

Introduction

The Manitoba government is making changes to the parks reservation process to improve the experience for Manitobans when campsites first open up for booking. We intend to make changes to the reservation system right away, while also working to replace it with a new one.

We would appreciate your feedback as part of the accompanying survey, as we are considering several changes to the reservation process. Our objective is to meet Manitobans' expectations for a reliable, convenient and fair reservation system.

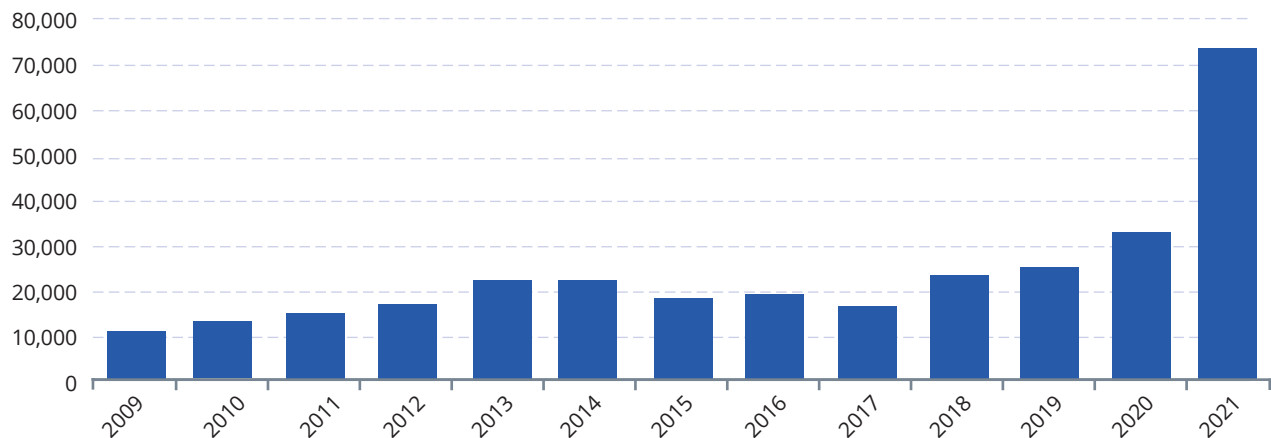
Improving the reservation system will be a key component of our broad new Parks Strategy that is currently in development, and the Parks Strategy will guide the overall modernization and improvement of Manitoba's provincial parks. Options for expanding campsite inventory will also be considered as part of the strategy, to address the fact that some areas of demand far exceed supply. However, this discussion paper and survey focus solely on improvements to the Parks Reservation Service.

Background and Context

The current Parks Reservation System was built in 2006. Over the years, we have made investments to address challenges with the system, however, the technology has now become outdated. As a result, Manitoba is working to replace it with a more modern and functional system to meet the needs of Manitoba campers.

The system has seen an extraordinary uptake in demand for camping reservations in 2021, with other recreation and travel options being limited because of COVID-19. The volume of reservations and number of devices trying to access the system at the same time was unprecedented during the pandemic. Other park jurisdictions also reported higher reservation numbers and longer wait times on their opening days during the pandemic.

Total Number of Reservations on All Opening Days



Pre-pandemic launches averaged about 9,000 reservations per opening days (note that the above chart shows the combined totals of all opening days for each year). By contrast, over 13,000 reservations were made on April 5, 2021 alone, and resulted in 99 per cent of the cabin and yurt inventory being reserved for the entire camping season. In total, the above chart shows a 117 per cent increase in the number of reservations made on the three launch days in 2021, compared to 2020.

Though it has been a more gradual shift year by year, the percentage of online reservations has increased drastically over time. When the Parks Reservation Service launched in 2006, online reservations made up 51 per cent of all reservations for the year, with the remainder made over the phone or in-person. By 2020, the latest full year for which data is available, 93 per cent of reservations were made online.

While weekends and very popular campgrounds often do book up, even with the volume of people booking campsites this past season, there are still available sites for campers to secure throughout the season, particularly if they are open and flexible. Those who can choose mid-week camping dates have more options available to them. Generally, there are also more campsites available at parks further from Winnipeg.

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What we Heard

Manitoba Parks has compiled a summary of issues with the 2021 campground reservation system that were raised with the department and in the media. This input is being used to inform improvements to the system, both to the technology used to run the system and the program rules that guide the process.

Dropped Tickets and High Ticket Numbers

- Many users were assigned high ticket numbers right at the start of the opening day and faced extremely long wait times in the queue.
- Users who faced long wait times want to know if any sites are still available to avoid wasting their time.
- In some instances, users experienced dropped ticket numbers during their wait and were assigned a new, higher number. On April 5, one of the servers had to be restarted, which meant that the devices assigned to that server were issued new tickets. Other factors that can result in dropped tickets include browser settings, user inactivity, and inconsistent internet connections.
- Some users were assigned a new ticket number but got in to the application on their old ticket number.
- Some users had to wait a long time to be assigned a ticket number.

Slowdowns

The system became sluggish or unresponsive for some users because demand exceeded the system's capacity, resulting in longer wait times in the queue and in finalizing a reservation. Related problems included:

- issues with adding reservations to the cart or seeing what was in the cart
- difficulty proceeding to the payment section
- lack of a confirmation email
- a lost connection after paying
- users saying it was extremely difficult to reach the call centre
- users with faster internet having an advantage

Booking Behaviour

Some user behaviour impacts the system and availability of camping. Some users mentioned that the behaviour of other users is unfair or inefficient, including:

- Some users logged on using multiple devices – getting tickets on a number of phones and computers.
- Some users resorted to panic booking – reserving dates and locations they didn't really want.
- Some users felt cancellation fees were too low, providing an incentive for some to book and later cancel or not show up at all.
- Some users refreshed their browsers frequently, putting further strain on the system and losing their place in line.

Inventory Release Schedule

Some users voiced concerns related to the inventory release schedule:

- Too many camping locations opened for reservations on the same day, thus too many people were trying to get sites in different parts of the province at the same time.
- Conversely, others felt there were too many opening days, forcing users to go through the reservation process on multiple days to secure reservations at different locations.
- Some suggested a rolling window system, similar to Ontario, where sites can be booked no more than 90 days in advance of arrival.
- Desired inventory sold out very quickly, particularly for prime dates (July and August), at sites with the highest levels of service and for facilities with limited inventory such as cabins and yurts.
- Long reservations (up to 21 nights) took up inventory that was in high demand. Some felt that the total number of camping nights should be lowered to increase supply for others.

Upgrading the System

The Manitoba government is exploring options for major changes to the Parks Reservation Service, including a completely new software application. The aim is to have the new system in place for 2023. While the province works to scope out, acquire and implement a new system, work is also underway on short-term fixes and potential rule changes to improve the 2022 reservation experience.

The focus is on addressing the major challenges users experienced on the 2021 opening days. We will test any improvements for performance and user experience against our best estimates of user traffic loads during the 2022 opening days.

While these short-term fixes will not address all of the current issues, they will improve performance while we work on major changes to the reservation system.

Potential Policy and Program Changes under Consideration

We are considering several program and process changes, stemming from the feedback on the 2021 season. Any changes would require careful consideration to minimize unintended consequences. In several cases, adopting changes recommended by some users may not be welcomed by other users. Ensuring that camping stays affordable and accessible are critical considerations as these options are reviewed.

Current Policy	Suggestions from the Public	Under Consideration
<p>Campsite, group use, yurt and cabin reservation openings are phased in over three separate days each spring.</p>	<p>Further break up the inventory and spread out over more opening days.</p> <p>Have separate opening days for different site types, e.g. yurts and cabins</p>	<p>Manitoba Parks is considering adding additional opening days to spread out user traffic. Additional dates would be published on the parks website and communicated through a news release. One trade-off is that many nightly campers camp in more than one location and would have to access the system on additional dates to secure their summer plans.</p> <p>In addition, allocating different combinations of high-demand and lower-demand locations or site types to each opening day may help reduce wait times.</p>
<p>The maximum stay for cabins and yurts is 14 nights. A user may book a maximum of three stays at yurts or cabins per reservation session.</p>	<p>Limit the maximum number of stays and bookings to enable more people to book yurts and cabins.</p>	<p>The maximum stay for cabins and yurts could be reduced to seven nights. This would free up an additional 93 cabin nights and 78 yurt nights for other visitors.</p> <p>Yurt and cabin maximum reservations could be reduced from three to two per reservation session on opening day. Campsite reservations would continue to be limited to three per session.</p> <p>It is important not to place excessive limits on the number of reservations, given that Manitobans want to camp with family and friends, and users often help family and friends who are unable to use the Parks Reservation Service directly.</p>
	<p>Reduce the maximum stay for campsites to enable more people to book sites.</p>	<p>Manitoba is considering extending bookings earlier into the spring and later in the fall, so that there is a longer window of time for people to consider camping, spreading out the demand.</p> <p>Significant restrictions on maximum stays would impact many families, for whom camping is an affordable way to access holiday time together. Reducing the 21-day maximum may also impact small businesses that depend on longer-term campers providing mid-week business.</p>
<p>Users are not refunded their \$10 reservation fee when they cancel. The fee rises to equal the cost of the first night for cancellations less than four days prior to the stay.</p>	<p>Raise cancellation fees to reduce the frequency of users over-booking, or booking sites they're not that interested in, just to cancel later once they secure the sites they want.</p>	<p>Manitoba is considering raising late cancellation fees or introducing a specific fee for cancellation. It will be important to consider the impact this may have on affordability of camping.</p> <p>While all jurisdictions have very unique rules that determine cancellation penalties, in general, Manitoba's current approach sees individuals paying significantly lower penalties for cancelling.</p>