

GREENSPACE, OUR SPACE, NATURALLY¹

by William A. McLean

It has been a long time since we have been able to speak with optimism about our environment. The recent wave of 'Green' thinking in North America and Europe gives a great deal of cause for hope that after decades of unbridled resource exploitation, an aware public will not only support but demand restraint and public 'Greening' policies. In the Greater Toronto area, we are experiencing our share of enthusiasm for conservation of our greenspaces, and we, at the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, have had a significant role in shaping the emerging conservation ethic.

Perhaps a brief geography lesson would be helpful in understanding the approach being taken. There are nine streams which flow to Lake Ontario in the area under the jurisdiction of the Metro Region Conservation Authority. The entire area is comprised of post-glacial features, and these streams rise in a headwaters area of interlobate moraine and flow relatively short distances (20-50 miles) over a steeply sloping watershed (up to 1100' of fall over till plains and shore cliffs) from the moraine to their outlets in Lake Ontario.

The resource areas to which the Authority principally applies its Greenspace strategies are the moraine, the river valleys and the Lake Ontario shoreline.

We think in terms of resource areas to reflect the importance of ecosystem management. 'Greenspace' has traditionally been viewed primarily as public recreation parks. In recent years, however, a fundamental shift in thinking has been occurring. People are beginning to recognize greenspace as significant to their personal health as well as to the overall health of the environment. The importance of managing natural ecosystems, significant wildlife habitats, forested areas, and major physiographic features as resource amenities is an emerging public value,

and is the basis of the Authority's 'Greenspace' strategies.

The resource areas being addressed by the Authority have characteristics which make them very important parts of the ecosystem. The headwaters moraine in the west merges with the Niagara Escarpment and extends eastward as a broad band of rolling hills, presently very rural in character. The area is well-forested and replete with springs which rise to the surface as the beginnings of the streams which flow southward to the lake. One of the most significant features of the moraine are the kettle lakes which dot the landscape. These are remnants of the ice age, and many of them penetrate through the impervious clay layers of the moraine to contribute to deep-seated ground water reserves. Where the ground water emerges as springs, it gathers into substantial stream flows; thus, within thirty miles of downtown Toronto we still have fast-flowing, clean trout streams.

As the waters flow southward into what we call the middle valleys, their character begins to change. The impact of urbanization is very evident in the form of deteriorated water quality, flood hazard to properties which have encroached onto the valley, and resultant flood remedial measures, such as channelizations. For the first twenty-five years of its existence, the Authority concentrated on alleviating flood hazards, with particular emphasis on the acquisition of flood plain and valley lands, with the result that the community now has a huge reservoir of resource lands in public ownership. There are over 30,000 acres of land held by the Authority. An outstanding example of this acquisition program is the Rouge Valley in eastern Metropolitan Toronto and neighbouring municipalities. The acquisition of these valley lands in the 1960's has made it possible for the Province of Ontario to designate almost 5,000 acres of land in north-east Metro as an urban

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario in August 1990.

wildland park, to be managed to the standards of a provincial park.

The Lake Ontario shoreline is a grand natural resource. In its eastern flank through Metropolitan Toronto, it rises in a 250' bluff from the water's edge. To the west, a low shore cliff is heavily urbanized, and the public greenspace has been artificially created through land fills (excavated materials), which, as they mature, become effective pieces of the ecosystem. So much so, that we are under constant pressure not to develop these precious 'natural' areas for active recreation pursuits. The desire for waterfront recreation opportunities, however, is very strong, and we have to balance the provision for these with the need to retain open greenspaces.

The critical aspect of retaining and managing the resource areas, lakefront, river valleys, and headwaters is that they must be linked to be a fully effective ecosystem. This means that the acquisition effort must continue. Where there are presently breaks in the system, gaps such as we have at Frenchmans Bay in the east, we must ensure that the gap is filled, either through ownership or management that assures that the common resource value is retained.

The linking and retention of the resource values in our system of resource areas is the major issue facing our area today. The issue has to be dealt in the context of an ever expanding urban area which has seen the ubiquitous subdivision spread its tentacles northward beyond the middle valleys, into the headwater zones.

Within the already urbanized areas, the community presses ever closer to the valley edges as land becomes scarce and expensive. Continued development upstream can worsen flooding problems downstream, and although flood remedial programs have removed much of the threat to life and property, safety and inconvenience remain problems to be dealt with. Shown in graphic terms, the urban sprawl unchecked looks like an amoeba, unformed and without boundaries spreading across our watersheds. The most rigorous management techniques, unaided by the recognition that sprawl must have boundaries, will be unable to retain the quality and effectiveness of the resource systems on which we depend. A key 'Greenspace Strategy' of the Authority was to

convince the planners of the Greater Toronto area, that in exploring the options that we have for the future of our area, we must consider the resource areas as important in infrastructure provisions as transportation, health care and education. We were successful, and the current debate on three basic options; sprawl, nodal, and concentration, considers what is most desirable from a resource area point of view.

The concept that Greenspace is your space, has gained credibility and acceptance among those who will determine the future of our community. When we tell people that Greenspace is their space, we mean it. The ecosystem can function with well-planned public use as a part of the equation. Linear trails for skiing, equestrian and hiking are an important part of your use of space. Well-selected sites for public camping, swimming, boating and picnicking are all compatible with our resource areas.

It is important that all parts of the community are considered in the use of space, including the disabled. It is also important that heritage resources have a place in our Greenspace provision. The Authority retains things of historical significance on its lands and has created a Pioneer Village to retain, for all generations, a record of our past which was so dependant on our resources. Sites of archaeological importance are treated with respect and as a link with our knowledge of the past.

In the long term, the greatest importance of our resource areas will be the role they play in fostering an understanding of the place resources have in our lives. We can't respect what we don't understand. Conservation education is a key strategy of the Authority. We have established day learning centers such as the Kortright Centre for Conservation which serves the entire community, along with several residential centers, which are directed to assist the educational system.

One of the most important aspects of the notion of resource space being your space is that it is close at hand. It isn't in Muskoka, or even Caledon, it is a part of your urban community. An outstanding example of this is the Don Valley which flows through the heart of our city. The muddy Don has the potential to be the magnificent

Don. There are stretches of it now, five minutes from downtown, which rival Muskoka for beauty. We have set aside a stretch of the East Don as the Charles Sauriol Conservation Reserve to honour one of our community's prominent conservationists.

Our plan for the future is simple. We plan to manage, either through ownership, trusts, easements or owner agreements, the entire linked system of waterfront, river valleys, and headwaters. We intend to reforest substantial acreages of our headwaters and valley systems. We intend to have green strips of the landscape that will shade our streams, reduce siltation, and restore aquatic habitats. We will continue to study what we have done and what we are doing. We are not afraid to make mistakes, we intend to learn by them. We do not pretend to know everything but we are committed to understanding what we do. We will pay special attention to rural drainage matters and encourage the establishment of boundaries to urban development in order that sufficient rural wedges between the river valleys can be retained. Where artificial drainage channels are required, we will be more sensitive to the retention of habitat than we have been in the past. We will extend our conservation services in the form of advice, encouragement and physical help to land owners who want to be a part of the program. We will increase our regulatory effort and prosecute those who treat our valleys and rivers as dumping grounds, and ask the courts for removal and restoration orders, rather than just fines.

The city and greenspace are not mutually exclusive entities. Greenspace is a vital part of the city. There are still many opportunities to extend the greenspace linkages along our shoreline and up our valleys. The linkages are essential to the well being of humans and the creatures that can only survive to the degree that we protect their

habitat. The effort must be a cooperative one. The Authority has said what it can and will do. We have established watershed planning groups that represent the various citizen interests, professional specialities and government agencies, to develop clear, achievable objectives and to apply their mandates to the achievement of those objectives. We have asked all to recognize that a watershed is a natural unit. It is to everyone's benefit to think of the watershed as a living organism in which individual parts contribute to the health of the whole. On this basis, the watershed strategies are being developed.

To assist in achieving our objectives, we have established a Foundation which is a vehicle for the community to contribute on an individual and corporate basis. For specialized recreation opportunities, we have invited the private sector to invest and are applying the resultant revenues to our conservation work. In none of this, do we consider ourselves to be anti-development. Indeed, we recognize well-planned development which is sensitive to the health of our resources as essential—the engine that makes our communities vital. We are not prepared to concede, however, that all development at any cost is to be tolerated. Greenspace must be provided for, and there is a cost. As Robert Bateman recently said, “the best things in life are not free anymore” but they are nonetheless essential. We are living in an age when the community is insisting that Greenspace is our space and we want it, naturally.

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