation of visitor and tourism policies within park management plans.
- The paper provides a method to improve the level of plan detail of the visitor and tourism components, and thus improve the quality of those plans.
- Use of these methods across a park agency would lead to higher levels of plan coherence and higher levels of transparency and accountability.
- Proper training of planning staff members in the special concerns for outdoor recreation and tourism would be important.

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1. Introduction

The park management plan is a fundamental public participation document with the potential to support good governance qualities, such as transparency and accountability (Graham, Amos, & Plumptre, 2003). Management plans should identify the key features and values, establish the management objectives to be met, and outline actions to be undertaken (Thomas & Middleton, 2003). Management plans should also direct policy development in three important areas: (1) resource and cultural management of park resources; (2) visitor and tourism management; and (3) general management policies on environment, finance, and staffing (Eagles & McCool, 2002). These plans provide members of the public, including visitors, local citizens, and tourism operators, with a written statement outlining government policy intentions

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 888 4567x32716.
E-mail addresses: eagles@uwaterloo.ca (P.F.J. Eagles), coburnju@gmail.com (J. Coburn), blswartm@uwaterloo.ca (B. Swartman).

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in regard to park management activities that will be carried out, within one park. However, research on the policy content of those documents has been lacking (Hyslop & Eagles, 2007).

In resource-based tourism destinations, such as national parks, it is necessary to manage visitor use with policies to eliminate inappropriate activities, enhance visitors' experience and their understanding of the destination, while maintaining the quality of tourism resources (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 1998; Kuo, 2002; McArthur, 1994; Moscardo, 1999). Visitor management can also be an important financial contributor to parks, as sufficient finance is required for parks to provide benefits to society, such as outdoor recreation and biodiversity conservation (Bushell & McCool, 2007; Crompton, 1999; Eagles & McCool, 2002; Emerton, Bishop, & Thomas, 2005). Successful tourism management requires a positive connection between plan quality and plan evaluation.

Starting in the 1990s, the issue of plan quality became important in the literature (Baer, 1997; Berke, Backhurst, Laurian, Crawford, & Dixon, 2006; Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b; Morckel, 2010; Norton, 2008; Tang and Brody, 2009). This literature attempts to outline what makes for a good plan, one that leads to successful implementation and one that can be evaluated against a set of criteria. Common elements of plan quality include: (1) factual base (Berke et al., 2006; Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b; Norton, 2008); (2) goals (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b); (3) implementation (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b; Norton, 2008); (4) policies (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b); (5) internal consistency (Berke et al., 2006; Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Norton, 2008); (6) monitoring (Berke et al., 2006; Berke & Godschalk, 2009), (7) interorganizational coordination (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003a, 2003b), and (8) plan presentation (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Norton, 2008). Pröbstl & Prutsch (2009) suggest that transparent presentation of involvement and participation are important. Understanding these elements of plan quality can improve the production of plans. Berke and Godschalk (2009) state that understanding plan quality is critical for providing legitimacy to the planning process and to planning as profession.

This paper uses the concept of plan quality (Berke et al., 2006; Brody, 2003a, 2003b; Norton, 2008; Berke & Godschalk, 2009) and introduces the concept of plan detail (Thomas & Middleton, 2003) to assess the scale and depth of visitor and tourism policies written within published park management plans in one location, Ontario Provincial Parks in Canada.

Managers must be aware of the needs of visitors, as well as the equilibrium between environmental protection and recreational use (Cole & Daniel, 2003; Eagles, 2002; Hendee & Dawson, 2002). Policy development and implementation requires fundamental information about visitors, their needs and wants, the impacts of their visits, as well as their distribution, and flow in space and time (Cole & Daniel, 2003; Eagles, 2002; Hendee & Dawson, 2002). Visitor management is an ongoing process and is considered to be a tool of sustainable tourism management; it ensures that the visitor receives a high quality experience, while encouraging visitors to adopt appropriate behaviour (Kuo, 2002; Cooper et al., 1998).

Policy detail is the amount of information provided for a specific policy area in publically-available management plans. For example, a low level of detail would include only background description of current activities, while a higher level of detail might include implementation and monitoring requirements. Presumably, higher amounts of detail stated for a policy area provides for higher levels of transparency and therefore accountability in regards to government policy, both laudable governance objectives (Graham et al., 2003). Thomas and Middleton (2003) argue that policies which apply to specific areas within a park should be described in full detail due to their critical importance in outlining the activities that can and will be undertaken in those areas. They also argue that the amount of detail found in the management plan depends on the park agency policy structure. For those agencies with several layers of policies, some of the detail, such as that concerning monitoring strategies, can be relegated to lower level policy documents, such as operational plans. Financial and staffing plans are typically not included in long-term management plans, due to their rapid rate of change, but instead are placed in yearly operational plans. Thomas and Middleton (2003, p. 38) state that management options must be developed "to the stage where they have spatial expression and the management implications are clear. For management implications to be clear to readers, sufficient detail is necessary so that the implications are relatively obvious." The literature does not provide descriptions of what sufficient policy detail might entail in park management plans. The literature also does not provide normative rules for policy detail, but relies on phrases such as full detail or sufficient detail. Our research attempts to address these issues.

Hyslop and Eagles (2007) identified 30 visitor and tourism policy categories as found in Eagles, McCool, and Haynes (2002). When applied to the policy documents for four federal park agencies in the USA and Canada, the US National Park Service provided the most comprehensive visitor management policy structure, addressing 25 policies areas, while the Canadian Wildlife Service provided the least, addressing only six of the 30 areas (Hyslop & Eagles, 2007). This set of 30 policy categories proved to be a useful framework for the detailed analysis of the visitor and tourism policies of one complex management plan, Algonquin Provincial Park (Eagles & Bandoh, 2009). This current research adopted this policy framework as a normative standard to be used in policy analysis of the visitor and tourism component of park management plans.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of a good plan

The quality of a plan is often used as an indirect measure of plan implementation success and as a reflection of quality in the planning process (Brody, 2003a). Other possible explanations, besides plan quality, determined by Laurian et al. (2004, p. 472) that were considered to influence plan implementation success include: "(1) the commitment of the agency to implementing the plan; (2) the inclusion in the plan of provisions for implementation and of management techniques to implement plan policies; (3) the specification of appropriate management techniques in development permits, and (4) the actual use of these management techniques by developers". Other than item (2), which is just one element of plan quality (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Brody, 2003b; Norton, 2008), the remaining three aspects are extraneous to the content of the plan. It is possible that one or more of these factors can have a greater influence on the success of plan implementation than the quality of the plan itself, but there is not enough empirical evidence to support either claim.

An evaluation of the outcomes of plan implementation helps understand if the plan was a success. Evaluation was defined by Weiss (1998), and restated by Baum (2001, p. 4) and Seasons (2003) as "the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvements of the program or policy." This definition provides substantial flexibility in how evaluation can be executed, where either

implicit or explicit standards can be used, and where the operation or outcomes can be assessed. A simple but powerful form of plan evaluation is an analysis of content of a plan assessed against a standard, such as the framework of 30 visitor and tourism policy categories provided by Hyslop and Eagles (2007).

How does one determine whether a plan is a good plan? Brody and Highfield (2005) evaluated plan quality of local comprehensive plans in Florida on a scale of 0 to 2. The level of detail considered two main components: (1) each of seven identified environmental policies; and (2) each of eleven identified implementation policy indicators. The ordinal scale used in this evaluation indicated "0" as not identified or mentioned in the plan; "1" as suggested, but not detailed in the plan; and "2" as fully detailed or mandatory in the plan (Brody & Highfield, 2005). Berke and Conroy (2000) evaluated plan quality in relation to sustainability principles contained in plans by extracting three items of information from every policy statement: (1) the sustainability principle promoted by the policy; (2) the management technique, for example zoning or a capital management program, which would be used to promote that policy; and (3) whether the policy was suggested (rated 1) or required (rated 2) by the plan (Berke & Conroy, 2000). Words that would indicate that the policy was suggested include: encourage, consider, intend, and should; words that would imply the policy was required include: shall, will, require, or must (Berke & Conroy, 2000). This numerical approach provides a structure that can be used to evaluate park management plans' strength of commitment to written content. It can be used to determine the degree of policy detail within management plans based on core characteristics associated with plan quality as found in the literature. This numerical structure will be described later in the paper.

2.2. Purpose and function of park management plans

Park planning and management occur within a hierarchy of law and policies, with the governing legislation at the top, and site planning and operational management at the bottom (Fig. 1). Management plans are central within that hierarchy. The hierarchical structure is important as policies become more specific as they move down the pyramid. Also, as policies move up the pyramid, the planning document type becomes more influential, but more general in wording. An important issue is the degree of specificity that should be given in management plans. Good coordination across an organization ensures policy coherence across all levels.

Thomas and Middleton (2003, p. 1) define a management plan as "a document that sets out the management approach and goals, together with a framework for decision making, to apply in the protected area over a given period of time." They also outline components that should be present in a management plan (p. 69):

> "(a) a descriptive section of the site in question (geographical, social, economic, biophysical), (b) a description of any laws, norms and agreements that apply to the park; (c) a strategic plan (prioritizing actions, stating strategies of what needs to be done and how it should be implemented); and (d) a zoning plan (defining park zones and what land uses will be permitted in each)."

They suggest that the level of detailed policy items can vary depending on the purpose of the management plan and legal requirements. Other factors, according to Thomas and Middleton (2003), that can influence this variability include the availability of other planning systems, whether or not a management plan is to guide day-to-day management activities, risks to the objectives, number of competing interests, level of stakeholder involvement, and issues external to the park.

Eagles et al. (2002, p. 43) define a management plan as "the vehicle for determining and listing all park policies" and being "comprehensive in character." They also suggest (p. 46) that objectives in the plan should be written in an "(1) output-oriented; (2) time-bound; (3) specific; (4) measurable; and (5) attainable manner". The function of a plan as expressed by Eagles et al. (2002) is more comprehensive in nature and entails a higher level of commitment to action than that expressed by Thomas and Middleton (2003).

Having a clear understanding of the purpose of a management plan is critical in order to evaluate the potential implementation success of that management plan (Morckel, 2010). The international literature provides a set of criteria which are useful to evaluate plan quality. Drawing extensively on Eagles et al. (2002), Eagles and McCool (2002), and Alexander (2008) a management plan has eight purposes:

1) communicate clear information where decisions can be traced and defended, if necessary;
2) explicitly communicate value judgments;
3) incorporate an understanding of stakeholder perceptions;
4) provide an opportunity for public contribution;
5) set precedence for following plans (Thomas & Middleton, 2003);

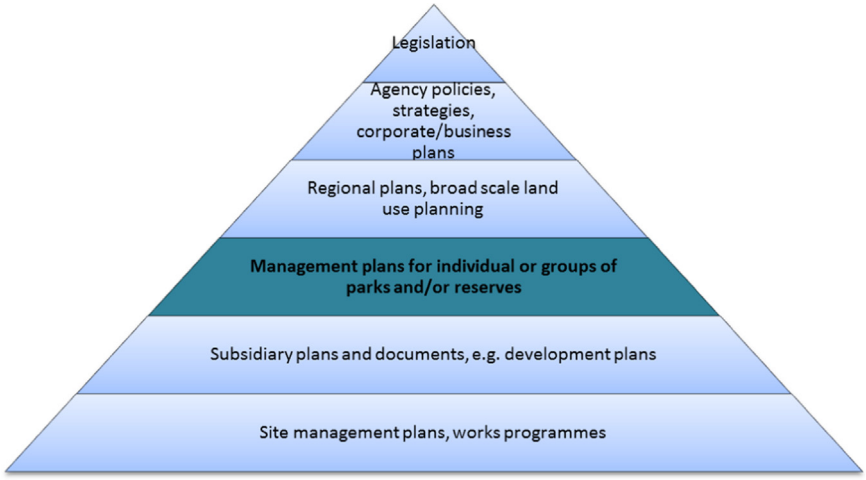

Fig. 1. Planning hierarchy diagram (adapted from Thomas and Middleton, 2003).

6) guide and control management of a protected area (see also Thomas & Middleton, 2003; Young & Young, 1993);
7) satisfy legislative requirements (see also Thomas & Middleton, 2003); and,
8) provide a document that can be implemented (see also Clarke, 1999).

The authors were unable to find published research on plan quality or policy detail within park management plans, suggesting research gaps which are addressed in this paper.

3. Legal and policy structure of park management plans in Ontario

Each park operates within a specified legal and policy structure. This research concentrated on the visitor and tourism management policies within the published management plans for one park system, Ontario Provincial Parks in Canada. It is important to understand the legislation and policies that govern management planning within that system, as described below.

The legislation governing Ontario Provincial Parks requires a management direction to be created for each park, on its own or in combination with one or more Provincial Parks or Conservation Reserves. This management direction can take the form of either a management statement or, for more complex sites, a management plan (Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006, Section 10). Management plans are intended to provide a 20-year foresight (Section 10(3) b); they are required during their creation, revision, and amendment process to have more than one opportunity for stakeholder consultation (Section 10(6)); and will subsequently be reviewed by the Minister of Natural Resources every 10 years (Section 10(7)). A management plan is:

> "a document approved by the Minister that provides a policy and resource management framework that addresses substantial and complex issues or proposals or both for substantial capital infrastructure or resource management projects for one or more provincial parks or conservation reserves or for a combination of them (Section 5)".

A management plan: (1) is a legislative requirement (Section 10 (1); (2) a management guide (Sections 10(5); and, (3) provides an opportunity for public consultation (Section 10(6).

Management directions and plans are not legally-competent documents under the Ontario Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act (2006), as the park managers and the government are not required by law to follow the plan policies. Activities can take place that are not mentioned in the management plans. The legislation contains no penalties for divergence from the legislative requirements in regards to the creation or timing of plans. These plans are policy statements only; subject to political, not legal, implications.

The Protected Areas Planning Manual (Ontario Parks, 2009) purports to have established a "provincially consistent, transparent, and predictable approach to protected area planning", where decisions can be "clear, repeatable, and defendable"; though it does not elaborate on how these objectives will be achieved. Neither the Provincial Parks nor Conservation Reserves Act (2006) nor the Protected Area Planning Manual (Ontario Parks, 2009) contain an explicit statement of purposes for management plans. The Blue Book (OMNR, 1992), a document no longer in force, stated that one of the functions of an Ontario Provincial Park management plan is to provide guidance for subsidiary plans; it is probable that this is still an intention of Ontario Parks. There are no statements that the plans should: (1) communicate clear information where decisions can be traced and defended; (2) explicitly communicate value judgments; (3) incorporate an understanding of stakeholder perceptions; (4) be a document that sets the precedence for following plans; and (5) is a document that is made to be implemented.

Uniquely, Ontario has eight categories of protected areas. The seven classes for Provincial Parks are found in Section 8(1) of the Act are: (1) Wilderness Class Parks; (2) Nature Reserve Class Parks; (3) Cultural Heritage Class Parks; (4) Natural Environment Class Parks; (5) Waterway Class Parks; (6) Recreational Class Parks; and (7) Aquatic Class Parks (Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves 2006). In addition, there is a designation called Conservation Reserve, which is not a class of Provincial Park, but a separate form of protected area. The concept of park classes, each with a unique set of recreation uses was first introduced in 1967, and their application was expanded in the revised 2006 legislation. Each class of park has specific management objectives, with a different balance between recreation and preservation, the level of commercial activities, and the types of recreation activity allowed (Killan, 1993). The two park classes most aimed at outdoor recreation use, the Recreational Class and the Natural Environment Class, were chosen as the subject of this research. The legislative objectives of recreational class parks are to provide a wide variety of compatible outdoor recreation opportunities in attractive natural surroundings. The legislative objectives of natural environment class parks are to protect outstanding recreational landscapes, representative ecosystems and provincially significant elements of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage and to provide high quality recreational and educational experiences (Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006).

Ontario Parks has a cadre of 13 full-time park planners as well as 10 definite-term contracts (Steinberg, pers. comm.).

Ontario Provincial Parks are assigned a status of either operating or non-operating. Operating parks have staff and visitor services, for at least part of the year. Non-operating parks do not have on-the-ground staff or visitor services, but are visited occasionally by officials located in other parks or in regional offices. For this research, management plans for both operating and non-operating parks were evaluated.

4. Methods

This research asked the question: What is the level of policy detail on visitor and tourism policy areas occurring within a sample of park management plans?

The management plans selected for the content analysis satisfied four criteria: (1) must be an approved management plan, as opposed to a draft plan; (2) must be the most recent plan; (3) must be a Natural Environment Class or Recreational Class park; and (4) must be available on the Ontario Parks website. In addition, plans published from the year 2000 onwards were used, to maintain the currency of the park management plans. At the time of this research, only 10 plans fulfilled all of these criteria. One plan, Windy Lake, which was published in 1988, was added to the research set to bring the recreation class park sample to five. The criteria chosen ensured that the most recent, complete plans were used from the two park classes that have the majority of the recreational use in the park system. According to the 2010 visitor use data (Ontario Parks, 2011), the Natural Environment Class parks had 4434,646 visitor days of activity, 46.7% of all visitor use in the park system, and the Recreation Class parks had 4773,048 visitor days of use, 50% of all visitor use, giving 96.7% of all visitor use.

This research undertook content analysis of 11 published management plans; 5 Recreational Class park management plans, Windy Lake (1988), Fairbank (2001), Driftwood (2001), Marten

River (2001) and Rainbow Falls (2004), and 6 Natural Environment Class park management plans: Charleston Lake (2007), Komoka (2010), Mashkinonje (2004), Neys (2004), Ruby Lake (2009), and Sleeping Giant (2007). Eight of these parks were operating, and three were non-operating.

Content analysis is defined by Neuendorf (2002) as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. This type of analysis provides quantitative data to highlight patterns in an objective manner regarding the level of detail that policies are described.

The analysis utilized a slightly modified version of Hyslop and Eagles' (2007) 30 categories of visitor and tourism policy relevant to parks (Table 1). The minor changes made to two of the their categories include: (1) emergency response was amalgamated into risk management; (2) marketing and competition for visitation was split into two criteria, advertising and market analysis. Since emergency response is one aspect of risk management, it was decided to merge the categories, so as to not overemphasize the field. The Hyslop and Eagles' (2007) category of marketing and competition for visitation mentions marketing, which we understand includes developing a product. Advertising those developed tourism products, which was not explicitly mentioned, is of sufficient importance to be given its own category in addition to marketing.

Human facilitated coding was undertaken by a single researcher to provide a conceptual analysis of the level of policy detail in park management plans. Content analysis was undertaken in two stages. First, every statement within the management plan that applied to one of the 30 visitor and tourism policies was written verbatim under the policy heading. Information that overlapped between two of the 30 separate categories was copied into each applicable category. The next step assigned a level of detail to that statement; in the case of duplications the level of detail appeared under both categories.

Table 1
Visitor and tourism policy categories and definitions (modified after Hyslop and Eagles, 2007).

Visitor and tourism policy categories	Definitions
(1) Goals of visitation	Policies on: overall goals which direct all visitor management in the park
(2) Visitor use plan	Policies on: an overall, clearly identified, strategy to guide visitor management
(3) Established visitor management framework	Policies on: the use of an established visitor management framework that provide directives for visitor management (such as Limits of Acceptable Use and Visitor Impact Management)
(4) Permitted and encouraged visitor levels and uses	Policies on: permissible/encouraged activities and visitor numbers that conform with park goals and objectives (such as low impact recreational and interpretation activities)
(5) Conflict management	Policies on: conflicts that may arise in the park (such as, between visitors and managers, between recreationists, and between recreation and non-recreational activities)
(6) Methods of transportation	Policies on: methods of transportation within the park (such as roads, tracks, airstrips, and boat landings)
(7) Trails and markings	Policies on: trails and markings within the park (such as signs and trails for education and enforcement purposes)
(8) Noise restrictions	Policies on: noise restrictions within the park
(9) Restricted items	Policies on: restricted items within the park (such as firearms)
(10) Land use zoning and temporary area restrictions	Policies on: land use zoning within the park (such as allowable and timing of activities)
(11) Accessibility (for the disabled)	Policies on: the provision of accessible programming, services, and facilities for persons with disabilities
(12) System of reservation	Policies on: reservation systems (such as for accommodation, programs, and facilities)
(13) Dates and hours of operation	Policies on: dates and hours of operation for the park as a whole, as well as for specific facilities (such as visitor centre, restaurant), and specific services (such as boat tour, educational program)
(14) Length of stay	Policies on: length of stay for visitation in the park (such as seasonal restrictions and campsite use)
(15) Fees and pricing	Policies on: fees and pricing for park entry, facilities, and services (such as in light of different park seasons, locations, and visitor types)
(16) Visitor education and interpretation	Policies on: visitor education and interpretation within the park (such as guided walks and evening programs)
(17) Risk management	Policies on: risk management within the park, including emergency response and search and rescue
(18) Backcountry trips	Policies on: backcountry trips (such as permissible activities and visitor numbers)
(19) Enforcement and rule of law	Policies on: enforcement and rules of law within the park (such as, preventing illegal, dangerous, or unwarranted activity)
(20) Facilities	Policies on: park facilities (such as the number and quality of washrooms, showers, and visitor centre(s))
(21) Accommodation	Policies on: park accommodation (such as accommodation type, location, facilities)
(22) Waste management	Policies on: waste and sewage produced in the park (such as waste treatment and recycling)
(23) Retail services and concessions	Policies on: what types of items will be sold (food, drink, clothing), by whom (contractors, park staff), and where (restaurant, visitor centre, on beach)
(24) Human resources required for visitation	Policies on: the number, type, qualifications, and training of park human resources (such as skilled workers, temporary workers, and volunteers) for specified roles and for specified times (seasonal, special projects, full time)
(25) Advertising	Policies on: advertising the park and its programs and facilities
(26) Market analysis	Policies on: market analysis with regard to the competition the park faces
(27) Economic impacts of visitation	Policies on: measurement and calculation of economic impacts (such as directing economic impacts to chosen targets)
(28) Visitor use monitoring	Policies on: a program to measure visitor use and numbers into and within the park
(29) Visitor Satisfaction	Policies on: visitor satisfaction (such as creating a certain degree of visitor satisfaction that can encourage visitor spending, or repeat visitation)
(30) Assessment of attainment of objectives	Policies on: a program to measure whether the park plan policies have been attained

Table 2
Levels of policy detail (modified after Brody and Highfield, 2005).

(1) No detail = not included in plan
(2) Minimal detail = background description of current visitor activities
(3) General detail = minimal detail + objectives of current and future visitor activities
(4) Very detailed = general detail + action/implementation plan (who, what, where, and when)
(5) Comprehensive detail = very detailed + monitoring and evaluation plan

Criteria for plan quality were developed for content analysis. The content from the plans was coded following the approach of Brody and Highfield (2005), but expanded into five levels for this study (Table 2).

Brody and Highfield (2005) and Berke and Conroy (2000) suggest five plan quality characteristics: fact base, goals, policies, implementation and internal consistency. These were used in the current study, except for internal consistency. The Hyslop and Eagles (2007) plan evaluation method does not account for the connection of each plan quality characteristic to each other on a policy-by-policy basis. This type of evaluation permits an investigation of the individual strengths and weaknesses of each plan quality characteristic, for example, the implementation strategies compared to the goals and objectives written in the plan overall.

Our method used definitions to account for the quality of characteristics, starting at the objective level. The quality of the factual base underlying the policy is not accounted for in this method; in addition, the quality of implementation and monitoring plan may not be recorded if the quality of the objective is not suitable, as each level of detail is dependent on the previous level of detail.

The level of detail categories, from level 1 to level 5, incrementally represent more detailed information in a plan regarding a specific policy; for example, statements regarding a background description of current visitor activities provide more detail than if a policy were not included in a plan, and so on. The level of detail categories represent information that could potentially be written about a policy in a plan to assist in the planning process; each new category provides information that does not overlap with the category before it.

Definitions were created for each level of detail category from 2 through 5 to ensure transparency and assist in the reliability of the results. These definitions for park planning best practices came from a combination of IUCN guidelines on management planning (Thomas & Middleton, 2003) and plan evaluation literature. These definitions are listed as follows.

Current background description can include a description of what stakeholders want and issue identification as well as statements of key social, economic, and environmental facts, including inventories of current park features and amenities (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Thomas & Middleton, 2003).

Current and future objectives refers to statements of what condition is desired. To meet the objective level of detail, an objective statement must be output/outcome-oriented, time-bound, specific, measureable, and attainable (Eagles et al., 2002; Schoemaker, 1984). Note, an objective does not state how this output or outcome is to be achieved (Eagles et al., 2002; Thomas & Middleton, 2003).

An action/implementation plan states how objectives are to be met, including who is responsible, and when and where action is to occur. Alternative implementation plans can be written to build in flexibility to the plan (Thomas & Middleton, 2003).

A monitoring and evaluation plan must present indicators that will be used to measure and evaluate implementation success, a timeline by which monitoring and evaluation will occur, and designate responsibility for who will undertake the process. Monitoring can be thought of as the process of collecting information on indicators and evaluation in order to review outcomes against set objectives (Eagles et al., 2002; Thomas & Middleton, 2003; Hockings, Stolton, & Dudley, 2000).

In the event that there was detail about a policy regarding a high level of detail category, for example monitoring and evaluation, but there was no information about that policy regarding a lower level of detail category, such as an action/implementation plan, the high level of detail for that policy could not be recorded. This is due to the belief that the level of detail categories is to be regarded in an incremental fashion. The highest level of detail for any policy that falls under a policy category was the level of detail recorded.

5. Results

Table 3 contains the content and level of detail for each of the 30 visitor and tourism policies in the 11 park management plans analyzed. Since each of the 11 plans was analyzed for 30 policy categories, there were 330 points of policy determination.

No policies were ranked at level 5 (comprehensive detail with very detailed policies as well as monitoring and evaluation plan). Eight of the 330 policy determinations were scored at level 4 (general policy detail plus an implementation plan). General detail (level 3) was identified in 51 determinations. The most frequently identified level was 2 (minimal detail) with 157 determinations. The second most frequently identified level was 1 (no information included) with 114 determinations. This reveals that the visitor and tourism policies were typically given low levels of detail in the 11 plans reviewed.

Policies for trails and markings were given level 4 in three plans, while two other policies, visitor education and interpretation, as well as risk management were given level 4 in two plans. Apparently trails, visitor education and interpretation, and risk management were the three policy areas which provided the most detail.

In order to assess the relative plan detail scores, the policies were ranked according to the mean of all parks combined. In addition the mean scores of the eight operating parks and the three non-operating parks are also included (Table 4). The top-ranked policy, with a mean score of 3 was trails and markings, suggesting that all plans had some level of policy detail of this frequently used outdoor recreation facility. Importantly, none of the plans contained any information on trail monitoring and evaluation. Visitor education and interpretation received a score of 2.9, suggesting it was more highly valued. However, the lack of policy detail and the lack of program evaluation policy suggest that evidence-based program improvement is lacking. The authors could not find other policy documents that outline monitoring of trails or monitoring of visitor education. Risk management was also given a score or 2.9.

Accommodation was given a mean score of 2.6. The eight operating parks have campgrounds with a mean of 3.3, higher than the non-operating mean of 2.0.

Visitor use monitoring received a score of 1.5, with 8 parks given a score of 1. This is also an anomaly since all the operating parks have ongoing visitor monitoring programs, as revealed in annual reports that provide data of visitor use for all parks each year (Ontario Parks, 2007). Therefore, the visitor use monitoring programs currently in place in the parks are not reported in the management plans.

Fees and pricing received a score of 1.5, with five parks given a score of 1. All operating provincial parks in Ontario charge a day use fee for those who enter the park for part or all of a day and do not stay over. All parks with campgrounds charge a camping fee. These fees are set by regulation. Therefore, the 11 parks had a pricing policy, even if the policy allows for entrance to a non-operating park at no charge, but the management plans usually did not state the current policy in place, where one would find the policy, or how it was developed.

Three policy categories were not mentioned in any plan: (1) a visitor use plan; (2) noise restrictions; and, (3) system of reservations. Ontario Parks has traditionally not prepared visitor use plans for the parks, so this absence is understandable. Parks have noise restrictions for all parks, with a minimum fine of $150.00 (Ontario Parks, 2013), but this fact is not mentioned in the plans. Ontario Parks has had a sophisticated campsite reservation system, either by telephone or internet, for over 20 years (Eagles, van Hemessen, & Legault, 2013), again not mentioned in the management plans.

Table 3
Content and detail in management plans.

Policy	Windy Lake	Fair-bank	Drift-wood	Marten River	Rainbow Falls	Charles-ton Lake	Komoka	Mashk-inonje	Neys	Ruby Lake	Sleep-ing Giant	Mean
Operating/nonoperating	OP	OP	OP	OP	OP	OP	NO	NO	OP	NO	OP	
1. Goals of visitation	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2.1
2. Visitor use plan	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.0
3. Established visitor management framework	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.1
4. Permitted or encouraged visitor levels and uses	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1.5
5. Conflict management	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1.5
6. Methods of transportation	3	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.1
7. Trails and markings	2	3	4	4	4	2	3	2	3	3	3	3.0
8. Noise restrictions	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.0
9. Restricted items	1	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	1.9
10. Land use zoning and temporary area restrictions	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2.5
11. Accessibility (for the disabled)	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	1.4
12. System of reservation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.0
13. Dates and hours of operation	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1.6
14. Length of stay	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1.6
15. Fees and pricing	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1.5
16. Visitor education and interpretation	3	3	3	3	4	3	2	2	4	2	3	2.9
17. Risk management	2	2	3	3	2	4	3	3	4	3	3	2.9
18. Back-country trips	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1.5
19. Enforcement of rules and laws	1	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	1.8
20. Facilities	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.3
21. Accommodation	3	3	3	3	4	2	1	2	3	2	3	2.6
22. Waste management	2	1	2	3	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	2.0
23. Retail services and concession	3	3	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2.0
24. Human resources required for visitation	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1.6
25. Advertising	2	3	2	3	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2.2
26. Market analysis	2	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	1	2	1.9
27. Economic impacts of visitation	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.0
28. Visitor use monitoring	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1.5
29. Visitor satisfaction	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1.2
30. Attainment of objectives	2	1	2	1	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.4

Very rarely did any the management plans mention “visitor management”, and if the term was used, it was in the context of making sure visitors are not destructive. Not even the Park Management Plan of the flagship provincial park, Algonquin, addressed the term “visitor management” (Eagles & Bandoh, 2009).

Many the management plans mentioned the need to develop subsidiary plans in the future, such as a: Business Plan, Natural Heritage Plan, Marketing Plan, Operations Plan, and Sign Plan. The use of subsidiary plans moves detailed issues from the overall management plan into a specific, targeted plans, often called operational plans. If visitor management activity is perceived as too detailed for a management plan, then it should be moved into a subsidiary plan. However, the researchers found no evidence that these subsidiary plans were developed, as none were available for public access.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1. Levels of policy detail and policy implementation

This research shows that the visitor and tourism policies in the Recreation and Natural Environment Classes of parks have relatively low levels of plan detail, as shown by the low policy detail scores.

Important policy areas, for example those for fees and pricing, dates and hours of operation, and visitor use monitoring, have provincial-level policies, mentioned on the agency website, but not mentioned in the management plans. This apparent lack of vertical policy coordination across the management organization reveals a low level of policy coherence across all the levels of the policy pyramid shown in Fig. 1. The lack of coherence can lead to confusion by stakeholders when attempting to understand exactly what the policies are and where they can be found.

Policy implementation, monitoring, and evaluation were shown to be weak. Such evaluation is essential before any subsequent plans are developed. This confirms the findings of Seasons (2003) that monitoring and evaluation in planning documents is often overlooked and underused. Fahner and Janas (2013) call for much more monitoring of the implementation of plan policies dealing with the environmental impact of recreational home construction in the Muskoka area of Ontario. They recommended that this monitoring requirement should be made a policy within all community plans. We conclude that a similar monitoring requirement should be placed into park management plans.

The relatively low level of policy detail results in low levels of transparency and therefore low levels of accountability for park visitor and tourism policies. This finding diverges from stated policy that a planning purpose is to provide an opportunity for public consultation (Ontario Parks, 2009). This indicates a weakness in achieving a key governance criterion.

6.2. Content analysis of park management plans

We now comment on the eight purposes of a management plan as found in the content analysis of the 11 park management plans.

Table 4
Ranking of visitor and tourism policies by mean level of plan detail.

Visitor and tourism policy category	Operating mean	Non-operating mean	Overall mean
Trails and markings	3.1	2.7	3.0
Visitor education and interpretation	3.3	2.0	2.9
Risk management	2.9	3.0	2.9
Accommodation	3.0	1.7	2.6
Land use zoning and temporary area restrictions	2.6	2.0	2.5
Assessment of attainment of objectives	2.1	3.0	2.4
Facilities	2.4	2.0	2.3
Advertising	2.1	2.3	2.2
Goals of visitation	2.1	2.0	2.1
Methods of transportation	2.1	2.0	2.1
Waste management	2.1	1.7	2.0
Retail services and concession	2.1	1.7	2.0
Economic impacts of visitation	2.0	2.0	2.0
Restricted items	1.9	2.0	1.9
Market analysis	2.0	1.7	1.9
Enforcement of rules and laws	1.6	2.3	1.8
Dates and hours of operation	1.8	1.3	1.6
Length of stay	1.5	2.0	1.6
Human resources required for visitation	1.5	2.0	1.6
Permitted/encouraged visitor levels and uses	1.4	2.0	1.5
Conflict management	1.4	2.0	1.5
Fees and pricing	1.4	2.0	1.5
Backcountry trips	1.6	1.3	1.5
Visitor use monitoring	1.4	1.7	1.5
Accessibility (for the disabled)	1.4	1.3	1.4
Visitor satisfaction	1.3	1.0	1.2
Established visitor management framework	1.1	1.0	1.1
Visitor use plan	1.0	1.0	1.0
Noise restrictions	1.0	1.0	1.0
System of reservation	1.0	1.0	1.0

1) Communicate clear information where decisions can be traced and defended, if necessary.
   This research found a paucity of detailed information in the management plans analyzed for most of the 30 identified policy areas in visitor and tourism. With a lack of information, future decisions in these policy areas cannot be sufficiently directed by those plans. Therefore, many future park-level decisions cannot be traced back to management plan policy.
2) Explicitly communicate value judgements.
   Visitor and tourism management is based on substantial levels of value judgements, though they are not explicitly communicated as such. Given the low level of detail found in the plans, it will be very difficult for managers or outside observers to understand the basis for those value judgements.
3) Incorporate an understanding of stakeholder perceptions.
   Our research did not explicitly assess plan statements in an effort to understand how policies were influenced by stakeholders. Therefore, we cannot comment how the current policies came about.
4) Provide an opportunity for public contribution.
   It is very challenging for any member of the public to understand the exact visitor and tourism policies in place in a park when so few are detailed in the management plan. Many policies occur in other documents and information sources scattered across the park organization, and typically are not accessible to the public.
5) Sets precedence for following plans.
   Any plan sets a precedent for subsequent plans. We conclude that the lack of detail found in the plans is partially the result of current plans utilizing outdated and insufficient policy structures found in older plans.
6) Guide and control management of a protected area.
   This research revealed that some visitor and tourism policies in parks are not outlined in much detail in the park management plans. Therefore, the park management plan is not fully guiding the park management for visitors and tourism.
7) Satisfy legislative requirements.
   There is no legal requirement in the Ontario Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act to detail the 30 visitor and tourism policy categories in the plan, nor is there a legal requirement to state policies to a specified level of detail (including an implementation and monitoring plan). Given that the legislative requirements, outlined earlier in the paper, are very general in nature, it is probable that these plans fulfill those requirements.
8) Provide a document that can be implemented.
   Laurian et al. (2004, p. 472) suggest that provisions in a plan regarding implementation of the policies are an indicator of plan implementation success. Our content analysis only found four out of the 11 visitor park management plans with visitor and tourism policies written in the level of detail that would enable analysis of implementation success. We therefore conclude that the current plans do not provide sufficient detail to fully direct a visitor and tourism program in a park.

Burby (2003) proclaims that one source of a plan being ineffective is caused by disconnect between what is a concern for decision-makers and what is a concern for the public, causing some planning actions to be without public support. This research suggests a tension between the stated goal of encouraging public consultation, and the desire by decision-makers to keep management policies loosely worded to allow for unfettered decisions at a later period. This research may reveal a fundamental issue in regards to park management policy. Unless policy detail is required by law and policy, it is probably to the advantage of management agencies to keep the policy structure loose and open for future interpretation.

If one follows the edict that only those activities that are explicitly mentioned in the management plan can occur in the park, then many aspects of visitor and tourism management that occur could not take place. For example, if visitor use monitoring policy is not mentioned or permitted then it could not occur. However, visitor monitoring takes place, revealing that activities take place that are not mentioned or allowed for in the overall plan.

6.3. Comparison of plans for operating and non-operating parks

It is interesting that the policies for operating parks are relatively similar in the level of detail from non-operating parks. It would seem logical that operating parks which have visitor activities should have much more detail in regards to all aspects of visitor management. Therefore, plan content analysis suggests that the park management policies in regards to visitation and tourism are not a realistic reflection of the actual level of visitor activity in the parks.

A major deficiency in the plans is policy around finance and staffing. It is not possible to undertake park management without sufficient finance and appropriate numbers of suitably-qualified staff members, and such a void needs explanation. This deficiency is caused by the overall government policy structure enveloping parks. Finance and staffing is determined by central government policies created annually in the provincial budget. Government does not allow this annual activity to be moved down to the park level in a plan outlined for a long-term, multi-year horizon.

Therefore, the parks are not able to discuss multi-year finance and staffing issues within a management plan.

6.4. Comparison of policy detail across plans

The results of the content analysis of 11 park management plans indicate a consistent level of policy detail across park plans, suggesting good horizontal interorganizational coordination. Despite the limited information provided in provincial legislation and guiding provincial policy documents, this finding suggests that other park management plans are likely used as templates for new park management plans. Eagles and Bandoh (2009), in a content analysis of the Algonquin Park Management Plan, provide evidence of a departure from strong interorganizational coordination as the Algonquin Park management plan likely contains a higher level of detail than other plans of the same park class.

We conclude that the content analysis approach used by Brody and Highfield (2005) to evaluate plans, identifying the presence of a series of policies in a plan and subsequently the presence of policy indicators or details, is appropriate. The five levels of detail in this research proved to be useful, robust, and relatively easy to use. The 30 policy areas (Hyslop & Eagles, 2007), as amended, were easy to interpret and apply to the plans. No major areas of visitor or tourism policy were found in the plans that were not mentioned in the Hyslop and Eagles (2007) policy list.

6.5. Legal and policy implications

Ontario Provincial Park management directions and plans are not legally-competent documents. The park managers and the government are not required by law to follow the plan policies. Activities can take place that are not mentioned in the management plans. The legislation lists no penalties for divergence from any of the legislative requirements in regards to the creation or timing of plans. The plans are statements of intent only. This weak legislative structure may explain why the plan policies are so loosely worded and structured. Is this legal and policy situation similar in other jurisdictions? This research cannot comment if these plans were implemented, so we cannot say if the planning was successful.

Based on our analysis and the literature review we conclude that these plans are not good plans, due to low levels of plan detail and therefore plan quality, at least in regard to visitor and tourism policies. There were particular deficiencies in the (1) factual base; (2) a full statement of goals; (3) implementation procedures; and (4) policies for monitoring. We found horizontal consistency amongst management plans, however weak vertical consistency across the levels of administrative organization.

6.6. Forces underlying lack of policy detail

What are the forces underlying this lack of policy detail? Our research cannot be definitive in this regard, but we present suggestions. The current legal structure for park planning in Ontario mandates plans, but provides no legal requirement about their content, possibly leading to administrative laxity in regards to the importance of clearly-worded policy statements. The current park management plan policy guideline (Ontario Parks, 2009) deals with planning process, but provides only few categories of content. The planners do not have provincial policy guidelines in regards to the visitor and tourism policies that should be included in each plan. In the absence of provincial guidelines, the planners appear to use former plans as a template. Given that the earlier plans lack such content, the void is passed down the line.

Ontario has 23 employees who plan for 330 provincial parks. Due to restrictions imposed by the government on the hiring of new staff, about half of the plan authors are short-term, contract employees. And to make matters worse, Ontario Parks does not require a professional planning education when hiring for these parks planning positions (Steinberg, pers. comm.). To the best of the authors' knowledge none of the 23 has professional planning certification under the Ontario Professional Planning Institute. The writers are often recent graduates from university, with little formal planning training or applied planning experience. Most have a resource management background, and few have recreation and tourism training. This short-term employment for many planners and the lack of planning experience means they do not have the ability to bring a more comprehensive approach to the creation of policies for visitor and tourism management. Our research suggests that the parks management agency lacks a human resources complement that is appropriately trained for visitor and tourism management and planning. This may explain some of the lack of policy coordination in visitor and tourism policy across Ontario Parks. This educational deficiency around planning for outdoor recreation is not unique to Ontario, as Stenseke and Hansen (2014) report a similar situation for outdoor recreation planning in Sweden.

An important issue was highlighted in this research. What policies should be found in upper-level agency-wide policies as found in Fig. 1, and what policies should be detailed in park management plans? Our research cannot answer these questions, but suggests that a park agency needs to make an explicit statement in regards to this issue of what policies are stated at what policy level.

6.7. Future research

Hopefully, this research may contribute to improved parks management plans in regards to plan content and detail, especially on visitor and tourism management. It would be desirable to undertake research on plan quality in other park jurisdictions. Do other park agencies elsewhere in Canada and internationally have similar policy voids and lack of vertical agency coordination as revealed here?

There is a perceived need for research-based information and methods that are of interest to planners and managers (Pröbstl & Haider, 2013). This paper provides a method and definitions, with five levels of policy detail, which provides much more guidance for park tourism planners than heretofore available. It also enables a more precise definition of policy detail for visitor and tourism policy in park management plans. However, more research is needed, ideally across several jurisdictions in order to assess if the trends found in this study occur broadly.

As experience is gained with management planning, more prescriptive guidance becomes available. A good example of this occurs in the European Union with management plans for Natura 2000 sites, as accumulated experience led to documents of standardized advice on plan process and content (Spinelli, 2005). We feel that this current research on visitor management in Ontario Provincial Park can provide guidance to the development of visitor management content standards for park management plans. Future research should look at amount of implementation of plans, to evaluate if the level of plan quality and level of detail found in the plans affects the success of the actual park visitor management activities.

Continuing to gain a common understanding of what constitutes a good plan and evaluating plans against these standards will assist in providing legitimacy to the planning process and should be a topic rigorously addressed by scholars and park planners. With greater organizational transparency, and a continuous process of adaptive management, it is hopeful that higher quality decision-making can be made.

7. Limitations

Of primary importance is the accuracy of content analysis which depends on measurement validity and assessment reliability. Convergent reliability speaks to the issue of whether the measurement category actually measures the concept. Discriminant reliability speaks to the issue of distinguishing amongst the concepts. Both types of reliability can be assessed by establishing facial validity, through consensus amongst researchers, and prediction. At the center of any content analysis is the use of categories that are precise and unambiguous (Norton, 2008). It is our feeling, after undertaking this research that the 30 categories used in the research (Hyslop and Eagles, 2007) are sufficiently precise and unambiguous to be useful. We had no conflicts or disagreements amongst the researchers in regards to understanding and applying the concepts. We conclude that the research instrument showed measurement validity and assessment reliability in this study. This finding should be tested further by additional work with the analysis of park management plans in other jurisdictions.

When a research permit was requested to contact park officials, Ontario Parks within The Ministry of Natural Resources was not willing to participate in this study. This refusal ensured that the research was independent from the influence of park agency officials.

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