

The Green Way Forward



A Review of Natural Heritage Policies for Southern Ontario
Ontario Nature, 2009



Acknowledgements

Ontario Nature gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the following people who provided invaluable information, insight and perspective on natural heritage policy issues: Ian Attridge, John Bacher, Gregor Beck, Trevor Bingler, Alison Chapman, Debbe Crandall, David Donnelly, Victor Doyle, Hannah Evans, Nathan Fahey, Elaine Farragher, Yvonne Fernandes, Natalie Helferty, Steve Hounsell, Louisette Lanteigne, Anne Lewis, Don McLean, Daphne Nicholls, Ken Petersen, Linda Pim, Sarah Powell, Kevin Rich, Joyce Sankey, George Tashos, John Taylor, Neil Taylor, Stuart Thatcher, Jason Thorne, Ken Whitbread, Mark Winfield and Michael Wynia. Note, however, that the views presented in this paper represent those of Ontario Nature and do not necessarily reflect those of the aforementioned individuals. A special thanks to Wendy Francis for her leadership on the project.

The production of this paper was made possible thanks to the generous support of the George Cedric Metcalf Foundation.

Project Concept: Wendy Francis

Writer: Andrea Smith

Editors: Gregor Beck, Anne Bell, Amber Cowie, Victoria Foote

Editorial Assistance: Gail Narine, Alexis Wood

Design: Levi Nicholson

Copyright © 2009 Ontario Nature – Federation of Ontario Naturalists

Executive Summary

Dramatic changes have occurred across much of Ontario's natural landscape over the last two centuries. In that time, land has been cleared for agriculture, urban settlement, roads and industry. In southern Ontario, the result is a patchwork of small, isolated and fragmented natural areas within a sea of development and modified landscapes. As well, polluted air, water and soils have affected the health of people, wildlife and ecosystems. Overall, the rich diversity of the province's plant and animal life has been greatly diminished.

In recent years, the significance of southern Ontario's natural heritage has received greater attention from the public and various levels of government. A number of positive policy changes and new conservation initiatives have been developed, refined and implemented. Such advances are encouraging, but these efforts remain largely piecemeal, uncoordinated and inadequate to protect nature against the insidious creep of urban sprawl and the continued loss of wetland, woodland and grassland habitats in some parts of the rural landscape. Current policies are failing to maintain and restore important "core" natural areas and ecologically essential lands and waterways that connect core areas, and function as "corridors."



To better protect and restore the province's natural heritage, Ontario Nature envisions a Greenway for southern Ontario, made up of a network of interconnected natural cores and corridors. This Greenway would protect natural features and systems, protect water quality and quantity, improve air and soil quality, protect and restore habitat for native wildlife and species at risk, enhance human health and well-being and, critically, enable adaptation to the anticipated impacts of climate change.

In this paper, Ontario Nature reviews and critiques current provincial policies aimed at natural heritage protection in southern Ontario relating to planning and development, aggregate extraction, environmental assessment, conservation of biodiversity, and provincial land use plans. With respect to each policy we review key components, identify shortcomings that weaken natural heritage protection and present recommendations to improve their effectiveness. We put forward 24 recommendations, many addressing overlapping issues. Of pressing concern are five systemic problems underlying these issues:



1. The lack of an effective, system-based approach to natural heritage planning and protection
2. The lack of monitoring of Ontario's large-scale land use plans
3. Insufficient constraints on infrastructure development in policies intended to protect natural heritage values
4. Insufficient constraints on aggregate extraction in policies intended to protect natural heritage values
5. The lack of inter-ministerial coordination in developing and implementing policies to protect natural heritage features and systems

If Ontario's natural heritage is to be afforded adequate protection based on sound science and integrated policy, these systemic problems must be addressed in accordance with the following overarching recommendations:

1. Establish a system-based approach to natural heritage protection and planning.

To make this happen, collaboration among differing levels of government and all ministries involved in land use planning is required to streamline protection, ensure that efforts are not duplicated and provide support to municipalities doing the lion's share of the work on the ground. This paper cites numerous examples of obstacles to a system-based approach, but none is as pressing or all encompassing as the changes that are needed to the Provincial Policy Statement, 2005. The Provincial Policy Statement makes reference to the need for a system-based approach to natural heritage protection but, due to weak language, lack of clear requirements and inadequate assistance for municipalities, it fails to deliver. Standards for natural heritage system development, clear requirements for protection and support for municipalities are needed to ensure that the Provincial Policy Statement can meet its stated goals.

2. Monitor the effectiveness of all large-scale land use plans.

Without a clear set of indicators to assess the implementation of complex plans such as the Greenbelt Plan, it is difficult to know whether policy goals are being achieved. The lack of measurable results has undermined adaptive management and the ability to improve policies or procedures that need refinement. All provincial land use plans should identify clear, measurable indicators and outcomes related to natural heritage features and systems, and should require monitoring and assessment at regularly scheduled intervals, ideally immediately before plans are up for review.





3. Assess, control and prevent the negative impacts of infrastructure development on natural heritage.

Infrastructure development has too often been seen as inevitable for growth and has thus been exempted from policy measures intended to protect natural heritage values. For example, the privileging of infrastructure development over the protection of natural heritage features in the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan has undermined efforts to protect waterways, forests and wetlands in the region. If infrastructure continues to be approved with few or no constraints, then hope for a healthy, resilient natural heritage system in southern Ontario is severely compromised. The Province must seek and implement solutions that allow for development to occur without the careless destruction of natural systems.

4. Assert tighter controls on aggregate extraction and develop an integrated plan for aggregate conservation and site rehabilitation.

In many instances, aggregate development trumps provincial, regional and municipal protection of natural heritage features. For example, aggregate extraction is ongoing in the Niagara Escarpment and has not slowed even with the implementation of the Greenbelt Plan. Provincial policy does not require demonstration of the need for aggregate extraction before development proposals are approved, and, consequently, aggregate extraction is treated as inevitable and unstoppable. The Province must develop a comprehensive aggregate conservation and site rehabilitation strategy to promote the substitution, reduction, reuse and recycling of aggregate resources; the improved rehabilitation of sites; a detailed analysis of future supply and demand; and the identification of priority areas for resource extraction that do not conflict with other land use considerations.

5. Integrate natural heritage protection into the operations and policies of all ministries involved in land use planning and environmental protection.

To be effective, the protection of natural heritage in Ontario must be better coordinated among relevant ministries. For example, Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy (MNR, 2005) should be integrated with the Provincial Policy Statement, the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and Ontario's Action Plan on Climate Change so that all plans include specific elements to protect biodiversity through land use planning and growth management initiatives. Effective land use planning, protection of biodiversity and adaptation to climate change require the collaboration and cooperation of all relevant ministries.



Ontario can no longer afford – in either the economic or the ecological sense – to continue with a piecemeal approach to natural heritage protection. Systemic problems, such as those described above, must be addressed. As the province’s human population expands, and with the advent of climate change, we require policy direction that is comprehensive, integrated and accountable.

We cannot meet the challenges ahead unless policies are founded on the understanding that nature is an integrated system in which all elements must be healthy and connected to ensure that the whole will thrive. For this reason, Ontario Nature is advocating policy reform that will support a Greenway of interconnected natural cores and corridors across all of southern and eastern Ontario.

METCALF FOUNDATION

Ontario Nature gratefully acknowledges the support of the George Cedric Metcalf Foundation in the production of The Green Way Forward.