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## Canadian campgrounds go wireless

By SEAN PATRICK SULLIVAN

TORONTO (CP) - Swimming pools, mini-golf and decent shower facilities are no longer the only hallmarks of a decent campground in Canada - these days, wireless Internet access is all the rage.

Getting online when getting off the beaten track is becoming standard practice for Canadian campers as more and more travellers insist on being connected - even when on vacation in the great outdoors, campground operators say.

Up until a few years ago, wireless Internet, or Wi-Fi, was unheard of at most campgrounds in North America, said Jef Sutherland, vice-president of information services for Campgrounds of America.

These days, it's hard to keep customers without it.

"It's now no longer, 'Great, you have Wi-Fi,'" Sutherland said. "It's, 'What? You don't have Wi-Fi?'"

More than two-thirds of KOA's 33 Canadian campgrounds now provide free wireless Internet access, he said. Across North America, it's offered by 379 of the company's 440 franchises.

In 2006, that figure stood at 281.

Though exact numbers aren't available, a list provided by the website RV.net identifies about 70 campgrounds across Canada with wireless access to the Internet.

So when did surfing the Internet replace sitting by the campfire, playing a game of cards and gazing at the stars?

"I think it's a social thing," Sutherland said.

"We now can't stay away from our technology, from our e-mail, even when we're on the road. It's the expectation even in camping that I can stay connected to my world."

Many campers stop at New Glasgow Highlands Campgrounds specifically because they can get online, said co-owner Marlene Andrews.

The campground is nestled in an Acadian forest, a 10-minute drive from the scenic beaches of Cavendish, P.E.I. - hardly a computer hotspot.

"People just seem to need to be plugged in all the time. When we were kids we didn't have cell phones; now my kids can't function without a cell phone," Andrews said.

While backcountry campers and purists may scoff at the idea of laptops invading the outdoors, RV owners have brought televisions, DVD players and other gadgets to campgrounds for years.

But Kristie Kuper, owner of a KOA campground in Thunder Bay, Ont., said campers in RVs are no longer the only ones toting computers.

"You walk through the park and see tents at the picnic tables with their computers," Kuper said.

"The tents are a little more outdoorsy, a little more travelled. They want to see everything and go on the Net to find the sights on their own."

Her campground added wireless access to the Internet because of overwhelming demand, she said.

"People want it, they need it," Kuper said. "In fact, some couldn't travel if they didn't have Wi-Fi, because sometimes Dad needs to work while the kids enjoy the pool."

Like any other campground activity, rain or excessive heat can take its toll on the routers that provide the wireless service, leaving some campers scrambling for tech support. It usually isn't available, and Sutherland said he's heard of campers lamenting their lost connection.

"Having access to the Internet for a lot of people is essential. When they can do it right from their RV, that's a plus," said Michael Kileel, owner of Hartt Island Campground in Fredericton.

"In the past RVers wanted water, electricity and sewage - I think it has to go beyond that now."

It's not just the younger generation that is eager for Internet access at campgrounds, Sutherland said.

"You see more and more of our average aged guests - over 50 - travelling with their laptops."

Reservations and travel plans are increasingly being made on the go instead of in advance, Kileel said.

With Wi-Fi becoming ubiquitous, perhaps it was only a matter of time before the online culture collided with the great outdoors.

"I think when you come camping, the cell phones and computers should be left at home," said Julia Clayton, who works at Jellystone Park campground in Kingston, N.S.

Still, that can be difficult, she admitted.

"I actually stayed here for three nights, in a cabin, and I brought my laptop. So I think I'm a bit of hypocrite."