

High demand for backcountry camping in Ontario



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By Michael Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The people of Ontario have a new outlet to enjoy the great outdoors as of June 1. Ontario has decided to reopen backcountry camping on Crown land managed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and in select provincial parks. Backcountry camping is when one hikes or portages all day and then spends the night out in the wilderness. It requires carrying all your camping gear, food, water and safety gear in a backpack. While this reopening is certainly good news for some, there are still restrictions in effect to preclude more people from getting sick with COVID-19.

The restrictions still in place on backcountry camping include physical distancing, wearing a mask when distancing isn't possible and frequent hand washing. No more than five people are allowed to camp together unless they're from the same household. Provincial enforcement officers will patrol, educate and enforce these measures during this time and until the pandemic subsides.

Gary Wheeler, with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks communications branch, says that the health and well being of visitors and staff will always be the number one consideration as the ministry decides how and when to open parks and services.

As we continue to make progress in our fight to stop the spread of COVID-19, we are carefully and cautiously reopening parks, giving Ontarians more opportunities to reconnect with nature. Our government is gradually introducing more activities, facilities and

services at Ontario Parks in order to keep staff and visitors safe. Following current provincial restrictions, no more than five people can occupy a backcountry campsite during their stay, unless they live in one household. We're counting on people to be responsible when enjoying our parks and continue to follow all the public health advice, including physical distancing and frequent hand washing to help prevent the spread of COVID-19," he says.

Wheeler mentions that ministry officers will also be present in provincial parks and conservation reserves to provide information, assist with emergencies and enforce provincial park rules and regulations. They may also be patrolled by local police and other enforcement agencies. He advises the public to continue to visit www.Ontarioparks.com and Ontario parks social media to check the status of their local provincial park.

As far as regular overnight camping at provincial parks, Wheeler says at this time no decision has been made.

"The health and well-being of visitors and staff will always be our number one consideration as we decide how and when to open parks and services. That's why over the next several weeks, we will gradually increase the recreational opportunities we offer at Ontario parks, including camping, but only when it is safe to do so. We will be continually assessing our approach and may need to make adjustments to services depending on ongoing public health advice. We understand this gradual approach may impact many Ontarians summer plans, but we are not prepared to take any chances with the health and well being of staff and visitors," he says.

Paul Connor, the executive director of Ontario Trails, is grateful for the move, in that it promotes people's physical and mental health through access to the outdoors.

"Opening up these additional spaces in the backcountry is certainly very important for local use, because it'll help distribute trail traffic over a greater area. I'm concerned however, with people travelling greater distances and not following health guidelines in the backcountry. For instance, if people have accidents and need to be extracted from the backcountry, that'll put an additional strain on local healthcare. You can't stay locked down forever, but it's not business as usual. It depends on people planning before they go, being safe in the woods and practicing good health behaviour. Even though you're in the backcountry, it doesn't mean you'll always be distant from one another. My concern is with the trails, portage routes and parking lots. Many of them are narrow and you're not going to have six feet to space out and it's problematic. However, make sure people are not only putting in a trip plan but a compliance plan. I will use the hand sanitizer, if I come upon other people, I'll use a mask, I'll be using gloves. This kind of tripping can be done without compromising public safety. That's the new reality; you can go there, you can do your thing, you can come home, you're not sick and you didn't make anybody else sick when you were away. It's a good thing, but it has to be managed and assessed properly," he says.

Alexandra Anderson is the executive director of Camping in Ontario, and says while she supports the spirit of allowing backcountry camping, she is also quite confused as to why they did it when they have so far refused to allow her members to accept RV campers for overnight stays. She says her members are not allowed to accept travelling campers with RVs into their campgrounds and must advise them to go find a parking lot.

"It is truly a health and safety issue from the perspective of the campers. Can you imagine you've been relocated; you're travelling across the country, you get to a campground and the campground says they're not allowed to put you up for the night, but please go find the nearest Walmart. That's happening every single night. This is a safety issue for travellers, many of them essential workers trying to get to their jobs," she says.

Camping in Ontario's member parks have worked really hard to ensure a safe, no contact experience with campers and staff, according to Anderson. She is also quick to point out that she is solely referring to RV camping, not tent camping. Her members are not yet set up for that and have no intention of opening up their common washrooms and common areas for the foreseeable future until the pandemic is under control.

Brent Oliver is a long-time member of Wilderness Adventurers of Ontario and serves on its board of directors. He says his group is thrilled to learn of the recent relaxing of outdoor activity restrictions in Ontario, specifically the opening of backcountry camping.

?The club's executive is currently following a policy of lagging the lifting of provincial restrictions so that our travels through smaller northern communities does not put an unreasonable load on health care workers and emergency services in these areas. Soon, the club plans to allow day events including hiking and paddling activities in accordance with provincial guidelines related to group size, social distancing, etc. Assuming the provincial restrictions continue to be relaxed, the club is looking forward to allowing overnight camping trips in the near future. To assist club trip organizers and to ensure the safety of participants, the club has been expanding and enhancing policies to include such items as a health questionnaire and checklists related to social distancing and other items prudent during this cautionary time. While our club recognizes that members will be venturing into the outdoors more and more on their own, we are taking a very cautionary approach to expanding club activities. We're very excited to see restrictions lifting but support a slow and steady unfolding of changes and encourage members and others to be patient. We'll soon enough see each other on one of Ontario's wonderful backcountry trails and lakes,? he says.

One of the provincial parks offering backcountry camping is Kawartha Lakes provincial park, the second largest park in Ontario behind Algonquin provincial park. Paul Smith is the park superintendent at Kawartha Lakes and says that his park and a number of others have opened up to backcountry camping based on the health and well-being of visitors and staff, which he says is their number one consideration.

?We're carefully and cautiously reopening parks to give Ontarians the opportunity to reconnect with nature and backcountry camping is one of the lowest risk activities. Typically, campers are in smaller groups and they come fully equipped and they don't need to buy supplies because they brought their own. Shared facilities like washrooms and showers aren't required, as they're going directly to the backcountry site. With the opening, we're helping people enjoy nature and still do physical distancing.

Smith says that as soon as backcountry camping was opened up June 1, there was a huge interest in doing it. He says they have had 90 per cent plus occupancy rates since the announcement, and their reservations just filled right up.

?Based on that high level of interest, and the telephone calls we've gotten about camping, it seems most people are really eager to return to the provincial parks and get out and reconnect with nature. So, it's really good there's a good turnout,? he says.

All the Kawartha Lakes provincial park staff is back on, according to Smith, so they'll be able to get out and ensure that campers are following the rules. They have also reduced the number of people on a campsite from nine to five, and they all must be from the same household.

?If there's any social distancing issues, we have the ability to educate folks and our staff has received some direction on that,? he says.

Stephanie Maber has been backcountry camping for years, and she's delighted at the prospect of being able to do so again this year. Maber is a successful entrepreneur in the GTA, and is the founder and CEO of FEO Marketing. She says she usually portages and backcountry camps on Crown land and describes her first outing into the backcountry.

?The first time we went backcountry camping, I honestly didn't know what to expect. We definitely went a little overboard with everything we bought, thinking we needed it all. Our first ever was a horrible trip into the site. Since we were going to be leaving our car, we did not know where we could park, so we had a family member drop us off at the lake. Instead of being close to the entrance to the park, they dropped us off on the other side of the lake and it took forever to get there. We had to paddle across and the wind was against us. On top of that, the canoe was full to the brim with the stuff we'd bought. When we got to the first portage, we had to unpack all the stuff, carry the canoe over a decent sloped rock-filled hill, and then make multiple trips back and forth to get our stuff. Once we were on the next lake, we decided that we would pick a spot here and not do another portage further into the park. We set up camp on this lake and nobody else was around. The first night was so peaceful with the dark sky, clear stars, the smell of the campfire and of freshly caught fish. The lack of noise and the disappearance of that city hum really made every aching muscle worth the trip. The rangers on most crown park lands really do take care of them, and have built outhouse areas in each campground for you to do your business. They visit throughout the weekend to check if you're okay, give you some firewood if you

need it and that you're not needlessly disturbing the surrounding area. We were really impressed with the site and how well kept it was," she says. "My best advice is to make a list of what you need and only pack that. I highly recommend renting a canoe and trailer, rather than buying. We did this for our last trip and it was much easier and lighter. I don't recommend this to anyone who does not like to get dirty or needs their phone to survive. If you want to go backcountry camping, you go off-grid. You enjoy nature, peace and living off the land."