



# STATE OF ONTARIO'S PROTECTED AREAS

Education and Outreach (Discovery Program)

2021

# State of Ontario's Natural Resources Indicator Report

## Education and Outreach (Discovery Program)

This indicator describes how opportunities for residents of Ontario and visitors to increase their knowledge and appreciation of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage are achieved through the Discovery Program.

### Status



**Status:** Good



**Trend (Long-range):** Mixed

### Why it's important

One of the legislated objectives in the PPCRA is "To provide opportunities for residents of Ontario and visitors to increase their knowledge and appreciation of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage." The Discovery Program is a program which (through its staff) facilitates interpretation of the unique heritage values found within protected areas while providing education to the public regarding biodiversity and conservation and fostering an appreciation for the value of parks and conservation reserves. Discovery Program staff are typically the park nature experts who also contribute to numerous social media initiatives, provide valuable information to management planning and often taking the lead on ecological integrity monitoring and restoration initiatives.

### How we monitor

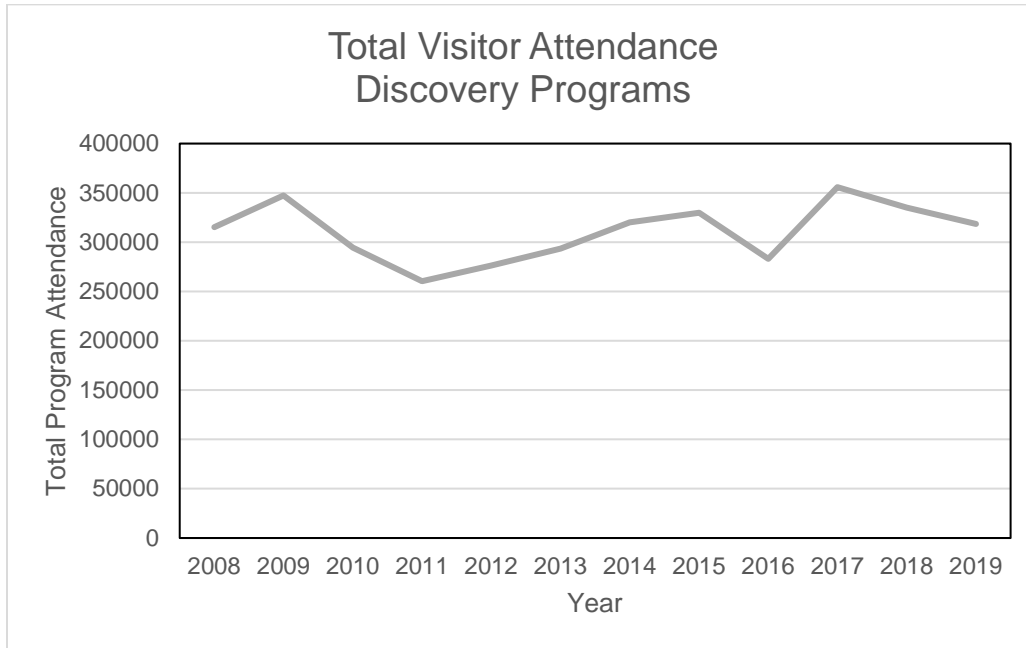
All provincial parks with a Discovery program collect and submit attendance statistics for analysis. Program statistics are categorised by program type, including core programs such as guided hikes, children's programs, evening programs, organized school groups, special events etc. Information is also collected on interpretive/ educational publications (number distributed), facilities and exhibits (attendance) that are produced and conducted by Discovery Program staff.

Ontario Parks car camper and day-use surveys provide a measure of customer satisfaction with Discovery programs and facilities attended during their stay as well as motivations for attending and justifications for not attending.

Discovery Programs are evaluated by senior staff, who also conduct program and facility audits.

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## Data



## Additional data

From 2015 Car Camper Survey: 82.9% of campers who attended an education/interpretive program were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience (data collected from 21 parks with education/interpretive programs).

## What's happening

A review of the former Natural Heritage Education (NHE) Program (now named the Discovery Program) from 2013-2015 recommended a modernization of the program and a reallocation of resources. The review identified, among other priorities:

- a need to engage in more comprehensive interpretive planning exercises;
- a need to explore new programming formats and options to include more parks;
- a need to rebrand the program;
- a desire to increase programming efforts for school groups.

Since the review, the NHE program has been rebranded as the Discovery Program. In addition, interpretive strategies were subsequently completed for 23 parks, with programming expanded from 42 to 72 parks which include student-led, informal, and drop-in programs, as well as some school group pilot programming.

Overall attendance at staff-led programs has been relatively stable over the past 12 years. Declining attendance in some program formats such as traditional evening

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programs has been compensated by the development and delivery of newer program formats and by the increase in number of parks offering informal drop-in children's programs. These new, drop-in programs are also linked to specific activities in a Discovery Activity Booklet that is available at all operating provincial parks. This has resulted in more access to Discovery self-led activities for families in all parks.

Over the past 10 years, social media accounts have been added to the Discovery Program's toolkit as an effective way to communicate interpretive messaging and to promote programs. The number of followers of park Facebook and Twitter accounts managed or co-managed by Discovery staff has risen from none in 2012 to over 280,000 in 2019. Discovery staff also contribute regular educational blog articles to the Ontario Parks blog.

From 2015-2017, a Discovery school program position was piloted at Pinery Provincial Park. As a result of the pilot's success, Bronte Creek and Pinery provincial parks now offer a full slate of school programs, both as outreach into schools and for groups visiting those parks. Overall school group contacts by Discovery staff rose to an all-time high of 27,000 in 2019. This increasing emphasis on school programming is something the Discovery Program hopes to build on at other parks across the province.

The visitor satisfaction rate of 82.9% from the 2015 car camper survey indicates a high quality of Discovery Programming at the 21 parks included in the survey. As this is currently the only quantitative measure of program quality, the Discovery Program will be introducing other evaluative measures of success.

## **Indicator last updated**

September 2020

## **Data source(s)**

N/A

## **Related links**

N/A