# Day 2 Transcript: Marie-Hélène Brisson

## **Alison Whiting:** Today we are opening up the conference with some words from Marie-Hélène Brisson who is here from Parks Canada. Marie-Hélène has been with Parks Canada since 2015 and is currently the Acting Director for Visitor Experience. Her presentation will be delivered half in French and half in English. Audio interpretation and captions will be provided based on the language channel selected by each attendee. Welcome Marie-Hélène.

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** Thank you Alison. I'm Marie-Hélène. I'm at the Acting Director for uh Parks Canada. I'm a white woman and I have red hair. Today I'm wearing a wonderful green sweater which is actually Parks Canada uniform. My pronouns are she/her and I'm extremely pleased to be here today to present the agency to us, to speak about our structure and the work that we conduct in terms of accessibility for our infrastructure for the visitor experience.

## I'm accompanied with a number by number of colleagues who are also taking part in this meeting. So as Alison mentioned, my name is Marie-Hélène Brisson. I'm the Director for Visitor Experience at Parks Canada. I am a white woman. I have red hair. Today I am wearing a beautiful green shirt which is the Parks Canada uniform. My pronouns are she and her. I'm really really happy to be with you today um to be able to share a bit of um the structure of the agency and the work that we're currently doing in visitor experience at Parks Canada. I'm going to start in French. I know that's a number of changes for the interpreters but I thank you very much for your patience.

## Parks Canada is the first organization of a national parks in the world. We have been there for more than 100 years. My presentation, on the first slide shows the extent and the size of the agency. I know that in next few days and yesterday, tomorrow, yesterday, we also spoke a great deal about national parks but Parks Canada is far larger than that and those who work in my team at the national office, on the ground work with a number of different facilities.

## So I do want to mention them today as well. We're the biggest conservation agency in the country. We are a leader in the protection of natural resources and heritage resources in the country and we're the most important provider of heritage tourism products in Canada overall. Let me give you a few numbers to give you an idea. 171 national historic sites, we have now five national marine conservation areas, 47 national parks, one national urban park, and others will be built soon. 7500 dedicated employees were responsible for 12 of 20 of Canada's world heritage sites. We cover 450 000 square kilometers of areas that are protected. We have more than 7000 kilometers of trails, 25 on average million visits per year as well. We monitor more than 200 plus species at risk as well we have more than 12 000 campsites to reserve each year. We're in charge of more than 26 billion dollars of assets in infrastructures as well just a store we're also responsible for more than 600 wonderful red chairs that are present throughout the countries all across Canada. Thank you.

## On this slide, and let me explain what this is. This is a map of Canada and that is for the purpose of today's conversation. It illustrates where we have national parks as well as marine conservation areas and on this map we see that we have the southernmost point and the highest one in the north and we also handle the coastal areas east and west as well as the marine conservation areas that are present in all of their provinces and territories. So that's a vast territory that Parks Canada has to cover.

## What is our legislative mandate? It's two-sided and I'll read this out and I'll explain it. "On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present national significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage, and foster public understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations. That's a lot of information in a brief text. So how we work to ensure that our mandate is relevant to visitors as well is that we do this on the basis of experiences.

## People who come to us at Parks Canada, we want to ensure that they have memorable experiences by having a wonderful experience. We develop a sense of belonging and by doing this, we develop support for a specific site and at the end of the day when you support a site we're encouraging the protection of that site. Next slide please. So, it is a meaningful visit and sustainable development again I know that I'm repeating myself a little bit, that is when one has a meaningful experience and feel safe and that you're experiencing a wonderful time with families and friends. You develop a sense of belonging that will be specifically linked to a specific site whether this be a historical site or a park and this leaves us with memories and this enables us to also develop a sense of responsibility vis-a-vis that area and at the end of the day it fosters the desire to protect it and that is really what we're about. A visitor comes to the park, let's say and if they feel that they belong to this as we do. They feel afterwards much more encouraged to continue protecting these sites, to visit them, to speak about them and as I say it just ensures the sustainability of these Parks Canada sites which at the end of the day belong to all all Canadians.

## Next slide. And I will be switching to English for the translators. I'll just take a sip of water and I'll continue. Okay, so I wanted to explain also the variety of facilities that we have again. I know that we're talking about national parks mostly for the next for the conferences for the three days but the reality is that the teams at Parks Canada can be one moment dealing with the national historic site the next a marine conservation area or a national park and those skill sets are transferable. So I wanted to cover with you today in national historic sites the type of facilities that we have. So, we're talking about lighthouses, tunnels, historical monuments, vessels, bastions, and batteries for the historic sites. We have that are related to our military history fortifications. We've got plenty of different styles of buildings and historic waterways such as the Rideau Canal, for those of you who have been in Ottawa before.

## Next slide. Let's see. So for national parks, national marine conservation areas, again a variety of infrastructure related to our visitors such as like campgrounds. It could be front country, back country. We also have roofed accommodations that are reservable for visitors. Visitor centers infrastructure shelters washrooms trails and lookouts. We've got golf courses playgrounds marinas launches for boats, beaches lots of different types of interpretation exhibits and signage across the country. Gathering and event spaces. We have lots of diverse day use areas and picnic areas for our visitors as well as hot springs. In each of the facilities that I just described we have programs and services for visitors. So it varies from information gathering, interpretation. It could be different programs and workshops for variety of age groups.

## We have rental equipment, also equipment accessible for people with disabilities. A variety of information on our website as well that's a service transportation and tours is available across the country for various activities. Again events and celebrations are available for visitors at any time. We have our visitor safety teams that are there to ensure safety for all of our visitors and we have a great volunteering program as well that Canadians can contribute to and participate but also as a visitor when you come you would be bound to work or be taking an activity often with some of our volunteer groups. That's in a nutshell what we do which is I feel a bit exhausted explaining it. It's a lot um for such a small but powerful team.

## So our challenges in terms of accessibility for the Accessible Canada Act, making such a vast and diverse agency accessible by 2040 will be a challenge but a challenge that we want to take on. Um dealing with the diverse terrain and like the realities that are different. Everywhere across the country, remoteness is is definitely one of the challenges for our teams. Um we'll have to work to determine what the priorities will be, where we start um. We are doing some work right now in national office but also in our field units and our sites to determine what's our gap, what our gaps are and where we should be starting. Um we have to manage consistently aging infrastructure facilities, so that's definitely another challenge for organization. Lots of our infrastructure dates back 400 years ago. So not definitely, not everything was accessible at that time. Uh and again we have to balance a variety of priorities for the agencies such as conservation and climate change and climate adaptation.

## So um the approach we've been taking over the last few years has been to recognize that it will be impossible for us to make everything, everywhere accessible for everyone. What we are focusing on is providing meaningful experiences to our visitors, to make it worth their time to experience our sites and create that connection. I was just talking about um we identify and we prioritize what is important and what we want to feature for our visitors. Again trip planning is important, that's one of our focuses for everybody. So we'll be working on providing or the right information on our website and on sites so that people with disability can decide if they can do these activities and engage with visitors and partners and researchers to help guide our work. Thank you.

## So just quickly a couple documents that are helped guiding us and help us guide our colleagues in the field. CSA standards. We've got the Treasury Board Accessibility Standard for Real Property. Parks is a variety of directives that we've created. The one that we're really proud of. It's the only one in the federal government. It's the Inclusive Sanitary Facility Directive that we have been that we've put in place as of last year. We have front country camping design manuals, trail guidelines as well as access series documents that we can use to work and make some of our activities and services more accessible.

## I'm conscious of time. I'm going to give you a few uh I want I want time for questions. Um so here's a few initiatives that we've been working on um over the last few years and some of you may have worked with Shira on our team. I know she's very well connected. So we have as an agency led by our HR colleagues, Parks Canada has done an accessibility plan um for the next few years.So guiding us and where we're what we're moving towards not only for visitors but also for employees uh who. So so that's one of the things. We've also adapted our training for inclusive service for employees who interact daily with visitors. We are also doing evaluations on existing programming with our colleagues in the parks and the sites. We're doing as well working with our web colleagues doing a trip planning as I mentioned to adapt the information on our website so that it's the person can make it informed decision themselves without us just pretty much saying this is accessible or this is not.

## Next slide. Thank you um we are working right now on a collection of trail data which is really interesting to inform those pieces of information that we share with visitors. Again develop more inclusive and accessible washrooms working with what we currently have as infrastructure, not everything has to cost thirty thousand dollars to renovate their smaller things that we can do to make our washer facilities inclusive and accessible. So that's one other element we're working on. We have now a program that's going to stay, used to be a pilot project but we're going to keep the the program for accessible equipment such as wheelchairs for beaches for example and we're doing improvements on our roofed accommodations which we called O-ten-tiks to make them all accessible for everyone.

## So in a nutshell, those are our challenges. Those are in and some of the different initiatives we've been working on over the last two years. I'm happy to take questions. For me today, I'm really happy to to be able to be here. I would love to see you that would make this more interactive but I'm looking forward to connect with some of you and work with you in the near future on making our experiences at Parks Canada meaningful for everyone.

## **Alison Whiting:** Thank you so much. We are so thrilled to have you here as well today. Uh that was fantastic. We do have some questions coming in from the audience. Uh from Joan, uh they're asking how uh do you go about doing your accessibility evaluations. Uh is it outsourced to contractors, um does the does Parks Canada have internal staff doing them?

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** So at the national office level we have one great person I just mentioned, Shira because I feel like everybody knows her um but so we can do some uh ourselves and internally but a lot of them are outsourced. I know that at the rouge for instance they worked with Access Now. Other field units have worked with consultants. I believe some of the guest speakers that are coming in for the conference have been working with Parks Canada as well. Um we can't do this all alone and it's important that we work with partners and people from outside of our organization to to be able to input and just not look at ourselves as well.

## **Alison Whiting:** Absolutely, there's such a wealth of expertise out there. It's great to be able to to capitalize on that. Um, so you mentioned um you know the aging infrastructure and so I imagine things like maintenance, ongoing maintenance and stuff is another thing. So when you're looking at extending training for your staff and making accessibility uh more prominent in that area, are you including things like uh the the staff that are going out and doing the maintenance checks and stuff and ensuring that they're checking those accessibility issues are still or that the accessibility is still is still there?

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** I think one of the elements we started with is really our visitor experience staff who every day will have to have a conversation or providing information and then we're working towards providing. Also sensibility training to all of our different all employees in every site right so it becomes a shared responsibility essentially um to notice what is not accessible and what is accessible right. Um it's it's a big endeavor. It's gonna take time for us to get there but we've started um so that everybody can. Um I find accessibility for me it's also like bilingualism, like it's a shared responsibility um so everybody has to partake in it and yes for sure um our field staff will be getting uh training at every level.

## **Alison Whiting:** Wonderful, wonderful we um talked a little bit about I think about budget and funding and things like that because obviously a lot of this it's it costs money, so uh in terms of prioritizing accessibility solutions in the parks budget, uh how do you balance that and like which parks get prioritized? Are there metrics like you know location or number of visitors and things like that that get taken into consideration?

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** To be honest we're working site by site and who's ready to start looking at some of their infrastructure. Each site has their priority list in terms of working on making every facility safe. Now they work with our national team or with consultants to determine okay if we have to I don't know fix this building. At the same time as well make sure that everything is accessible right so or at least some access. So that's that's not like there's a priority by more popular place if I can say it like that because you're talking about number of visitors like I don't think that's what we want to do um. Some sites, one of the elements that we've decided to work on at our level is looking at roof accommodations which I mentioned at the end for autumn 6. Um it's an easy step for us to look at every national park that has O-ten-tiks all of them. What are their estates, are they really accessible? Sometimes you know I have to admit we made them accessible with a ramp but the washroom facility next to it is not accessible. So then that's the next step that we have to work with each site to move towards. So like I said slowly but surely it'll take time but we want to try to do as many across the country as possible and not go necessarily by a number of visitors.

## **Alison Whiting:** No oh that's great to hear and yes I I know that these things take time and it's a process getting to everything. um So I think I think we have time for one final question and it's the idea of meaningful equivalent experiences where you know the the to make something accessible is just either way too challenging for financial or environmental or historical reasons. So are there some examples of places in national parks currently with meaningful equivalent experiences?

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** Well I'm trying I'm trying to think quickly off the top of my head. There's one in the PEI this year where we've had equipment put in place for accessible for wheelchairs. So to be able to go on the beaches and mats right. So there's definitely a great meaningful family activity that people can now do and all experience the wonderful beaches of PEI that are gorgeous. Um so that's one element that I can say and it's not as very costly right um.

## **Alison Whiting:** Yeah fantastic.

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** There's been there's a ton more I could have spoken for 10 more minutes.

## **Alison Whiting:** Oh I'm sure yes I know we did. I'm realizing I think we could have run this conference for seven days because there's so much to talk about but thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate having having you guys here today.

## **Marie-Hélène Brisson:** Merci.