

Natural Heritage Protection in Southern Parks in 1999

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There is a risk that protection within parks will not be adequately addressed with the move to make Ontario Provincial Parks self-sustaining and more profitable as well with down-sizing or elimination of many of the important provincial government natural heritage protection functions. Small southern Provincial Parks currently have within their boundaries important ecological features and rare species. The protection of these species may not be the first order of business when annual budgets for operations are being developed. When new facilities are being built or campgrounds, electrical outlets, water systems, parking lots and picnic areas are being upgraded or simply prepared for the visitor season, negative impacts are likely to occur. In addition, benign neglect may mean that ongoing ecological degradation can occur if certain management activities are not undertaken. For instance, invasive exotics such as Garlic Mustard (*Aillaria petiolaris*), Norway Maple (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastris orbiculatus*) may spread into new areas and lack of adequate fire management may put rare savanna species at greater risk of extirpation.

Turkey Point Provincial Park is perhaps a good park to illustrate some of the issues. Park staff are interested in and sympathetic towards management and natural heritage protection. However, it is an enormous task in itself to manage the day-to-day operations of the park for the park visitor let alone address the perhaps even more complex issues of natural heritage protection. This is especially true in southern Ontario where visitor pressures are great and we are dealing with tiny compromised remnants. Turkey Point is a unique oak savanna ecosystem in the parks system. It supports one of two populations of Goat's Rue (*Tephrosia virginiana*) and one of three populations of Bird's-Foot Violet (*Viola pedata*). The nature reserve portion supports a hybrid population of Small White Lady's-Slippers (*Cypripedium candidum*) with one or two pure plants. Many other species are provincially rare.

Although limited budgets are of concern in the operations of the park, the following activities may be excessive: regular mowing of wide verges; graveling of dead end roadways; and, seeding of end circles with exotic lawn mix. New parking areas have been gravelled and permanent cement barriers put down. A new firewood storage shed has been erected (circa 1998) and new electrical outlets installed in camping areas where garlic mustard is invading. Since all of these activities occur within the oak savanna, it is safe to presume that rare species are disturbed or destroyed by the activities. Many of these activities are carried out by summer staff or contractors who have no idea of the natural heritage values. I suspect no one qualified to identify the many important significant features of this park actually reviewed the sites before these activities were carried out. Two days before this meeting (April 20 1999) I visited the park and saw that the campgrounds had apparently been cleaned with a leaf-blower in preparation for the camp season. I believe these activities are carried out because in the face of a big job they are

relatively normal activities in our everyday lives. It is easier to manicure, because we all do it at home, than it is to plan and carry out the more complex job of natural heritage protection. I also believe there is no mandate left in parks to do ecosystem management. I wonder too, in the budget designing process, whether budgeting for natural heritage protection is ever considered. Operations are budgeted and the rest is unimportant because it does not earn dollars. The leaf-blowing example suggests there are ample funds for manicuring however.

A much-needed prescribed burn finally took place in early May. However, the fire program has been years behind in getting started and several species may now be extirpated because of the delay. Even with the fire program there is no budget to monitor the burned areas so that an assessment of the effectiveness of the burn can be made. Frequency of burns and any necessary modifications will not be made based on local information and cannot pretend to be adaptive ecosystem management. As members of the local naturalist/biologist volunteer community we have suggested invasive exotic species removal, development of management activities, monitoring burns, creation of an interpretive naturalist program and other activities. However, we may then be asked if we can take on these activities. This is a burden too great for the volunteer sector especially in a rural setting where it is hard to find the able bodies to do what is needed and the resources to support them. Turkey Point as an example does not stand out. There are even more serious issues with other provincial parks, lands held in trust by conservation authorities, counties and regions and others. Rondeau and Port Burwell however stand out as parks that have exemplary management.

Looking at protection on the landscape scale, Turkey Point Provincial Park should consider adding to its boundaries Potter's Creek, the Normandale Fish Hatchery, St. Williams Forest Station, the Picetum and other nearby natural areas. The golf course should be restored to Black Oak savanna and all of the pine plantations should be rapidly phased-out or block cut to allow savanna and prairie to re-colonize.

Other public properties owned by Long Point Region Conservation Authority (Anderson Tract) and Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk as well as private properties owned by Ryerson United Church (camp), Nature Conservancy of Canada, and Hamilton Naturalists' Club (Spooky Hollow) should be co-managed toward a greater ecosystem goal. Private properties between various public blocks should be given high priority for easements and acquisition by various means. At the time of editing this commentary, in November 1999, there was a grand opportunity to add St. Williams Forest Station—the Carolinian Life Zone's largest chunk of forest—to Turkey Point as Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) divests itself of the operational aspects of its former mandate. However, the possibility of expanding the park in this way looks bleak indeed.

In conclusion, I believe we need to stop talking about and start doing protection in parks. I challenge everyone to the enormous task at hand—to get involved on the ground. The 'profit at any cost attitude' needs to be reversed. A broad-based environmental ethic is needed. Environmental policies are lacking. Management and operations plans lack detail and are out-dated. Additional government natural heritage staff need to be hired to get on with the task of protection. Natural herit-

age protection activities need to go on in every park with their own separate budgets. All operations need to be screened for impacts on natural heritage. Seasonal staff need to be sensitized to the parks' special features and participate in workshops which will give them skills in natural heritage management. Interpretive programs need to be revitalized.

Instead of being willing participants like 'lambs to the slaughter' in closing out OMNR activities in southern Ontario we need to increase drastically the number of highly-qualified people in the field. It is ridiculous that only one government ecologist is responsible for the day-to-day protection of as much as half of Canada's rare biodiversity. I conclude by suggesting that none of us should be complacent.

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