



NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION  
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# Open Water Swimming at Meech Lake

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION REPORT  
JANUARY TO APRIL 2021

Canada

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## **I. Project description**

### **A. Background**

During the summer of 2020, there were an unprecedented number of users in Gatineau Park, as people looked for safe ways to exercise and enjoy the outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This included a notable increase in the use of Meech Lake for open water swimming, often early in the morning. Unfortunately, there was a corresponding increase in the number and gravity of conflicts involving swimmers at Meech Lake. As a result, the NCC implemented a parking lot closure from 9 pm until 7 am at Meech Lake for the latter part of the summer.

When this measure was implemented, the management of Gatineau Park committed to a consultative process that would seek to determine the conditions under which open water swimming could be safely and sustainably practised at Meech Lake.

## **II. Public consultation process**

### **A. Overview**

The consultative process implemented by the NCC to address the issue of open water swimming at Meech Lake was carried out in several stages.

As a first step, the NCC invited affected stakeholders, including local residents and members of the open water swimming community, to participate in an online workshop. This workshop provided an opportunity for participants to share their concerns and put forward potential solutions to the challenges surrounding the practice of open water swimming at Meech Lake. It also allowed the NCC to provide information to participants about the regulatory context for open water swimming, as well as an overview of the issues that arose during the summer 2020 period.

The NCC invited interested stakeholders to form an advisory committee on open water swimming at Meech Lake and at other lakes on NCC lands in Quebec. At a first meeting of the advisory committee, the NCC shared a draft management proposal for open water swimming, aimed at addressing the challenges raised by swimmers and Park residents. Advisory committee members provided feedback at the online meeting and in subsequent written exchanges with Gatineau Park staff. These and other comments subsequently provided via email by individuals who participated in the first workshop with stakeholders were taken into account as part of the refinement of proposals.

These proposals were fleshed out in an implementation plan, which will then be shared with the advisory committee and the wider group of stakeholders. It was noted that the plan constitutes a pilot project at Meech Lake and Leamy Lake for the summer of 2021, and that monitoring and check-ins with stakeholders will take place over the course of the pilot project.

#### **a. Consultation objectives**

- Raise awareness about the regulatory context for open water swimming and recent issues associated with this practice at Meech Lake.
- Understand the challenges and different perspectives that surround the current practice of open water swimming at Meech Lake.
- Determine under what conditions open water swimming at Meech Lake can be safely, sustainably and collaboratively managed.
- Develop an open water swimming management plan that could be applied at all NCC lakes in Quebec.

#### **b. Date and time**

#### **c. Workshop with swimmers and residents**

- January 14, 2021, 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm

#### **d. Advisory committee meeting**

- March 10, 2021, 7 pm to 8:30 pm

### **B. Consultation procedure and tools**

#### **a. Workshop with swimmers and residents**

The workshop was held via the Microsoft Teams platform, and was divided into four parts:

1. A presentation on the current situation and regulatory context of open water swimming at Meech Lake
2. Breakout room discussions on concerns and potential solutions
3. A plenary session during which a representative from each of the two breakout rooms summarized the main points raised by each group
4. A group discussion on potential next steps

At the start of the workshop, participants were asked to self-identify as either swimmers or residents. This determined the breakout room to which they were assigned.

NCC staff took notes throughout the workshop.

#### **b. Advisory committee meeting**

The meeting was held via the Microsoft Teams platform. It was divided into several segments, during which the NCC put forward ideas to address the following issues:

- Noise related to swimmers in the early morning
- Trespassing on private property
- Swimmer safety

- Protection of the common loon
- Obeying applicable laws and regulations
- Equitable access (fees)
- Vandalism and other illicit activities outside of operational hours

At the end of each segment, the NCC solicited feedback on the proposals from the advisory committee members.

NCC staff took notes throughout the workshop.

## **C. Invitation and promotion**

### **a. Workshop with swimmers and residents**

Participation in the workshop was by invitation. Gatineau Park staff and the NCC's Public Affairs team compiled a list of stakeholders affected by issues surrounding open water swimming at Meech Lake, and/or people who had expressed an interest in participating in a consultative process on this topic. The list included residents of Gatineau Park and members of the open water swimming community. Participants who contacted the NCC with an interest in participating were also invited to attend.

### **b. Advisory committee meeting**

Membership of the advisory committee was determined on the basis of interest and a balance of residents and swimmers. Workshop participants who volunteered to serve as members of the advisory committee were subsequently invited to participate in a meeting to discuss proposals put forward by the NCC.

## **D. Participants**

### **a. Workshop with swimmers and residents**

- 25 participants

### **b. Advisory committee meeting**

- 9 participants

## **III. Summary of feedback**

### **A. Online workshop**

#### **a. Breakout room 1: Residents**

## Issues and concerns

One of the first concerns raised by some residents was with the format of the workshop, which they felt mirrored a larger problem: the way in which the issue of open water swimming has been framed. Several residents felt it was unfortunate that participants were being separated into “swimmer” and “resident” groups. Their main concern was that this reinforces an “us versus them” dynamic in which residents are portrayed as the main cause of unpopular efforts to regulate the use of the Park. In actual fact, some contended, there are numerous groups who agree that the use of Meech Lake by certain visitors is becoming increasingly problematic and needs to be addressed somehow. Several residents stressed that they are not opposed to open water swimming at Meech Lake, and acknowledged that the issues they have raised with the NCC are not all attributable to swimmers. They view Meech Lake as a shared resource, and are keen to work collaboratively with all concerned parties in support of respectful and responsible use of Gatineau Park.

Regarding the practice of open water swimming itself, the main concern raised by residents relates to safety. Several residents reported encountering swimmers who did not adhere to best practices (e.g. wearing a brightly coloured swim cap and/or using a swim buoy). This resulted in near misses between rowers or motorboats and the swimmers in question.

Most of the issues raised by residents, however, relate to the behaviour of Meech Lake users when they are out of the water. This includes the following.

- **A highly disruptive level of noise early in the morning and late at night.** This is often caused by loud voices, vehicles driving up and down the lake, and late-night partying, although this last element is not attributable to swimmers. Some residents reported encountering swimmers in groups numbering over 100 speaking loudly before 7 am.
- **Trespassing on private property.** Residents reported seeing swimmers crossing their property to access the water, using their property as a rest or gathering area, and urinating on private grounds. Efforts to confront individuals trespassing on private property resulted in conflict and, some reported, physical threats.
- **Speeding.** Residents have witnessed vehicles driving over the speed limit to and from Meech Lake.
- **The misuse of certain public facilities.** Examples include using the boat launch at parking lot P12 as a beach and picnic area, as well as late-night partying and fires at Meech Lake.

These behaviours have had a negative effect on the quality of life of some residents. Some residents also expressed concern with the effect that these behaviours have on wildlife. There is a shared sense of frustration with the lack of decisive action from public authorities, and a keen desire to develop collaborative and long-term solutions to the issues outlined above.

## Proposed solutions

The solutions put forward by residents centred on user education, regulation and enforcement. Proposals included the following:

- Creating lanes or corridors for open water swimming.
- Restricting access for open water swimming to one area of Meech Lake in order to reduce vehicle traffic up and down the lake.
- Designing an open water swimming schedule for clubs and other large groups of swimmers.
- Establishing quiet times, similar to those enforced at campgrounds.
- Creating a code of conduct or set of principles for respectful behaviour.
- Promoting the use of other lakes for open water swimming (e.g. Leamy Lake).
- Launching a public awareness campaign around respectful behaviour at Meech Lake and best practices for open water swimming.
- Ensuring greater oversight of activities at Meech Lake (e.g. more visible presence of NCC staff and conservation officers).
- Collaborating with local law enforcement to clarify areas of responsibility.
- Learning from the experience of other sites that allow open water swimming (e.g. Beauport Lake, Memphrémagog Lake, Tremblant Lake, Jean-Drapeau Park).
- Installing security cameras.

## **b. Breakout room 2: Swimmers**

### **Issues and concerns**

One of the main concerns expressed by swimmers during the online workshop is that open water swimming would be restricted or over-regulated. Several swimmers related that, in many years, and, in some cases, decades, of open water swimming at Meech Lake, they had not encountered any problems whose magnitude would warrant intervention from the NCC. Some stressed that the swimming community already adheres to best practices set by bodies like Swim Canada, and that most of the fellow swimmers they encounter are careful to make themselves visible in the water by wearing brightly coloured swim caps or using other devices such as swimming buoys. Several swimmers requested data on incidents such as collisions between swimmers and boats, and more information on the legal basis of potential NCC intervention to regulate the practice of open water swimming at Meech Lake.

A similar degree of skepticism was expressed with regard to the involvement of open water swimmers in other issues, such as excessive noise, speeding and trespassing on private property. While some admitted witnessing instances of such problematic behaviour, there was a shared sense that it is unlikely that those responsible are members of the community of open water swimmers. Most felt that open water swimmers are, by and large, respectful users of the lake, and accept their responsibility to practise their sport in a way that does not disturb Park residents.

Some pointed out that much of the noise at the lake originates in the buoyed area, and that the apparent increase in problematic behaviour may be due to new users of the lake who may not know the rules or be familiar with best practices. Others pointed out that Meech Lake is visited

by all kinds of people, and that it is unfair to hold open water swimmers accountable for issues caused by others. Some felt that it was similarly misguided to lump club members and regulars together with casual swimmers who may be less likely to adhere to best practices. From this perspective, certain swimmers felt that the scope of public engagement on the issue of open water swimming was too broad and tackled issues not caused by members of the open water swimming community.

Other concerns raised by swimmers in relation to access to Meech Lake involved parking passes. Some swimmers indicated that, if season passes were not sold and daily fees became the only means of securing parking, as was the case in the summer of 2020, open water swimming at Meech Lake would become unaffordable for many members of the community.

## **Solutions**

There was a consensus among swimmers around the importance of continuing to adhere to safe practices endorsed by organizations like Swim Canada, and of behaving in a way that is respectful toward Park residents. There were mixed feelings about approaches that would restrict the practice of open water swimming at Meech Lake.

Solutions put forward by swimmers included the following:

- Educational initiatives geared toward raising awareness about best practices for open water swimming, including making oneself visible in the water (e.g. by wearing a brightly coloured swim cap or using a swim buoy). Participants proposed that this could be accomplished in part through the NCC's website and on-site signage.
- The enforcement of existing laws pertaining to trespassing and other infractions of the criminal code.
- Establishing quiet times.
- Some swimmers tentatively endorsed the creation of lanes or corridors for open water swimming delineated by buoys, but requested details on how this approach would be implemented. Others were opposed to this idea.
- Some swimmers proposed creating designated access points from which to engage in open water swimming. Others rejected this idea.

## **B. Advisory committee meeting**

### **a. Noise management and access points**

Some participants had misgivings about the proposal to favour the use of O'Brien Beach in the early morning. As these participants noted, there are residents who live within earshot of the parking lot and beach who would likely be disturbed by the noise created by opening the area up at such an early hour. Some participants also worried that installing new infrastructure (e.g. lockers) would attract more people and thus create more noise. One participant recommended enhancing access to the beach and adding bike parking on-site.



Some participants argued that rules governing noise should resemble municipal by-laws on noise and rules enforced at NCC campgrounds (i.e. quiet hours between 10 pm and 7 am). Participants discussed the challenges of enforcing quiet hours. Some stressed the importance of enforcing relevant by-laws, while others noted that such by-laws are typically meant to address issues like parties or construction, rather than people speaking loudly in parking lots or on beaches. As one participant noted, even speaking as you might in your living room is disruptive for residents if their window is only feet away from the beach where the conversation is taking place. The presence of large groups of swimmers was also mentioned as particularly disruptive early in the morning.

Several participants agreed that it is the responsibility of visitors and swimmers to behave respectfully and to comply with quiet hours. Participants stressed the importance of educational initiatives around the effects of noise on residents early in the morning. Signage, social media messages and information made available on the NCC's website, as well as that of its partners, were recommended as means to raise awareness about this issue. A code of conduct was also raised as a tool to help promote respectful behaviour.

Other suggestions put forward by participants to help reduce disturbances due to noise included the following:

- Promoting Leamy Lake as an alternative option for open water swimming, thus distributing traffic more evenly across several beaches.
- Allowing swimmers to park at the Willson House and exit through the boathouse.
- Looking to other sites that face similar challenges, with a view to applying lessons learned to Gatineau Park.

The boat launch at parking lot P12 was the object of some debate. Some participants recommended that it be made into a third access point for open water swimming. As some participants noted, best practices advanced by swimming clubs recommend that there be one support boat or stand-up paddleboard for every four swimmers. In the view of some participants, the P12 boat launch was a much more convenient access point than the Blanchet or O'Brien beaches for swimmers who are accompanied by boats.

Other participants felt that this would be an inappropriate use of the P12 area. Some noted that there were already concerns around its increased use as a beach rather than a boat launch. One participant worried that this was an ecologically sensitive area that would be threatened by increased use. One participant who supported its use as an access point for open water swimming agreed that it should not be used for picnics or loitering, and that swimmers/boaters should make prompt use of the space.

## **b. Swimmer safety**

Participants generally agreed with safety recommendations. The use of a brightly coloured swimming cap or swimming buoy was widely supported. One participant recommended encouraging swimmers to use both, rather than one or the other. Another participant

encouraged the NCC to make swimming buoys available for rent. Some questioned the thinking behind certain recommendations. This included the guideline that swimmers younger than 18 should be accompanied by an adult, since, as one participant noted, some teens are better swimmers than adults. Another participant wondered about the usefulness of posting an emergency contact number, which swimmers would likely not be able to dial while in the lake.

The issue of recommended versus mandatory swimming routes generated a great deal of discussion. Some participants (mostly residents) felt very strongly that routes should be mandatory. These participants argued that this is an important measure that would greatly reduce the risk of collisions between swimmers and boats. Some participants proposed variations on this idea, including dividing the lake into separate swimming and boating zones and creating a corridor in which only boats would be permitted.

Other participants were strongly opposed to mandatory routes (mostly swimmers). One participant noted that the attractiveness of open water swimming was, in large part, a function of being able to swim anywhere. Some questioned how the use of such routes would be enforced, and judged this approach to be impractical. For these participants, it would be preferable to promote best practices and courteous sharing of the lake rather than attempt to impose rules that restrict swimmers to particular routes or demarcated lanes.

One participant noted that the proposed route from Blanchet Beach — which crosses the middle of the lake — was not compatible with advice that open water swimmers stay close to the shore. Another participant requested more information about how the proposal for corridors aligned with provincial regulations for open water swimming.

One participant recommended engaging with clubs to ensure that large groups of swimmers are accompanied by a coach in a boat, and that they adhere to appropriate safety regulations.

#### **c. Measures to discourage trespassing on private property**

One participant stressed the importance of education to help ensure that visitors do not unwittingly trespass on private property. Another participant expressed support for the proposal to install buoys close to the western shore where there are relatively few private properties.

One participant raised concerns about the proposal to identify private properties on a map to discourage visitors from trespassing. This participant felt that no specific properties should be identified, and that instead visitors should be made aware of the fact that there are private properties surrounding the lake, and they should be encouraged to be respectful of owners and their rights.

#### **d. Protection of the common loon**

One participant expressed concern that indicating the location of loon nesting areas on a map would have an opposite effect from what is intended, and that people would swim over to have a look.

#### **e. Enforcement**

Several participants wondered about roles and responsibilities related to enforcing by-laws and any regulations related to open water swimming at Meech Lake. Some participants noted that accountability on this front was not clear, and that authorities often declined to respond to perceived infractions.

#### **f. Equitable access**

One participant expressed strong support for the proposed measures, in particular the hourly rate for parking. This participant noted that most swimmers were out swimming for no more than two hours.

Another participant expressed support for making hourly rates the norm across all activities in Gatineau Park.

### **IV. Response to feedback**

It is apparent from the range of responses received that there is no clear consensus among stakeholders on an approach to managing open water swimming at Meech Lake, beyond adhering to guidelines for bright bathing caps and raising awareness about respectful and compatible shared use of Meech Lake. These measures are important, but will not address all of the concerns identified through the process, nor demonstrate due diligence with regard to the regulation respecting safety in public bathing areas.

Therefore, the NCC will implement a pilot project for the 2021 swimming season, with a commitment to monitoring the results, listening to feedback and adapting as necessary.

### **V. Next steps**

The full suite of measures will be shared with all stakeholders, and will be available on the NCC's website.

The NCC will work with stakeholders to implement the pilot project, and monitor its effectiveness.

Required installations (buoys, signage, parking lot gates) will progressively be installed early in the season.