

Interactions, challenges, and management issues at the fringe of National Parks: The case of the Riding Mountain Biosphere Reserve

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the complex ecological, demographic, cultural, socio-economic and political-administrative relationships and interactions between Riding Mountain National Park and the adjacent municipalities, since 1986 forming the Riding Mountain Biosphere Reserve. Many challenges characterize the multiple linkages between Riding Mountain National Park and its fringe realm. Baskets of mutual opportunities and benefits contrast with diverging interests and potential sources of friction. In recent times, improved relationships between the federally governed National Park and the surrounding provincially and locally administered municipalities have contributed to move closer to the dual goals of the Biosphere Reserve, environmental protection and sustainable regional development.

Keywords

Riding Mountain Biosphere Reserve (RMBR), Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP), Municipalities, First Nation Reserves, linkages and interactions, environmental protection, regional development

Introduction: Regional setting, research focus, methods

The Riding Mountain Biosphere Reserve (RMBR) in Manitoba, established in 1986, is one of currently 18 Biosphere Reserves (BRs) in Canada. The core area represents Riding Mountain National Park; the surrounding 'area of cooperation' includes 15 Municipalities, as well as three First Nation Reserves.

Key agendas of this research address the duality between the conservation goals of RMNP and the often diverging mandates and development priorities of the Municipalities and communities outside the confines of the National Park. Congruences and cooperation between the two realms of the RMBR are contrasted with disparities and conflicting interests.

The research presented is rooted in the long-term familiarity of the author with this area. Various papers have been published on this topic (STADEL 1996; STADEL 2005; STADEL 2015; STADEL & SELWOOD 1996) and other published documents have been consulted (BORGFJORD 2010; CANADIAN COMMISSION FOR UNESCO & CANADA/MAB 2001; CANADIAN PARKS AND WILDERNESS SOCIETY 2004; PARKS CANADA 2011; RIDING MOUNTAIN BIOSPHERE RESERVE 2014).

Results and discussion

The research linkages and interactions first emphasize the nature of the various forms of interlinkages and interactions within the RMBR, more explicitly between RMNP and its adjacent Municipalities and First Nation Reserves (Fig. 1). RMNP since 1933 is an area of environmental protection. However before, various forms of resource use have been carried out in Riding Mountain, haying, grazing berry-picking of native people, and forestry and milling operations, as well as recreational land uses. With the establishment of the National Park, indigenous populations were evicted from the National Park (PECKETT 1999; SANDLOS 2008). Only recently they were given back a small parcel of land inside the National Park and regained some rights for hunting and fishing. Rapid and profound has been the landscape change of the realm adjacent to Riding Mountain. The combination the systematic land survey system, the establishment of a dense network of colonization railways, and the ensuing massive influx of European settlers transformed the former eco-zones into a zone of large-scale agriculture, dispersed farmsteads and a network of hierarchically organized service centres. In this way, a distinct landscape contrast and a duality of functional orientation emerged between Riding Mountain proper and its surrounding regions. The rather arbitrarily drawn limits of the National Park mark a sharp administrative boundary between the Federal Lands of the Park and the provincial and local jurisdictions of the Municipalities and First Nation Reserves. While the prime management objective of the National Park is nature conservation and biodiversity protection, the goals of the adjacent lands is primarily oriented towards a strengthening of local and regional economies and a fostering of the economic and social viability of communities. Whereas agricultural activities are restricted to the Municipalities, recreation and tourism are important economic pillars within the entire RMBR (Fig.2, Fig. 3). In summer, vacationers flock to the numerous small lakes, and choice scenic lakeshore- and forest lands have been converted into residential subdivisions of cottages, secondary homes or permanent residences. While this may be seen as a welcomed complement to the traditional agricultural function strengthening the rural tax base and the vitality of small service centres, it has also resulted in environmental problems of sewage- water- and waste disposal management threatening the conservation goals of the RMBR. In addition, the population influx of a largely urban population with its recreation-oriented outlook has not always harmonized with the mentality, aspirations and priorities of the long-term residents of the rural municipalities.

The following most important concrete achievements of the RMBR in the last few years have been the Aquatic Invasive Species Programme to prevent the intrusion of harmful zebra mussels into local lakes; programmes relating to wildlife issues, water conservation and soil management; programmes with the objective of strengthening the viability of small communities; and educational and public awareness activities. In terms of cooperative initiatives of RMNP and the neighbouring municipalities, shared infrastructures and services have been established between the National Park and the Municipality of Harrison Park at its southern fringe: a joint volunteer Fire Department and an open landfill- and recycling site, and more recently a project to provide drinking water from Clear Lake in RMNP to the commercial establishments, school and cottages of Harrison Park. Fig. 4 summarizes and generalizes the linkages between RMNP, the Municipalities and the First Nation Reserves.

The RMBR is facing a number of challenges and problems which can be summarized as following: Diverging goals, priorities, and management agendas between the federally administered National Park and the local interest and development goals of the Municipalities and First Nations; lukewarm support of the RMBR by the National Park, First Nations and some Municipalities; unsatisfactory consultation process between the National Park and the Municipalities and First Nation Reserves; deficient public awareness level of the Biosphere Reserve; lack of adequate funding and personnel.

Riding Mountain National Park & Biosphere Reserve

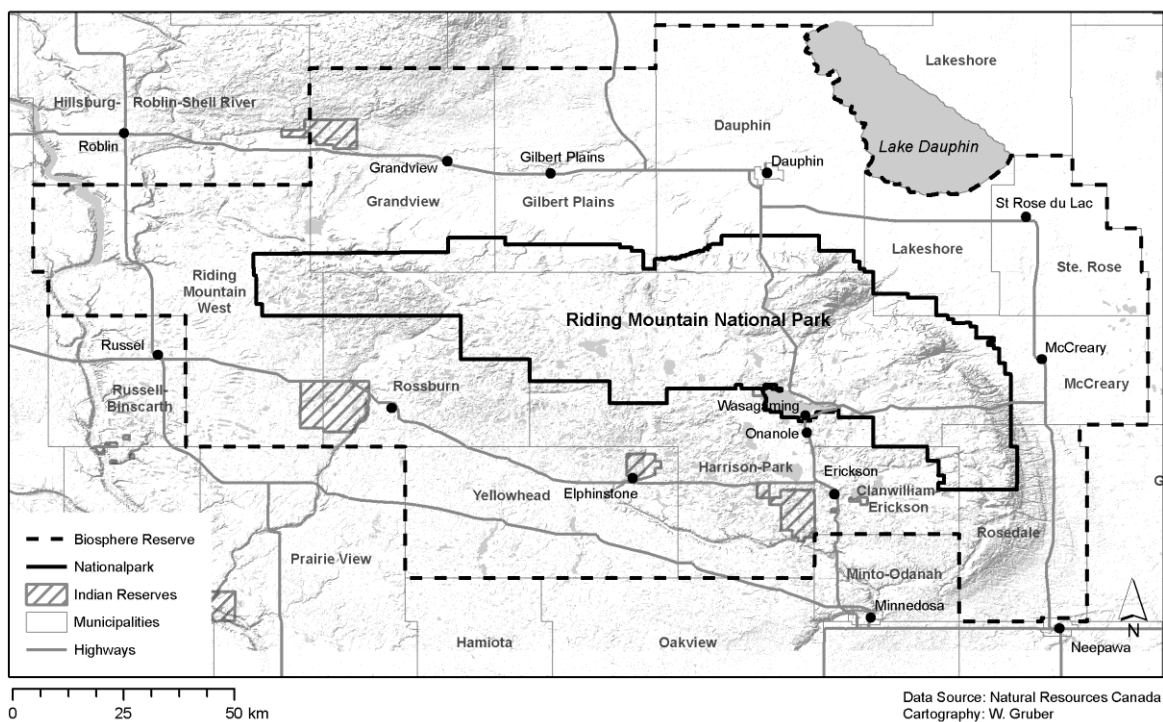


Figure 1: Riding Mountain Biosphere Reserve, Manitoba, Canada



Figure 2: Riding Mountain National Park - a recreational destination (Photo credit: Stadel)



Figure 3: Wheat combining in the Municipality of Harrison Park, Manitoba (Photo credit: Stadel)

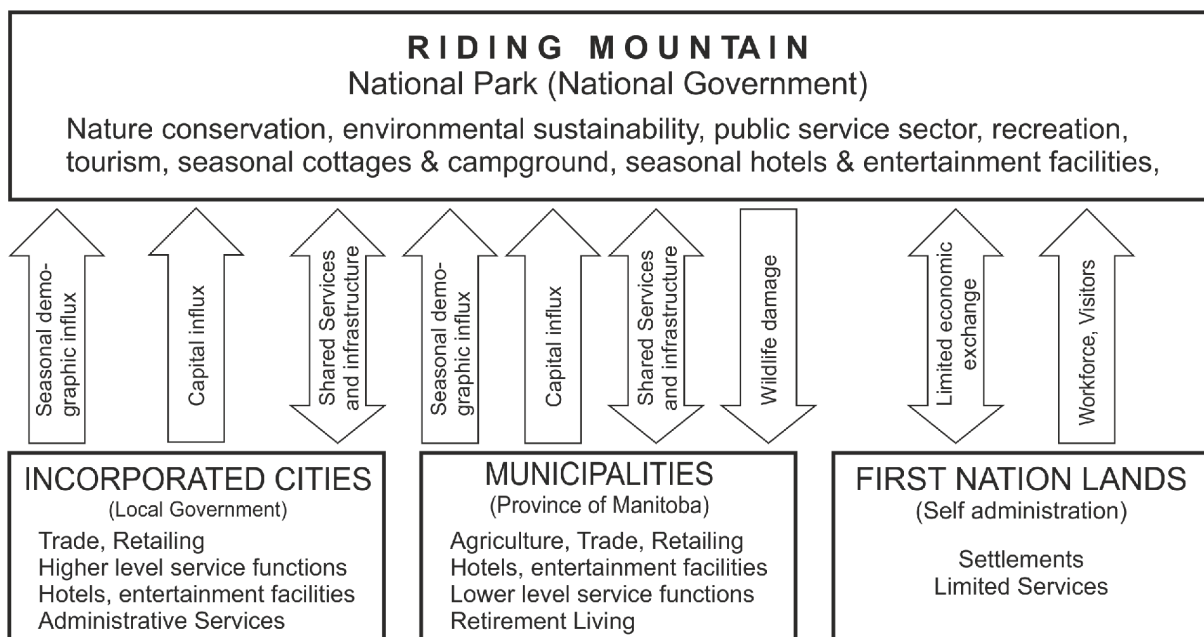


Figure 4: Interactions between Riding Mountain National Park, the Municipalities and the First Nation Reserves, Manitoba

Future perspectives

It has been shown that the RMBR is a distinct and highly complex ecosystem and human environment. It is also an evolving and very dynamic area calling for adaptive and innovative approaches to the challenges, new opportunities and problem areas. One of the challenges for the RMBR was the establishment of a protected area in a region of long-term human livelihoods and settlements. A different type of challenge for the RMBR is the rapid and in places excessive growth of the recreational function coupled with voracious land consumption, an inflation of real estate prices, the dangers of land and water contamination, and a potential “erosion” of traditional local cultures. Therefore, the principal goal of the RMBR appears to be of finding a balance between enhancing biodiversity and conservation, supporting a healthy agricultural sector, strengthening lively communities, maintaining attractive recreational environments, and in general fostering a sustainable regional development: *‘Biosphere Reserves should strive for innovative ways in which to showcase sustainable living practices in the light of dominating unsustainable patterns of growth and human consumption. This can be achieved through real local- and community –based processes’* (STOLL-KLEEMANN & O’RIORDAN 2017: 89).

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