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LIVING

A natural Kawartha connection

Natural Heritage System would co-ordinate interests of public, private groups

Although the Kawarthas is a huge region, the pressures on the land are relentless. One only has to look at the number of new roads, golf courses, aggregate extraction sites, housing subdivisions and other forms of urban sprawl to get a sense of how quickly the landscape is changing. Not surprisingly, many ecosystems are increasingly threatened, along with the species that live there. When you add planet-wide threats like climate change to the mix, it's not hard to understand that the unique character of the Kawarthas can no longer be taken for granted.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

With the vision of maintaining a landscape that supports the needs of both people and nature, a diverse group of local organizations and stakeholders has undertaken an initiative known as "Kawarthas, Naturally Connected." Simply put, the goal is to identify and map a connected system of natural areas in order to be able to carry out more sustainable land use planning and resource management decision-making.

In the past, the approach to conservation was to simply set aside areas of public and private lands for the purpose of protecting their natural values. Although they were managed with conservation in mind, these isolated "islands" of natural habitat were usually not connected to one another. By the early 1990s, ecologists were questioning whether discrete, disconnected parks and other kinds of protected areas alone were enough to sustain ecologically-sound landscapes, especially in densely populated southern Ontario. Research was showing that a "system-based" approach to conservation and planning across ecological regions would be much more effective.

In response, the first guide to landscape systems, based on natural networks and natural core areas, corridors and connecting links was introduced by the Ministry of Natural Resources. This led to the establishment of the Natural Heritage System (NHS) concept. Since then NHSs have been designed at many different levels. The Oak Ridges Moraine is an example of a NHS at the regional scale and Sustainable Halton is a good example of a municipal initiative. In addition to core conservation lands (e.g., municipal, provincial and conservation authority parks) and waters linked by natural corridors and connections, lands that have been restored to a more natural landscape or that have the potential to be restored can also be part of the system.

SYSTEM IS ESSENTIAL

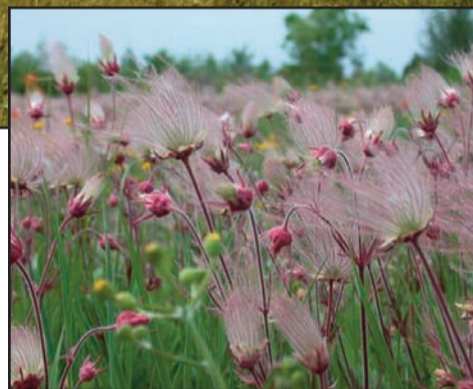
A Natural Heritage System is an essential tool to help individuals, organizations and communities make informed and coordinated decisions about how the land is used. In this way, Kawarthas, Naturally Connected can help ensure that key natural areas and features remain on the landscape, both for our benefit and that of future generations. Having a NHS in the Kawarthas would help conserve biological diversity, natural processes and viable populations of native species and ecosystems. It would also assist in determining



Courtesy of The Ministry of Natural Resources



PAUL E. CLIFFORD photo



W.D. BAKOWSKY photo



Courtesy of Kawartha Conservation

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the best areas for stewardship and restoration projects, set priorities for conservation land donations or purchases, and identify information gaps in our natural heritage knowledge base.

BENEFITS FOR ALL

Why is this so important? To begin with, properly functioning ecosystems provide all of us with essential services and countless benefits daily, services that would cost millions of dollars annually to replace, even if we could. These include clean water in our lakes, rivers and wells, clean air, pollution control, pollination of wild plant species and crops, protection against flooding, increased soil retention, and the provision of natural resources such as lumber and other forest products. Because the natural areas in a NHS are connected, corridors are created by which species can move from one area to another. This expands the gene pool and allows for richer genetic diversity in wildlife populations. Linking natural areas together would also make these areas more resilient to stress such as the ever-worsening effects of climate change.

From an economic development perspective, Kawarthas, Naturally Connected would also support tourism and local businesses by providing for a diversity of landscapes that allow for eco-

A Natural Heritage System for the Kawarthas would incorporate a wide variety of public, private and even commercial landscapes and interests, varying from farmland to cottage country to sites like the Ken Reid Conservation Area Marsh.

tourism, wildlife viewing, sport fishing, hunting, swimming, boating and cottaging – all of which are part of the unique characteristic and lifestyle in the Kawarthas. While the economic value of these services amounts to millions of dollars annually, their contribution to our day-to-day quality of life is priceless.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

When designing a NHS, it is essential that a diversity of perspectives and interests are represented so that the final design reflects the concerns and needs of the whole community. Facilitated by Kawartha Heritage Conservancy and the Victoria Stewardship Council, the diverse group of partners participating in the project includes: City of Kawartha Lakes, City of Kawartha Lakes Agricultural Development Advisory Board, City of Peterborough, Clear/Stoney/White Lake Plan Environment Council, County of Peterborough, Kawartha Conservation, Kawartha Heritage Conservancy, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Otonabee Conservation, Parks Canada - Trent Severn Waterway, Ducks Unlimited Canada and Trent University, among others. The focus area includes the eight municipalities in Peterborough County, the City of Peterborough and the City of Kawartha Lakes as well as the jurisdictions of both Otonabee

Conservation and Kawartha Conservation. It extends roughly from just east of Lake Simcoe in the west, Lake Scugog and Rice Lake in the south, Havelock in the east and Kinmount/Haliburton County in the north. It is important to point out that a NHS does not dictate the actions of landowners on their property – it is not legislation. However, it can provide useful information to these same individuals and organizations to help them steward their natural areas and features strategically and efficiently.

MEETS SPECIFIC INTERESTS

To get a sense of the varied interests that the participating organizations have in the Kawarthas, Naturally Connected project, let's look at a few examples: The Agricultural Development Advisory Board for the City of Kawartha Lakes wants to make sure that the farmer's view is understood; Alderville First Nation is concerned about things such as the preservation of the remaining wild rice beds; the City of Peterborough wants more information in order to integrate its planning with the land area beyond the city limits; the Ontario Stone, Sand & Gravel Association is seeking a balanced plan as development pressures increase (e.g., 407 being built) and the Havelock-Belmont-Methuen Lake Association would like to have up-to-date data on natural her-

itage features for establishing lake plans and informing stewardship projects around lakes like the planting of native trees on shorelines.

A multi-step process There are, of course, many different steps involved in carrying out this collaborative project, steps that require a significant commitment of time and energy. Over the past year, the stakeholders have been working on setting targets. Ecological targets, for example, are quantified statements that provide direction for how much of a natural feature to include in a NHS scenario. For example, a target could be to include 50% of all existing wetlands in the NHS. Some of the ecological targets identified so far include incorporating all known areas of rare habitat into the NHS, bat hibernacula, deer wintering areas, special geologic features and different habitat types such as upland forest, forested wetlands, non-forested wetlands, rock barrens, alvars, etc.

FIRST, SET TARGETS

Once the targets are set, different scenarios can be established for how to actually incorporate these targets into the NHS. Each scenario has different ecological targets and socio-political considerations. It is hoped that a preferred scenario will be agreed upon before this fall. Stakeholders will choose the preferred scenario and finalize the result through consensus. The end products of the project will consist of a map outlining proposed areas that could form a "back-bone" of a Natural Heritage System, a database of natural heritage information and a series of GIS layers (a system for storing, manipulating and displaying geographical information on a computer) for mapping that can help stakeholders with their project planning.

It is important to note that the preferred scenario is not an action plan. It simply shows which components of the landscape are important to include to meet the targets set by the group. It will be the basis for action plans that can be acted upon by the participating organizations. The final preferred scenario will not ensure that biodiversity is conserved – it is the activities that take place based on the NHS information from the scenario that will hopefully do this.

This project is an opportunity for local residents to contribute to sustaining our community's natural wealth and our local cultural, social, environmental and economic values. Many readers of this column, for example, have considerable knowledge of key natural areas in the Kawarthas. If you know of places important to wildlife, with special plants or animals or unique habitats, the Kawarthas, Naturally Connected project would love to know. It may indeed be possible to include them in the design for this natural network.

For more information about the initiative, you can visit the Kawarthas, Naturally Connected website at www.kawarthasnaturally.ca or contact either: Doug van Hemessen, Victoria Stewardship Council, 705-324-1478 (dougvanhemessen@kawarthaheritage.org) or Mike Hendren, Kawartha Heritage Conservancy, 705-743-5599 (mhendren@kawarthaheritage.org)

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