ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS RECEIVED DURING PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GEOCACHING POLICY FOR PARKS CANADA

Summary

This report summarizes the comments received from stakeholders with regards to the creation of an official geocaching policy for Parks Canada. Comments received by email were read, grouped, thematically coded, and analyzed for tone, content, and policy suggestions. These emails were also kept in hard copy in a binder.

Tabulated results were created, and recommendations are put forward. Cumulative results reflect the needs of the responding public, geocaching associations, and some environmental and cultural non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Introduction

Parks Canada's National Park Action Plan aims to have stakeholders engaged in the review of the assessment of appropriate activities in National Parks. In consideration of the Agency's commitment to consult with stakeholders, the interim policy was approved with the provision of a consultation and a one-year trial period.

The public consultation was officially launched via a posting on the public website for Parks Canada on May 28th, 2005. The public consultation period ended December 31st, 2005, and will be followed by a phase of work involving representative stakeholders in a collaborative process with Parks Canada staff to develop a final policy. The website posting invited the public to comment on the appropriateness of geocaching, and Parks Canada's interim geocaching policy for protected heritage areas. An email account was set up specifically for the purpose of collecting these comments.

The following images are screen captures of the invitation for the public to comment on the interim geocaching policy
(http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/pc/poli/interim/geocaching_e.asp).

Interim Policy on Geocaching in Protected Heritage Areas Managed by Parks Canada

We want to hear your views - You are invited to comment on the development of a policy for the management of geocaching activities in Parks Canada's protected heritage areas. The consultation period for the development of alternate management scenarios will continue until the end of December 2005.

For the remainder of 2005, Parks Canada will be consulting the geocaching community on the interim policy to consider alternate management scenarios. Parks Canada's key objective is to provide opportunities for visitors to participate in interesting and educational experiences in ways that minimize potential impacts. Parks Canada recognizes that the geocaching community has worked hard to maintain a respectful attitude towards nature and to promote responsible behaviour, and we look forward to collaborating on the development of creative management solutions that enhance the stewardship aspects of the activity.

For further information on the interim policy, or to provide comments, please email Claire McNeil at rec.activities@pc.gc.ca

An initial report dated August 2005, and prepared by Jessica Lankshear gives a more thorough explanation of the initial process for this evaluation. This report expands upon the August 2005 summary of comments.

Strategy

Comments were collected by email, read, replied to by Claire McNeil, and categorized as either a public comment, or interest group comment (according to whether the sender identified themselves as representing an organization). These emails were then read and thematically coded by Lori Bradford, and results were entered into the spreadsheet, along with associated information such as the name and email address of the respondent, the province of origin (if provided), and the date the email was received. In addition to comment theme, content was also analysed and categorized according to tone, and policy suggestions were identified and categorized separately.

Themes were continually updated and expanded/collapsed to ensure that the results were truly reflective of the emails received. Over time new themes emerged and a list of policy suggestions was created. Policy suggestions were divided into categories reflecting different prescriptive requirements; cache placement, container and contents, permission, behaviour, monitoring & maintenance, cache posting, and education.

In order to ensure continued two-way communication and to draw attention to the impending closure of the public comment period, in December 2005 an abbreviated version of Jessica Lankshear's report summarizing public comments was emailed to all individuals who had had commented on the interim policy, as well as to geocaching associations that had been contacted and invited to participate. In addition, to ensure a broad community was provided opportunity to participate in the public comment period, request for comment was sent to four environmental and two cultural NGOs. Two of the targeted groups responded, as well as one additional NGO.

Review of Methodology
By December 31st, 2005 eighty-two emails were received from members of the general public, and forty-two emails from organizations (including thirty-nine emails from individuals identified as part of a geocaching association, and three responses from NGOs - two environmental and one cultural heritage NGO). In total, 124 responses were received.

It is important to keep in mind that the comments were received mostly from members of the geocaching community and may be highly skewed in the direction of their interests.

The range of locations from which emails were received included all but two Canadian provinces and two territories, five States, and one European nation. There were also thirteen emails from unspecified origins. Emails were received consistently throughout the period up to and including the last day of the comment period, and were received and responded to in both French and English. All comments were coded in English.

In order to ensure consistent coding of comments, those received up to August (coded by Jessica Lankshear) were re-read and re-coded by Lori Bradford. This was in order to ensure consistency between reviewers. When new themes emerged, the initial group of emails was re-assessed to ensure no data was missed.

Explanation of Thematic Coding
The thematic coding does not include any tones apparent in the emails, or policy suggestions given, as these aspects were assessed independently. The same set of codes was used for both public and interest group comments, as they were quite similar in nature over the entire sample. Counts were transferred to percentages for ease of reporting.

Ten separate codes emerged. The following table gives the number and title of each code (note that numbers are not in cumulative order, but jump in several cases due to the collapsing of related codes over the comment period) as well as the percentage distribution among total responses (124):

Table-1 Summary of codes and distribution:

Code Number	Code Title/Explanation	Distribution
1	Criticism of initial ban, wishes Parks Canada staff to try activity before creating policy	33%
2	Geocaching is a safe, educational, family-oriented, intellectually-stimulating activity	46%
3	Geocachers have a good environmental ethic by picking up garbage (CITO), and have less impact than many other activities currently allowed in the parks	69%
4	Supports Parks Canada's approach and agrees with the strong environmental focus	29%
5	Geocaching allows visitors to experience the environment and things they would not have experienced otherwise	34%
7	There are economic and marketing benefits to the park of allowing geocaching	27%
18	Some geocachers believe the media has been portraying geocachers improperly; as reckless treasure hunters, this is not the case	5%
22	Geocachers are not aware of the impacts they cause	10%
23	The cultural integrity of sites must also be maintained, concerns with geocaching activities not respecting the cultural protection mandate, protection of cultural sites cannot be overlooked in policy creation	8%
24	Concerns over how to police policy: activity is self-policing, or need for Parks Canada staff to police	17%

Please see appendix-1 for charts indicating theme titles, explanations, exclusion rules, and flags, as well as sample quotes.

As indicated in Table 1, the most common themes to emerge from the emails was that the public and associations believed that geocachers have a good environmental ethic, and that geocaching is a safe and educational activity. Slightly more emails indicated disagreement with the initial pre-cautionary approach that PC took (33%), than the number (roughly 30%) of commenters who agreed with the strong environmental approach. Slightly less than 30% of emails indicated the belief that Parks Canada would

lose economic and marketing benefits if Parks Canada continued the ban on physical caches, or if Parks Canada banned geocaching altogether. This is reflected in the emails from visitors who would not have come to National Historic Sites or Parks if it were not for the current caches.

Of those that mentioned that it is a family-based activity, most emphasized that virtual caching would not meet the needs of the children in their search for a container of "treasures" to trade and collect. These respondents also generally believed that geocachers benefit from the exercise that this activity provides.

Many of the commenters strongly argued that geocaching has less impact than numerous other activities occurring in the Parks system. It was also interesting to note that the geocaching associations who commented felt that media portrayals of the sport were inaccurate and that members of the general public, and Parks Canada does not have an accurate profile of the impacts of geocaching but instead believes that geocachers are reckless treasure hunters.

Finally, some of the commenters believed that geocachers and geocaching organizations are the best "policers" of their own policies and that Parks Canada is not equipped, firstly, to create a fair policy because of their apparent lack of participation in the activity, and secondly to police that policy within their given resources. Some of the commenters explained in detail the process by which a geocache is approved, monitored, and how quickly a cache owner can be notified of any discrepancies.

A third of the respondents mentioned that Parks Canada had acted too hastily in initially banning physical caches without evaluating their effects first. Cache owners who were notified of the archival of their caches through geocaching.com were insulted at not being notified first by Parks Canada. However, the interim policy was also perceived positively and as an appropriate pre-cautionary step.

A smaller group of respondents mentioned that they did not believe geocachers were aware of the impacts they caused, or that geocachers may not truly follow environmentally sound practices but instead, disregard them in their hurry to find a treasure first or log as many caches as possible.

Several respondents expressed that one of the most exciting aspects of taking their children geocaching, was the apparent delight of the child opening and trading cache contents. Often young adults were excited to find a physical "cache" and investigate it's contents, even though they had earlier complained about taking part in a "family activity." This may be an area for further investigation by Parks Canada.

A related theme was that in protecting the environment it was also important to a tenth of the respondents that cultural integrity was also maintained. This theme included suggestions that cultural sites should not have physical caches, that any caches should respect cultural integrity and if possible, give a culturally educational message as well.

Explanation of Tones
There were five tones indicated in the emails. These ranged from helpful, and trusting, to angry and patronizing. Please see the table below for the explanation and distribution. Several emails included multiple tones.

Table-2 Tones apparent in emails received:

Tone Number	Tone Explanation	Distribution
13	Neutral conversation	29%
14	Cooperative, wants to help Parks Canada in developing policy	43%
15	Believes Parks Canada is taking their input seriously	22%
17	There is fear or concern over the process; feel as though they've been neglected or underemphasized in policy development, concerned that Parks Canada has already made up their mind and is just going through the process	12%
19	Inflammatory tone, patronizing, not constructive	15%

Most of the public comments were cooperative in tone or believed that Parks Canada was taking their opinion seriously. However, 15% of the public's responses were quite angry or inflammatory in tone. These were most often in response to the ban of physical geocaching, removal of their personal caches, or accompanied by criticism of higher impact activities that are currently or have been perceived to be allowed in the Parks system.

In some emails, tones changed slightly during the message. The overlap was taken into consideration given the codes being presented, by allowing two tones to be listed in the spreadsheet when it was very apparent in the email received. Although Parks Canada has taken the public consultation approach quite seriously, there was still 12% of respondents who were concerned about the process, or felt that Parks Canada had already decided on a policy and was simply going through the motions of a public consultation. This is important given that most of the commenters were geocachers being asked to give their opinions in the first place, which may indicate that there were problems in the way the interim policy was communicated. The result that almost half of the emails were cooperative in tone, another 30% were neutrally-toned, and another 22% believed that Parks Canada is taking their comments seriously illustrates the trust the public had in Parks Canada, and the legitimacy of using a public consultation process for this policy creation.

Comments by individuals identified as part of an interest group generally were quite constructive, and most often included gratitude at having the opportunity to contribute. Some of the geocaching association spokespeople expressed fear at losing the opportunity to do this activity in National Parks, and concerns over the policy development process transparency. However, email exchanges over the comment period indicated that the relationships between the geocaching associations and Parks Canada representatives had strengthened as stated in the emails.

Finally, many commenters offered their personal phone numbers and addresses in hopes of being able to continue to contribute to this process.

Explanation of policy suggestions

Policy categories were developed from a review of 52 policies on geocaching currently in place around the world. An additional policy category (experience) was added during review of the public comments, to capture the full breadth of the suggestions received from the public.

Of the total 124 emails received, 38% included some kind of a policy suggestion. Of the 78 different respondents who participated in the public consultation, 53% of individuals included policy suggestions. Contributions ranged from one suggestion per email to 11 policy suggestions in an email. In addition to the emails received, two meetings with geocachers over the course of the public consultation provided an additional source of policy suggestions. A total of 164 policy suggestions were categorized from the emails and meetings.

The policy suggestions received have also been preserved in their original form for further consideration. Results shown in Table 3 reflect the types of guidelines and policies respondents suggested could be created by Parks Canada, not necessarily the level of agreement with specific proposed guidelines and policies. Slightly less than half the suggestions (41%) were related to aspects of permission; with the sub-theme of duration/distribution accounting for the highest proportion (18%) of that total and the highest number of suggestions of all sub-themes. Other frequently mentioned policy suggestions were in relation to education (16%), and cache containers and contents (13%).

Table-3 Policy suggestions and distribution among emails containing policy suggestions:

Categories	Sub-themes	Includes:	Distribution
Cache placement	Safety Ecological/cultural Visual/experience	Guidelines about where caches should or shouldn't be placed, in relation to safety constraints, ecological and cultural resource constraints, or visual constraints (i.e. cache should not be visible to everyone)	11%
Container and contents	Container Contents	Guidelines about container size, type and identification, what should or shouldn't go in the cache	13%
Permission	Non-commercial	Guidelines about who the cache is available	41%

	Cache type Process Compliance Duration/ distribution	for/its purpose, the type of cache (virtual, multi, physical, etc.); steps for submitting cache for approval, or for removing cache; mentions of rules and regulations for enforcement and consequences, and guidelines relating to cache density, cache life- span or cache distance from trails.	
Behaviour	Cacher	Guidelines about how cache owners and cache seekers should behave (e.g. no digging, no crossing fences)	1%
Monitoring & maintenance	Cacher Staff Staff/cacher	Guidelines for monitoring and maintaining cache, its contents, its impacts, either directed at cacher, land management agency staff, or a joint responsibility	4%
Cache posting	Online posting	Guidelines re: Information that should be posted online to guide cache seekers to the site	7%
Education	Interpretation Communication	Suggestions about using geocaching as an educational tool, or suggestions about communicating information about geocaching in parks to staff, visitors or geocachers	16%
Experience	Staff Co-management	Guidelines on who should and how to implement geocaching as Parks Canada activity, and suggestions on how Parks Canada could work with geocachers to manage the activity	7%

Overall Results

Parks Canada received eighty-two public respondent emails, and forty-two interest group (geocaching association or environmental/cultural NGO) respondent emails. Thirty-eight percent of the total emails received included suggested guidelines and policy options.

Table 4-Emails received during public consultation

	# received during public consultation	% with policy suggestions
Total emails	124	38
Total emails from associations	42	26
Total public emails	82	44
Total respondents	78	53

Most respondents believe geocaching to be safe, educational, intellectually stimulating, and a benefit economically, and as a marketing tool for attracting visitors to Parks Canada protected heritage areas.

Many respondents were frustrated/angry at the initial ban of physical caches, though more frequently respondents were cooperative and wanted to be involved in the policy development.

The NGOs who responded indicated that they support the interim approach of virtual caches, and that a strong compliance effort may be necessary to discourage inappropriate use of protected heritage areas.

Key Findings
The following comments indicate issues raised by respondents that Parks Canada might want to consider addressing in future activity assessments:

- It is important to the public that Parks Canada consider other activities that are occurring in the Parks before deciding on a geocaching policy – to ensure consistency in regulating similar activities. This may be a communications issue rather than a lack of activity analysis.

- Once policy is established, research and monitoring should be conducted on the impacts of geocachers in the Parks system and on ecosystems in general with a follow-up assessment of the effectiveness of the policy as a goal

- There are concerns about how to ensure compliance with the policy that will be put in place. Many commenters believe that the rules and archive system in place already through geocaching.com have proven to work well, or that Parks Canada does not have the resources to perform in-house enforcement. However, environmental and cultural groups that responded felt that there needs to be effective enforcement of the policy at the Park level.

Recommendations and Conclusions
The comment period was successful in soliciting public opinion from the geocaching community, however, more input from the general public, and other user groups is required to complete a strong sample population. Although Parks Canada reached members of the public from across most of the country, the most dense response area was from Western Canada and Ontario. Further comments should be obtained from those in Northern and Eastern Canada, as well as from members of the general public, industry professionals, and user groups with potential conflict with geocachers.

The following suggestions were developed from the results of the emails received:

- Create a suite of potential policy options from those suggested by the public, associations, and other jurisdictions.
- Create a geocaching consultation group to discuss and build on these policy options. Assemble a group of stakeholders for a workshop to develop and decide on policy and compliance.
- When considering user groups, it is apparent that children have special needs with regards to this activity. Providing tradable "cache contents" at the park office for revealing once a child presents proof of finding a cache might be an acceptable alternative to allowing physical caches in Parks.

- Consider policies on other activities occurring in Parks to ensure user groups will be treated fairly.
- Target other groups, such as environmental groups and other MRT participants (including Aboriginal groups) for comment in order to achieve a more reflective sample of the Parks users.
- Maintain the professionalism presented during the email dialogues. Many commenters were appreciative that Parks Canada was offering them the opportunity to comment, and of the personal response to their emails.

APPENDIX A: Thematic Coding Charts

Thematic coding tables of geocaching consultation period emails.

The following are tables of qualitative coding conducted on the emails received during the public consultation period up until Dec.31st, 2005. This coding was performed as per Neumann, W.L. (2000). Social Research Methods. Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.

Title of Code	1- Criticism of initial ban, wishes Parks Canada staff to try activity before creating policy
Description	Respondent was angry/surprised about the initial ban of physical caching, and felt that Parks Canada acted too soon in establishing this ban. Further comments in this code included messages indicating that respondents wanted Parks Canada staff to try geocaching before deciding on their policy.
Flag	Negative tone, expression of anger with ban, complaint about having to remove caches, disappointment with policy, expression of wanting Parks staff to try geocaching, expression of Parks staff being inexperienced or ignorant of geocaching, expression of dislike for virtual caching
Exclusions	Negative comments that did not include reasons, policy suggestions
Example	"I think the interim policy posted above is out of line, and is obviously a knee jerk reaction to an activity which is not understood."

Title of Code	2-Geocaching is a safe, educational, family-oriented, intellectually-stimulating activity
Description	A conclusion of many of the respondents was that this activity is not at all against Parks Canada's policies and operating principles. Combined in this code was the idea that many respondents brought forward that geocaching apart from allowing visitors to experience the environment and historical places, and get exercise and adventure with their families, was that it provides something lacking in National Parks experiences; intellectual-stimulation.
Flag	Comments regarding the activity included such things as safe, educational, intellectually stimulating, family-oriented, and fun. Many respondents commented that they would not come to the park had it not been for the caches.
Exclusions	Comments regarding environmental ethics of geocachers, suggesting policy surrounding potential caches, and comments comparing this activity to others were listed under separate codes.
Example	"In this day and age, there are very few activities like geocaching that appeal to all ages, all fitness levels, and all income levels."

Title of Code	3-Geocachers have a good environmental ethic by picking up garbage (CITO), and have less impact than many other activities currently allowed in the parks
Description	Comments describing the environmental ethic carried by many geocachers and the idea of Cache-In Trash-out (CITO) strongly promoted by geocaching associations. This code also encompassed comparative statements about geocaching and other activities currently permitted in National Parks.
Flag	Comments mentioning the effects of other activities in comparison to geocachers, emphasis on geocaching's Cache-In Trash Out policy, comments referring to environmentalism or litter potential, and impact-related anecdotes
Exclusions	Policy suggestions, and comments related to media portrayals (covered in another code)
Example	"Initially I removed two bags of trash near the cache that was littered near the site. When maintaining it, I have removed several more bags of litter." "The local geocaching community are all very respectful of the environment, and most geocachers are the same. They are really no different than any one of the million other visitors you encourage to come here, and those who simply hike the trails, without even realizing there is a cache there!"

Title of Code	4- Supports Parks Canada's approach and agrees with the strong environmental focus
Description	Commenter supports the initial ban, supports the process by which Parks Canada is examining this activity, and also believes in the environmental approach and potential impacts that geocaching could have.
Flag	Comments exhibiting trust for PC, expressing potential impacts or impacts they've noticed of geocaching, and statements revolving around environmental protection from geocaching impacts
Exclusions	Comment suggesting geocaches / cachers are environmentally friendly (covered in code 3), comments criticizing process (covered in code 1), and comments comparing other activities (code 3)
Example	"Although I am a geocacher, I agree with your policies about physical caches." "I also agree that geocaching can pose a significant risk to both the park, and the non-geocachers' enjoyment of the park. I am happy to see that your organization is taking time to review the correct strategy versus rushing to judgement."

Title of Code	5-Geocaching allows visitors to experience the environment and things they would not have experienced otherwise
Description	This code reflected experience aspects of geocaching. Many

	commenters suggested that this is an activity that is unique and educative.
Flag	Comments expressing the personal experiences they have enjoyed with the activity.
Exclusions	Comments referring to safe, family, environment, intellectual-stimulation, and fun (code 2)
Example	"When I first learned of geocaching after receiving my first GPS receiver, I was non-active, non-athletic and generally was not concerned about environment, Wildlife, or other outdoors concerns. Since having found the sport of Geocaching, I have travelled Across the entire country of Canada to geocache, Travelled to the USA to meet with other geocachers. In my travels, I have met and made friends from all over the world, I have seen and experienced too many glorious things to mention that many will never see in their entire lifetime. I have ventured farther than I ever would have conceived just to locate a simple container hidden in that special spot. After being married, Geocaching influenced the decision of my Wife and I as far as honeymooning. Rather than travelling south to venture into the land of the Sun, we opted to travel where we would have a better chance of Geocaching and ended up within Banff National Park. My experience within Banff National Park and Jasper National Park was, so far, the pinnacle of my life to date. Because so many locals were aware of the most beautiful spots and the best places to visit, we were so fortunate to be able to experience these parks as they should be experienced."

Title of Code	7- There are economic and marketing benefits to the park of allowing geocaching
Description	Many commenters explained that geocaching brings in visitors, and hence income for the parks, as well as providing a unique way to attract and advertise parks.
Flag	Comments expressing economic gains, or potential marketing gains for Parks Canada, or illustrating that by banning this activity, Parks Canada may decrease it's visitor numbers and interest, or cause a backlash of future boycotters.
Exclusions	Policy suggestions, criticism of initial ban.
Example	"There is an enormous potential to promote Canadian parklands through the medium of geocaching." "By banning geocaching you are not only losing the revenue stream from these visitors, you are losing a valuable member of what should be considered your volunteers…"

Title of Code	18- Some geocachers believe the media has been portraying geocachers improperly; as reckless treasure hunters, this is not the case

Description	Comments regarding the media surrounding geocachers, especially on behaviour and environmental impacts
Flag	Any media reflection
Exclusions	Policy suggestions
Example	"It looks like the media and a geocacher opened up a can of worms. I think there may be a few people who read into this the wrong way." "I knew that, as I posted in the Forums, the [undisclosed media] probably only took one snip of the entire conversation, and that was unfair to you. The same applies to the title of the article. It was inflammatory and I took offence to it too, …"

Title of Code	22- Geocachers are not aware of the impacts they cause
Description	Some commenters have suggested that geocachers are not fully aware of the impacts they may cause to protected areas and are thus being irresponsible in their activity or unfairly criticising Parks Canada's actions.
Flag	Comments pointing out potential impacts, or illustrating damage caused by geocachers that appear to be unaware that they've caused it.
Exclusions	Comments on environmentalism, or comparing the activity to other activities (covered in other codes).
Example	"My feeling is that while most geocachers believe they don't cause much impact they don't generally understand what impacts they might have. I think that most importance should be put on avoiding off trail use and impacts to cultural heritage. "

Title of Code	23- The cultural integrity of sites must also be maintained, concerns with geocaching activities not respecting the cultural protection mandate, protection of cultural sites cannot be overlooked in policy creation
Description	The main emphasis of the impacts of the potential for impacts of this activity has been physical damage to the environment, however, many commenters were concerned about the cultural heritage of sites, particularly, any aboriginal grounds, or significant archaeological sites. Cultural education is not a main aspect of geocaches listed, but should not be ignored.
Flag	Comments regarding protection of cultural heritage, plaques, burial grounds, and archaeology sites. Additionally, comments on ensuring messages given in caches reflect the culture of the area.
Exclusions	Policy suggestions, education/family comments (code 2)
Example	"Personally, I prefer caches that take our family to historical locations...places that tell a bit about the area." "Natural heritage must be afforded the same protection as cultural heritage and vice versa."

Title of Code	24- Concerns over how to police policy: activity is self-policing, or need for Parks Canada staff to police
Description	There are various concerns over the policing and regulating of whatever policy will be implemented. Some geocacher commenters believed that enough policies are in place on the website hosts for geocaching that no new enforcement must be done, and that geocachers are the best policers of their own activity – why interfere with something that is working in their view? Other commenters believed that without strong enforcement through Parks Canada itself, caching would provide more damage and recklessness.
Flag	Any comments about regulating the policy, staff shortages, and self-policing.
Exclusions	Policy suggestions.
Example	"With particular reference to your comment about lack of reviewers, as I tried to point out, Geocachers are the best police of their own hobby. Recently in my area a cache was buried, contrary to gc.com policy, the first two visitors to the cache pointed this out and the cache was de-listed and removed in about 3 days."