

MNR-ONTARIO PARKS REVIEW OF

Atikokan-Quetico Tourism Recommendations

by

The Atikokan – Quetico Recommendation Review Team

presented to:

Atikokan Township Council in Council Chambers

June 20th 2005

The Review Team was charged by the Minister of Natural Resources in collaboration with the Atikokan Township Council, to conduct their review. The Team examined each of the eleven recommendations originally proposed by the Council to the Minister of October 4th 2004. Each recommendation was examined to determine its current status, relevant issues, available opportunities and possible constraints. The Team has responded with suggestions that they feel will benefit Atikokan and will be beneficial or at least not unduly compromise the spirit and intent of Quetico Provincial Park.

EVALUATION OF ELEVEN COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

by the

ATIKOKAN/QUETICO RECOMMENDATION REVIEW TEAM

1. Overview of Recommendation Review Team Comments:

The Review Team applauds the efforts of the Minister of Natural Resources and the Atikokan Town Council to seek mutually beneficial objectives related to tourism and park management. The Town of Atikokan is facing serious social and economic challenges and in response, needs to diversify its focus to more strongly embrace tourism and outdoor recreation. The causes of the decline are many but include mine closures, forestry challenges, government cut-backs and could potentially also include the closure of the Atikokan Generating Station. The Community must determine how best to take advantage of Quetico Park, Crown land and undeveloped municipal lands.

Quetico is an important anchor attraction with an outstanding wilderness reputation and an established access quota. With appropriate and innovative planning and programming Atikokan could become a much enhanced service centre and gateway. As well, the tourism product surrounding Atikokan could be diversified to offer complementary as well as alternative tourism experiences. The Atikokan Town Council, as well as the businesses and people of Atikokan, must embrace this opportunity and pursue it with vigour and enthusiasm. MNR for its part needs to recognize that Quetico is a flagship park within its system. It is one of the oldest, largest, and most pristine parks in the system and perhaps the only provincial park with a strong connection to complementary parks in the United States. As a flagship park it needs to lead the way in policy innovation. The Review Team believes that the recommendation discussed in this report provide an opportunity to demonstrate the positive role that parks can play in the fabric of north-western Ontario. This role provides economic opportunities but also contributes to the quality of the environment and the quality of life....it is part of the reason people choose to live here.

Motivated leadership, innovative programming and quality facilities are key to the operation of a flagship park and to repositioning Atikokan as a major service centre. To achieve and sustain this will require the consolidated support of the provincial and federal government, the local council, businesses, non-profit organizations and the public. The Park has a dedicated following and a positive revenue stream. Atikokan has been actively strengthening its stature as an outdoor recreation service centre despite limitations and challenges to its social and economic fabric. The Review Team believes that now is the time for action on these recommendations.

2. Executive Summary---Key Ideas from the Recommendation

Access Issues

- *Investigate, plan and develop park access and recreation amenities along a scenic road corridor from the Highway 11b junction to the shore of Batchewaung Lake. This is the primary Access Issue and the most important overall recommendation.*
- *Improve parking, information and washroom amenities at Beaverhouse access.*
- *Rehabilitate access points at Nym and Lerome Lake*
- *Maintain Stanton Bay Road access to a minimum service standard*
- *Seek federally legislated aircraft minimum flight ceilings and paths.*
- *Review all air access policies in the Management Plan Review*
- *Allow discretionary air access to Mack Lake during low water periods*
- *Undertake a pilot project air access to Basswood Lake/Cabin 16 area*
- *Explore low cost access options at Tilley Lake and Clay Lake.*

Planning Issues

- *Support Township Council in the implementation of the Recreation Corridor Plan which seeks to enhance tourism opportunities on Crown Land without expanding the park boundary. This is the primary Planning Issue.*
- *Accelerate plan for White Otter Park and Atikokan's role as an operations centre*
- *Plan and Implement Improvements to Highway 11 B Junction*
- *Maintain and even raise fees further on parks southern entry points*
- *Invite Atikokan-Quetico Recommendation Review to continue to assist Council on an as requested basis.*

Marketing Issues

- *MNR, Tourism & Recreation and Atikokan to cooperate on tourism marketing initiatives. This is the primary Marketing Issue.*
- *Encourage links between Quetico and Atikokan in media.*
- *Continue with progress to improve reservation system.*
- *Continue progress on an Outfitter Certification Program.*

Program Issues

- *Update socio-economic impact information to provide a modern baseline and measure impacts of policy and program actions and alternatives. This is the primary Program issue.*
- *Establish an ecological monitoring and research program in the Atikokan/Quetico area.*
- *Establish an interior ranger training centre in Atikokan/ Quetico area.*

3. Detailed Review of the Original Eleven Recommendations:

Original Council Recommendation One:

“We would like to increase Canadian outfitters’ access to southern entry stations, and encourage American paddlers to enter through Northern entry stations. We would like to discuss increasing Canadian’s access to southern entry stations, especially Prairie Portage. We encourage the Park to expand trail access given to Cache Bay fly-ins, by expanding the program to include Prairie Portage. We further recommend designating a certain number of Prairie Portage and Cache Bay permits to Canadians. Further, we would like to see more initiatives to encourage tourists to enter through the Northern entry points. We support the higher cost of servicing the Southern entries, and encourage visitors to enter through the entry points closer to Atikokan. We believe the fees charged in the south could be even higher than the \$16 per night charged in 2004.”

Review Team Response:

Key ideas:

- *Seek federally legislated minimum aircraft flight ceilings and paths*
- *Review all air access policies in the Management Plan Review*
- *Allow discretionary air access to Mack Lake during low water periods*
- *Undertake a pilot project air access to Basswood Lake/Cabin 16*
- *Maintain and even raise fees further on the Park’s southern entry points*

Background:

The Review Team understands that convenient road access to the eastern and southern edges of the Park is unavailable. Air access is possible but is regulated through the management plan which generally strives to make Quetico non-motorized. Many wilderness park users and some outfitters believe that the quality of the wilderness experience is negatively affected by aircraft noise. Some argue for increased air access while others want aircraft landings eliminated from all park lakes. The Review Team appreciates the need to balance air access with its impact. The Team urges strengthening of the 1995 management plan call for a 1,200 meter minimum aircraft flight ceiling and flight paths around the park periphery, through federal legislation.

The Review Team recommends that the topic of air access be thoroughly discussed in the upcoming Management Plan review. In the meantime, the Review Team recommends two actions to support air access pending Plan review. One, that aircraft landing be permitted, at the discretion of the Superintendent, on Mack Lake when water levels from Clay Lake restrict access (some years in August); Two, that a pilot allow drop-off only access to Basswood Lake in the vicinity of Cabin 16. The Committee suggests that one of the current Mack Lake permits be allocated to trips going north. Air access and park quota was once allocated to the Cabin 16 area and is already referenced in federal aircraft legislation. Further, the Review Team is pleased to learn that entry fees at southern stations were raised to \$18 in 2005 and suggests raising them to \$20 in 2006.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 1.

- *Seek federally legislated minimum aircraft flight ceilings and paths*

This will involve coordination with the Government of Canada-Transport Canada. Restrictions on air access will contribute to the quality of the park's wilderness experience. Quetico Park has undertaken to sample user opinion on this question. OP Main Office staff need to investigate policy implication before proceeding. The Federal Member of Parliament for the Park area has expressed an interest and willingness to assist with this project. There is no significant cost to advance this although there would be some modest staff time requirements.

- *Review all air access policies in the Management Plan Review*

The Management Plan preparations will begin in the fall of 2005 with public start up in spring 2006. OP Main Office staff will review air policies generally, including federal regulations in 2005. There is no significant cost or staff time required to advance this idea. It will likely lead to a reduction in overall air access.

- *Allow discretionary air access to Mack Lake during low water periods*

The Management Plan conceptually provides support for this initiative and it can begin in 2005. Quetico Park will endeavour to improve an existing portage which should alleviate most of the need for exceptional approval. There is low additional cost (\$2,000) to enhancing an alternate portage. There is no significant staff time implication associated with permitting discretionary access.

- *Undertake a pilot project air access to Basswood Lake/Cabin 16*

Ontario Parks Main Office staff will examine existing provincial park and federal landing legislations regarding this option. It may be that a trial project can be permitted in 2006 with subsequent management plan review discussion. Potential canoe storage at the existing, Cabin 16 site may provide an option to cache canoes thereby reducing the number of flights required to set up outfitted parties. There will be modest staff time to advance this idea and low cost (\$2,000) to adapt the Cabin 16 site.

- *Maintain and even raise fees further on the Park's southern entry points*

This should be done during fee review in 2005. Fees can be raised from \$18.00 to \$20.00 at Prairie Portage. It may be appropriate to raise fees at the US Border-Lac La Croix Entry station as part of a revenue generation initiative to help fund the costs of park operating agreement with the First Nation. It is consistent with the park management plan and will aid several park goals. There is no significant cost to advance this. It will generate from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Original Council Recommendation Two:

“We believe that the Recreation Corridor concept currently being explored by Quetico Park and the Township of Atikokan has tremendous possibilities. We would like to encourage a continued partnership between Atikokan and Quetico on this initiative.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Support Township Council in the implementation of the Recreation Corridor Plan, which seeks to enhance tourism opportunities on Crown Land without expanding the park boundary.*

Background:

The Review Team recognizes that as a wilderness park, Quetico cannot support unlimited tourism development. It is recognized that Quetico has a good reputation and creates a strong and favourable image. Many of the areas that can sustain additional tourism and recreational activity lie beyond the park, including some within the Municipal boundaries. Many forms of recreation not suited to a wilderness park can be accommodated elsewhere in the Crown land surrounding Atikokan. The Recreation Corridor concept suggests opportunities for consideration and public review. The Review Team urges the Council to demonstrate leadership to publicly review, revise and advance some of these concepts. Council would understandably have a major role in those ideas proposed within Township boundaries. The Minister of Natural Resources is encouraged to work with Council on ideas within Crown land and to consider those related to Quetico as part of the upcoming Park Management Plan review.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 2.

- *Support Township Council in the implementation of the Recreation Corridor Plan, which seeks to enhance tourism opportunities on Crown Land without expanding the park boundary.*

The Corridor Plan includes many initiatives inside and outside the Park. As such it would be best for Ontario Parks to offer to participate in an implementation team which would include Fed Nor, Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, Ministry of Transportation, and the Township of Atikokan.

The small number of initiatives that are proposed inside of the park (trails and access points) should be considered through the management planning process. It would be appropriate however for Ontario Parks to begin feasibility, policy suitability and cost estimation work in 2006, in parallel with the management plan review. Projects outside of the park which relate to the park, such as highway signage, could be considered in 2005.

There will be significant capital (>\$1,000,000) and operational (> \$100,000) implications if even substantial elements of the Corridor Plan are implemented. These would be shared among the relevant groups beginning in 2006.

Original Council Recommendation Three:

“We would like to encourage Parks Ontario to develop the Turtle River/ White Otter Park, and La Verendrye Park into operating parks. This would allow Atikokan to further promote itself as the focal point of a vast recreation area. Given the local expertise in managing parks, we believe these two new parks could be operated out of Atikokan.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Accelerate planning of White Otter park reserve and Atikokan's role as operations centre*

Background:

The Review Team recognizes that the Management Plan for Turtle River/White Otter Lake Park Reserve has been under development for a long time and is now being internally reviewed prior to public consultation. Council should urge the Minister to complete internal review and begin the process of public consultation. Without seeing the draft Plan it is impossible for the Review Team to endorse its direction.

Nevertheless, the Review Team is generally positive about the idea of a fully operational waterway park to the immediate north and west of Atikokan. Similarly, the Review Team is of the opinion that there is a solid case for operating such a water-based park from Atikokan, building upon the existing capacity present at Quetico. Management of wilderness canoe tripping in this waterway park, as well as in La Verendrye Park Reserve, could extend the range of attractions in the Atikokan/ Quetico area.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 3.

- *Accelerate planning of White Otter park reserve and Atikokan's role as operations centre*

A draft version of the Management Plan for Turtle River / White Otter Lake Waterway Park is currently being reviewed in the Ontario Parks' Main Office. If this review proceeds expeditiously it should be possible to involve the public in the process within six months. It will assist Ontario Parks' public consultation process if it can be seen that this park initiative is being advanced under urging from the Township of Atikokan. The location of the operations centre for this future park remains undecided. A planning budget and staff resources are already allocated to this project.

A management plan already exists but for La Verendrye Park reserve but there is no plan to operationalize it.

Original Council Recommendation Four:

“Quetico Park is a jewel in the Ontario Parks system that we believe should be promoted. The Township will entertain cost-sharing opportunities with Quetico Park advertising initiatives where Atikokan is featured prominently.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *MNR, Tourism and Recreation and Atikokan to cooperate on tourism marketing initiatives.*

Background:

The Review Team believes that it is important to establish the Atikokan area as a high quality destination for outdoor adventure. A major component of this attraction is Quetico Provincial Park. The Review Team recommends the Minister of Natural Resources and the Township of Atikokan approach the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation to together develop an Atikokan/Quetico Tourism Marketing Program. The 1995 Management Plan for Quetico called for just such a plan. The Ministry of Tourism and Recreation has allocated project teams to assist other communities with tourism initiatives. One clear example of this was the “Comprehensive Tourism Development Project” in Temagami and South Temiskaming. The Atikokan / Quetico Tourism Brand could have appeal across Canada and Internationally.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 4.

- *MNR, Tourism and Recreation and Atikokan to cooperate on tourism marketing initiatives.*

Ontario Parks could consider participation in cooperative tourism initiatives in 2006 with planning beginning in 2005. Most effort however should be directed toward the preparation of a marketing plan. Ideally such a plan is prepared in conjunction with staff from the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation and involves not just the Park but also the surrounding region. Currently, Ontario Parks' marketing program is concentrated in the Main Office.

The major thematic focus for Park-based marketing is to encourage more US visitors to access the park from northern (Canadian) entry points. Secondary marketing objectives are to raise awareness of recreational opportunities associated with fall hiking and winter skiing. A potentially large opportunity would be to build new markets for Quetico in Europe. Only American visitors can enter Canada with remote border crossing permits. This means that any European visitor must come through Canadian entry points thus giving Ontario outfitters a distinct advantage over US-based businesses.

Original Council Recommendation Five:

“Quetico Park has increased Atikokan’s exposure in its recent publications. Specifically, the new park map, produced by Chrismar, mentions Atikokan on the cover, in the text, and in the form on a map insert. We encourage Quetico Park to continue promoting Atikokan in its publications. We would gladly work with park staff to provide material. Likewise, Atikokan –as a means of positioning itself as the gateway to Quetico Park – will mention Quetico Park in its documents.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Encourage links between Quetico and Atikokan in media*

Background:

The Review Team acknowledges ongoing work and encourages further efforts. Quetico Park, the Township of Atikokan, and organizations in Atikokan should look for opportunities to reference the links between the park and the town. Each should reference the other on maps and promotional materials. Repeated use of slogans such as “Let the Atikokan and Quetico Spirit be your Guide” or the “Canoeing Capital of Canada” help to strengthen the connection between these areas. An annual display of media that links these areas should be organized by the Town and Park to build momentum and recognition for this effort.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 5.

- *Encourage links between Quetico and Atikokan in media*

This initiative can be enhanced through existing budgets and staff resources. It essentially just requires greater openness and effort in engaging the media.

Original Council Recommendation Six:

The new reservation system for Ontario Park's campgrounds is an improvement. However, we believe that what works for campgrounds does not necessarily work for wilderness camping. Staff handling interior reservations need to understand the Park and the many options paddlers face. We would like Parks Ontario to consider reverting to using local Quetico Park staff for interior reservations. We recommend that reservations for other north-western Ontario parks, such as Wabakimi, be taken at the Quetico office. Alternately, local staff could train reservation staff about our wilderness parks.

Furthermore, we believe that Canadians should have a preferential access to the Ontario Park's reservation system. This could be achieved by having a separate 800 number accessible only from Canada.

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Continue with progress to improve reservation system*

Background:

The Review Team recognizes that in prior years there have been unacceptable delays and poor service for outfitters using Ontario Park's CAMIS Call Centre. However, recent improvements such as the new satellite dish at the Atikokan Office and improved service from the call centre staff have led to major improvements. The Review Team applauds Ontario Parks for these improvements. The Review Team believes that the current local trip planning service line and the periodic training and communication efforts between Ontario Park's local staff and CAMIS is essential to maintaining locally relevant and up-to-date information. MNR should also approach CAMIS to explore possibilities for an Atikokan branch office of the reservation service. Further, the park and outfitters should examine the merits of a revenue neutral dedicated telephone line to support Quetico outfitters.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 6

- *Continue with progress to improve reservation system*

Noteworthy improvements have already been made to the park's reservation system and this is not an area that requires much more attention. One small improvement would be enhancing information on Ontario Park's reservation internet site. Currently, the public can obtain information on the availability of campground campsites over the Web. So far they have not been able to receive information on the availability of entry quota into Quetico Park. This would be an important customer and outfitter service and would boost park revenues. This project would be coordinated from Main Office.

Original Council Recommendation Seven:

“We would like to explore ongoing joint initiatives between Quetico Park and Atikokan to improve the entrance to Atikokan and establish Atikokan as a tourist destination and as the gateway to Quetico Park. Improving Atikokan in this regard is beneficial to both parties.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Plan and implement improvements to Highway 11B Junction*

Background:

The Review Team agrees that a strong visual presence at the intersection of Highway 11 and 11b is important to make passing motorists consider turning into Atikokan. An eye-catching display could also serve as a backdrop for souvenir photos and become a general promotional symbol. This development should probably include several adjacent areas including the inter-section traffic island, and re-developed tourist bureau and the view from the overlooking hilltop on each side of the approach roads. A site design starting point is contained in the Northwood's Adventure Country Management Plan, Dec 2004. There may also be merit in considering preparing travellers for the intersection by announcing their arrival to the town at the township boundaries along the highway. Advance awareness should even extend to signage in Fort Frances and Thunder Bay. It is recommended that the Town work with the Park and other government agencies on design concepts and funding options for this project.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 7.

- *Plan and implement improvements to Highway 11B Junction*

This project should be led by the Township of Atikokan and linked to the Corridor Plan. Any planning at the Intersection would need considerable involvement from the Ministry of Transportation as the area lies within the Highway Right-of-Way. Design and construction issues would also need to consider the adjacent Tourism Centre and the potential Batchewaung Road and Access Point.

Original Council Recommendation Eight:

“The quality of roads accessing the Northern entry points is often poor. Typically, access points are on logging roads. When the logging companies stop using a particular road, it often falls into disrepair. We encourage the park to work with the Forest Management Plan to locate Northern access points along current or recently abandoned logging roads. Such a strategy (which would require periodic review) would ensure that roads are always of an acceptable quality, while moving around the environmental impact over time. At least three northern access points could be developed using existing roads: Currently the Jim Lake Road is in very good shape and runs close to Batchewaung Lake. We recommend that as part of this strategy, access to Batchewaung Lake should be provided from the Jim Lake Road. Likewise, a well-maintained logging road exists within six kilometres of Clay Lake. A road access and a new entry station could be built there. This would give people drive-in access to the popular south-end of Quetico Park from Highway 11. North-eastern entry could easily be built at Tilley Lake. Quetico Park boasts a healthy network of ski trails in the north-eastern section of the park. An entry station in this area would enable it to further promote winter tourism, providing a longer season for Atikokan tourism businesses.”

Review Team Comments:

Key Ideas:

- *Investigate, plan and develop park access and recreation amenities along a scenic road corridor from the Highway 11b junction to the shore of Batchewaung Lake.*
- *Rehabilitate access points at Nym and Lerome Lake*
- *Maintain Stanton Bay Road access at a minimum service standard.*
- *Explore low cost access options at Tilley Lake and Clay Lake.*

Background:

A dispersed series of good quality, convenient access points is essential to tourism servicing and important to dispersing environmental impact. While potential access enhancements such as Tilley Lake and Clay Lake have some merit, the Review Team clearly is most concerned about improved access close to Atikokan. Improvements to existing access areas at Nym Lake and especially Lerome Lake are short term priorities. While these points are not on park property they are the beginning of the park user's wilderness experience and should provide a complementary experience. Stanton Bay is well-used by Canadian outfitters and should remain an access point with roads serviced to a minimum maintenance standard. The Council's recommendation originally suggested that the Jim Lake Road might provide an alternative access point but in the Team's opinion this would be of only minor benefit to Atikokan. The Team believes that a much better long-term solution would be a new park road through the Crown Land connecting the Highway 11b junction to the north shore of Batchewaung Lake. This latter connection should be a good quality road with associated trails, displays and picnic areas; ultimately leading to a primary attraction and access area on Batchewaung Lake. Such a road would have the added benefit of providing a link for recreation and trail amenities within the Township lands to the south of the Highway.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 8.

- *Investigate, plan and develop park access and recreation amenities along a scenic road corridor from the Highway 11b junction to the shore of Batchewaung Lake.*

This is a major and high-impact project with a potential budget of \$5,000,000. While it may be led by MNR it should involve other provincial, federal and municipal partners. There are important management plan questions relating to facility development and access. Almost all of the land involved is outside of the park, on Crown Land within the Township Boundaries of Atikokan. Ontario Parks should undertake feasibility, cost estimate and policy implication studies of this initiative as soon as possible to allow more informed discussion of this major idea. Ontario Parks should seek some certainty regarding the ultimate land tenure of the roadway and adjacent road corridor. A scenic road entrance will require management of the land along the roadside. This could be done through a park boundary adjustment or a long term land use permit.

- *Rehabilitate access points at Nym and Lerome Lake*

These old access points are generally in poor repair. They would normally be upgraded through the regular Ontario Parks capital program. Lack of capital funds has led to declines. The Lerome Lake Access Point has recently been subject to a tornado which has uprooted most of the surrounding trees. Access from Lerome to the Quetico Boundary is through a series of Crown land lakes. Ontario Parks should endeavour to secure some protective certainty over the strip of forest which lines the inter-connecting portages.

- *Maintain Stanton Bay Road access at a minimum service standard.*

Quetico will continue working with local outfitters to maintain this forest access road at a minimum standard. However, if major weather-related deterioration affects this road it may prove cost prohibitive to maintain in the long term.

- *Explore low cost access options at Tilley Lake and Clay Lake.*

Improved and new portage connections along the Park's east boundary would improve access and distribute use. The existing Clay Lake portages can be improved however park portage crews are currently unable to keep up with the overall maintenance demands. Ontario Parks needs to examine the level of operating resources currently allocated to the over 200 km's of portages in Quetico. A new 2 kilometer portage from Tilley Lake on the park's north-eastern boundary could improve access from the generally underused eastside. It would also allow an overnight canoe route loop from the main campground. The evaluation of this connection could begin in fall 2005. Planning and assessment would proceed in 2006 and potential implementation done in conjunction with the management plan review.

Original Council Recommendation Nine:

“The Beaverhouse entry station could be improved by moving it to the mainland. At the same time, the access road should be upgraded. A comfort station would be well-received. This would improve the security in the parking lot and significantly improve access to the station”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Improve parking, information and washroom amenities at Beaverhouse access.*

Background:

The Review Team believes that the Beaverhouse entry station in its current location provides important service, safety, operational and scenic values. The Review Team also recognizes the benefits to the people of Lac La Croix from their operation of this station. While alternative locations for the entry station might have merit it does not seem that any potential benefits would be worth the cost. In contrast, the Review Team feels that the access road to this entry station and even more the parking and turn around area need serious attention. This awkward, constricted, unorganized area is unpleasant, inefficient and hazardous. In short, it is not an appropriate departure point for a quality, flagship park. The Review Team believes that a road and especially site rehabilitation is needed and should include the provisions of pit toilets, designated parking and turn around, and interpretive signage as is found at most other entry points.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 9.

- *Improve parking, information and washroom amenities at Beaverhouse access.*

The parking area associated with this access point is on loose, wet, organic soil. No good quality parking area is locally available. Small capital investments over the years have improved the site but only a more concerted effort will resolve problems. This is a key access point onto the park and an improvement in parking, turning, signage and toilet services would greatly improve customer satisfaction. A design exercise could be undertaken in the fall of 2005 with the first phase of capital improvements addressed through the 2006 capital plan. This would be likely need one week of staff time from technical specialists in the Zone and Main Office staff plus \$100,000 in capital investment.

Original Council Recommendation 10:

“We understand that wilderness recreation has inherent risks; injuries and tragedies affect us all. We also understand that improper practices in the park threaten its wilderness integrity and its future. We believe that all people entering the park deserve a proper orientation. This is a joint responsibility on the park and the adjoining outfitters.

We support the new park orientation binder that has been developed, and that is being sold to outfitters. This initiative streamlines park entries while ensuring safety and a consistent message. We encourage the expansion of this initiative, perhaps through training to outfitters and a “Certified Quetico Park Outfitter” program.”

Review Team Response:

Key Idea:

- *Continue progress on an Outfitter Certification Program.*

Background:

The Review Team endorses the concept of a Certified Quetico Park Outfitter program provided that it is jointly developed by the Park and local outfitters. The program could further raise the calibre of customer service and increase the area's profile. The Review Team is encouraged by recent collaboration between Quetico Park staff and Park Outfitters in this regard. There may be additional merit in the Township supporting some form of local tourism and hospitality training with certification to complement this initiative. This effort could build upon and work with the certification efforts of the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation. The Chamber of Commerce could play an important role in supporting a community hospitality and tourism service certification.

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 10.

- *Continue progress on an Outfitter Certification Program.*

Quetico Park staff have already advance a preliminary certification project. At outfitter meetings in April 2005, five outfitters agreed to work on an expanded effort in the fall of 2006. This project will not restrict who can work in the park but it will highlight and promote those who have attained a level of training and service. This project can likely be self-financed through a certification fee.

Original Council Recommendation Eleven:

“We would like the Minister to establish a task force with the mandate of accessing the economic impact of Quetico Park and the surrounding area on Atikokan. The task force could include representatives from the park, the MNR, the local business community, the Township, and park users. It would make recommendations to increase those impacts for the local and provincial economy, while maintaining the integrity of Quetico Park’s wilderness values. The task force would also help ensure that changes do not negatively affect the park workforce.”

Review Team Response:

- *The Ministry of Natural Resources should work with the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, the Township of Atikokan and external university or private consultants to prepare an economic impact assessment for Quetico Park. This assessment should be used to examine options for park access and quota that could increase local economic benefit.*
- *Quetico Park and Atikokan could become a centre for training interior portage crews and interior wardens in northern or even all of Ontario. There will be increasing demand for this as new remote parks are established. Many of these will be partnerships with First Nations.*
- *Atikokan, Quetico and Quetico Centre combine efforts to establish an environmental research facility. Research projects could use the Park as a benchmark and programs could expand on current cooperative research with Lakehead University and the Atikokan High School’s Natural Resources Program and Quetico Adventure School initiative. Such a project would be consistent with the provincial government’s concern for air quality and climate change.*
- *The Atikokan-Quetico Recommendation Review Team believes that good cooperation and understanding has been achieved through its meetings. The Review Team remains interested in assisting the Town Council on this topic at the discretion of Council.*

MNR Analysis and Response to Recommendation 11.

- *The Ministry of Natural Resources should work with the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, the Township of Atikokan and external university or private consultants to prepare an economic impact assessment for Quetico Park. This assessment should be used to examine options for park access and quota that could increase local economic benefit.*

Ontario Parks has skilled socio-economic assessment staff working in its Main Office. Ideally, Ontario Parks would contribute skills and a small budget toward an evaluation project with the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation or Fed Nor. The park management plan review would be enhanced if current user research was available to evaluate trends and use levels.

- *Quetico Park and Atikokan could become a centre for training interior portage crews and interior wardens in northern or even all of Ontario. There will be increasing demand for this as new remote parks are established. Many of these will be partnerships with First Nations.*

Quetico Park, as the oldest park in northern Ontario, has some existing staff skill and knowledge in these areas. Quetico also has a decade of experience working on park maintenance with the Lac La Croix First Nation. There is an opportunity to expand this background into a training program for other parks and First Nations. A modest program could be offered for \$50,000 annually.

- *Atikokan, Quetico and Quetico Centre combine efforts to establish an environmental research facility. Research projects could use the Park as a benchmark and programs could expand on current cooperative research with Lakehead University and the Atikokan High School's Natural Resources Program and Quetico Adventure School initiative. Such a project would be consistent with the provincial government's concern for air quality and climate change.*

Quetico has recently expanded its environmental research cooperation with universities and institutions. Further projects are being advanced by the parks' biologist. There is no in-house capacity to undertake major research and monitoring programs. Arguably, an expanded program could arise from the decision to close the local hydro power station as a result of concern for air quality and CO2 emissions.

- *The Atikokan-Quetico Recommendation Review Team believes that good cooperation and understanding has been achieved through its meetings. The Review Team remains interested in assisting the Town Council on this topic at the discretion of Council.*

Quetico staff can continue to participate in the review team provided that the frequency of meetings and administrative expectations remain modest.

4. Related Commitments: Quetico 1995 Park Management Policy

The Atikokan-Quetico Recommendation Review Team is convinced that the protection of Quetico's ecological integrity and the enhancement of local economies are both necessary and feasible. The original eleven recommendations and the Review Team's suggestions arising from these are all consistent with directions already set in the Park's 1995 Management Policy. In fact, if the Park Management Policy would have been implemented there would essentially be no need for these recommendations at all. The Review Team acknowledges that much has been done since the 1995 Plan but an equally large amount remains incomplete, not started, or even deteriorated from prior conditions. While the Review Team recognizes that a lack of funds has been a limiting factor, it cannot be overlooked that Quetico's operational income exceeds its operating costs.

Quotes from the current management plan are provided as examples.

Page 5: "The Ministry will continue to support the existing tourism-based economic activity which benefits the Lac La Croix First Nation and the Town of Atikokan.

Page 6: "A major emphasis in the planning and management of Quetico is the development and improvement of opportunities for northern access. The implementation of this basic policy will achieve a number of important objectives. Additional northern entry opportunities will facilitate the use of Quetico by Canadians and, in particular, residents of Ontario. In providing viable alternatives to traditionally heavily used southern entry points, these entry opportunities will encourage user redistribution within the park. The resulting increase in user activity in areas adjacent to the park's northern boundary will tend to increase the economic impact of Quetico on the surrounding local Atikokan area."

Page 7: Discussions with interested Canadian outfitters will occur to see if mutually suitable aircraft landing sites on the periphery (particularly the east side) of the park can be found."

Page 18: "A marketing plan will be undertaken in co-operation with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation, tourist outfitters and local communities. As well, local businesses and park visitors will also be consulted."

Page 19: "Back-country hiking opportunities will be developed in response to user demand and within the constraints imposed by the resource base."

Page 19: "Facilities provided at access zones, although similar, will vary mainly in response to mode of access. Where access is gained primarily by water, appropriate facilities will include: an entry station, a natural heritage education facility, a canoe-launching facility, public sanitary facilities, staff quarters and warehouse facilities. Where access is by road, additional facilities may include a parking lot and campsites."

Page 19: "The Stanton Bay access to Pickerel Lake will be improved and consideration will be given to improving the Beaverhouse access road if warranted by demand."

Page 20: "Location, design and materials used for the construction of buildings will be consistent with the wilderness orientation of the park. In addition, site design standards will be applied to road design, construction and maintenance in order to provide an aesthetic access to Quetico"

Page 20: " A Highway 11 sign plan will be developed to improve park along the highway corridor. The plan will take into consideration the area between the East Boundary and the Flanders road into the Beaverhouse Access Zone and will be developed in co-operation with the community of Atikokan and the Ministry of Transportation."

Page 20: "Contributions to the secondary tourism objective of Quetico will be achieved by: 1. Upgrading facilities to enhance visitor stay, and in turn attracting new visitors and increasing the average length of stay; 2. Marketing services and attractions in the entire Atikokan area which includes the town, Highway 11 and adjacent areas. Emphasis will be on encouraging park visitors to discover and experience area attractions outside the park".

5. Conclusion: Current State of the Original Eleven Recommendations

Credit Due:

The Review Team applauds recent work by Quetico Park to advance Recommendation 5 (including Atikokan in Park information and promotion and Recommendation 8 (encouraging outfitter certification). These are headed in a good direction and with attention and persistence will yield positive results. The Review Team further acknowledges Ontario Parks' corporate efforts to improve the permit reservation system Recommendation 6.

Work in Progress.....slow progress:

The Review Team urges continued progress on Recommendation 3 (a management plan for Turtle River White Otter Park Reserve) and believes that Atikokan is a logical place to base future park operations. Recommendation 1, adjusting of the air access policies should be allowed on a pilot-project based with in-depth review during the upcoming management plan. Recommendation 4, undertaking a tourism and marketing plan, is potentially very important although the leadership for this should come from the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, with dedicated MNR involvement.

Major Improvement Required:

Recommendation 2 (Tourism Corridor Plan Implementation), Recommendation 7 (Atikokan Gateway Entrance), Recommendation 8 (Northern Access Points) and Recommendation 9 (Beaverhouse Access). These are in many respects the same issue. Facilities in the park are attractive and well-maintained but access points to the park are not. We have a world-class park with a shabby front door. Simply put, Ontario Parks needs to work more closely with MNR District, Atikokan Township and Lac La Croix First Nation to make sure that the access points to the park reflect the quality of the park itself. This is a challenge as most park access is through logging roads that are either deteriorating following the end of forestry operations, or may be dangerous and generally not scenic during logging operations. From Atikokan's perspective the best long-term solution would be a well-designed, 12 kilometre park access road across the Crown land from Highway 11 at the Atikokan junction, to Batchewaung Lake. Recommendation 11 speaks to new ideas not contained in the original recommendations and the Review Team has added several.