
From Urban to Rural to Hinterland: Is it time for a Provincial Protected Area Policy?

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, urban planning has moved away from the idea of “parks” as simply areas for recreation and aesthetic improvements toward that of “protected areas” which address a variety of goals including ecosystem health and biodiversity, values more typically associated with non-urban protected areas. Urban planning is increasingly incorporating understandings from the ecological sciences and urban protected area planning must be incorporated into broader regional, cross-jurisdictional approaches. Starting from the context of evolving protected area planning in Toronto, this paper highlights some protected area-oriented initiatives in Ontario. It proposes the need for a provincial protected area policy to provide an overall vision and set of goals for protected areas, from urban to hinterland, in the province. This would provide a framework to integrate protected area planning across all jurisdictions over the long-term. Such a policy, developed through a collaborative process, could also enhance the public view of and support for protected area initiatives and help educate the public about the varied roles and values of protected areas, including their importance as “green infrastructure”.

Introduction

The context of this paper is evolving park and protected area planning in urban areas. A review of the literature and examination of plans and other documents for Toronto and other urban areas shows that thinking has evolved, through a number of steps, from the idea of “park” to that of “protected area”.

Parks, as originally set aside in North American urban areas in the mid-1800s, were viewed primarily as places for passive, and later active, outdoor recreation in natural, albeit often highly modified, surroundings (Cranz, 1989; Platt 1994; Wright, 1983, 1984, 2000). The aesthetic value of open spaces was also a motivating factor, particularly highlighted in the City Beautiful movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The recreational value of urban parks remained the focus of concern for many decades with their ability to beautify urban areas also considered important. These traditional park values began to evolve to include environmental values starting roughly in the 1960s

and growing in the 1970s and beyond. The ability of urban parks to ameliorate climate and maintain surface and ground water regimes was noted, for example, in early official plans for Toronto (MTPB, 1959).

Following this, new protected area designations were introduced in a number of jurisdictions to supplement the idea of park. Examples include the introduction of environmentally significant policy areas in Waterloo Region in 1976 (Gosselin, 2003), environmentally significant areas in Toronto in the early 1980s (MTRCA, 1982) and provincial-level designations such as Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs) (OMNR, 1987) and provincially significant wetlands (Environment Canada and OMNR, 1984). These areas were set aside based on scientific criteria and intended to protect “islands of green” that contained such values as species at risk and rare habitat.

By the 1990s, new planning goals such as biodiversity and ecosystem health or integrity and advances in ecosystem science such as landscape ecology and conservation biology were resulting in new approaches to urban protected area planning. Buffered, connected green space systems were developed that fulfilled a dual role, incorporating both traditional park values of recreation and aesthetics as well as environmental values (for example see MTPD, 1994). More recently, integrated green space systems, addressing a broad range of goals, and natural heritage systems, based on ecological principles to address ecological goals, have been proposed for areas such as Toronto (TUDS, 2002), Ottawa (RMOC, 1995) and Waterloo (RMOW, 1998).

What this brief history shows is that the model of urban park – as originally developed – has been, over time, supplemented by the idea of urban protected area to address evolving environmental goals. Urban planning has increasingly incorporated understandings from the ecological sciences. Urban areas have a role to play in supporting environmental objectives such as biodiversity and ecological health. Urban protected areas provide a key tool in addressing these issues.

Where to now?

One further evolution of urban protected area planning should be to incorporate urban systems into nested, hierarchical regional conservation strategies. This is based on the belief that urban areas have a role to play in supporting nature conservation objectives, with protected areas being a key tool or approach (Beatley, 2000). Based on the model of linked reserve systems (Noss, 1987), as developed in the ecosystem sciences, local (e.g. city or regional) systems are nested within broader ones (e.g. bioregional or provincial). In other words, protected area systems at broader and smaller scales are consistent with each other. In Ontario, for example, a large-scale system could be envisioned for the province as a whole or even for a subsection, such as Southern Ontario. This would provide an umbrella that would integrate and encompass regional-scale

and smaller municipal level reserve networks.

An overview of some recent protected area programs and initiatives in Ontario demonstrates that movement toward this idea is developing. This overview is by no means comprehensive and these programs and initiatives are continuing to evolve.

Greater Toronto Area

The regions around Toronto – Durham, Halton, Peel and York – have all undertaken official planning (RMOD, 1993; RMOH, 1998; RMOP, 2001; RMOY, 2002). The plans have included setting aside green space systems similar to that of Toronto. Efforts to update the official plans have included integrating more ecosystem science, for example the creation of a natural heritage system in Durham and the use of buffers and linkages (Durham Regional Planning Department, 2003). However, the need to integrate green space and/or natural heritage systems across the regions is generally lacking as a planning objective, with the exception of Toronto's and Peel's recent official plans (TUDS, 2002; RMOP, 2002).

Greater Golden Horseshoe (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing)

This provincial-government initiative included the passing of the *Greenbelt Protection Act 2005* and the *Greenbelt Plan 2005* (OMMAH, 2005a; 2005b). The legislation creates a permanent greenbelt around the so-called "Golden Horseshoe" region of Southern Ontario. It builds on and encompasses regional planning for the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment. The purpose is to contain urban sprawl and to protect environmentally sensitive land and farmland. Official plans, for example those of Toronto and the regional municipalities of the Greater Toronto Area, must conform to the Greenbelt Plan. Goals include protecting and restoring connections to other natural systems within the Golden Horseshoe, such as the major river valleys of Toronto and the Oak Ridges Moraine, as well as beyond, for example to the Algonquin to Adirondack Conservation Initiative. This represents the type of nesting discussed above and in Beatley (2000).

Places to Grow (Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal)

The Places to Grow program allows for growth management plans to be created for designated regions (OMPIR, 2005b). An important element of the plans is to be the protection of sensitive and significant lands and water resources. A draft plan has been written for Toronto (OMPIR, 2005a). This program is seen to build on the Greenbelt Plan by creating natural systems that would connect with the broader greenbelt.

Natural Spaces Program (Ministry of Natural Resources)

This voluntary program is aimed at reducing the loss of significant natural areas in Southern Ontario (OMNR, 2005a). It encompasses the Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt. Based on the idea of stewardship, the program seeks to involve private landowners in protecting and enhancing significant areas on their land.

Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act (proposed) (Ontario Parks)

This major revision to the legislation governing provincial parks is seen as a complement to the Natural Spaces Program and the Greenbelt Plan (OMNR, 2005b). Provincial parks and conservation reserves are primarily located outside of the Southern Ontario area covered by these two initiatives.

Ontario Nature's Greenway (Ontario Nature)

Ontario Nature, a non-governmental organisation, developed this initiative based on the recognition that there are many parts of a greenway already in place in Southern Ontario, including the Greenbelt and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (Ontario Nature, 2006). The greenway is seen as a method to unite these different initiatives under one overall goal and program to create a cohesive system of core natural areas and linkages. It is envisioned as a nested system with three scales: local community, region and bioregion (Southern Ontario).

What this incomplete list shows is that there are a number of protected area-related initiatives underway in Ontario with many focused on Southern Ontario and the Greater Toronto and Golden Horseshoe areas in particular. The list also points to a general interest on the part of both the government and non-government groups in developing a more comprehensive approach to protected areas in Ontario, including the heavily populated south, but also encompassing all parts of the province through revised provincial park legislation.

There are a myriad of activities involving a myriad of government ministries and other groups. This raises the question: What holds it all together? A study of the programs and plans shows that they discuss complementing each other, hinting at the idea of a broader vision or goal for protected areas, as though each program or initiative were part of a broader puzzle, one that includes smaller pieces in the regional and municipal official plans, for example. But there isn't anything explicitly linking them.

A Provincial Policy?

A provincial protected area policy could provide an overall vision and set of goals for protected areas, from urban to hinterland. A vision could be, for example, to create, protect, restore and enhance a nested, hierarchical natural heritage system encompassing urban, rural and hinterland areas. Goals would focus on ecological values, such as biodiversity, tying the natural heritage system into

the recent Ontario Biodiversity Strategy (OMNR, 2005c). Other goals could include the role of protected areas as green infrastructure – lands that provide life-sustaining natural features and functions such as maintaining hydrological regimes, controlling air pollution and allowing for species migration – that are as important as the functions provided by built infrastructure, and human use and enjoyment through, for example, appropriate recreation. As such, the policy would address not only natural heritage systems, with their focus on ecological principles, but also a protected area system that can address both ecological goals and the more traditional park goals of recreation and aesthetics.

This would provide a broad framework within which to discuss the roles and types of protected areas that are appropriate for different regions across the land use spectrum, i.e. from urban to rural to hinterland. For example, in urban areas, environmentally significant areas are an appropriate protected area designation, whereas in hinterland regions, provincial parks could form the core natural areas of a reserve network. Specific goals for areas across the land use spectrum could also be developed, along with programs and priorities to address these as well as the overall provincial vision and goals.

A policy such as this would provide a framework to integrate protected area planning across all jurisdictions over the long-term. Such a policy, developed through a collaborative process, could also enhance the public view of and support for protected area initiatives and help educate the public about the varied roles and values of protected areas. This in turn would help build a constituency for protected areas that could ensure success over the medium and long term of programs and initiatives such as the recent Greenbelt and Natural Spaces as well as the continued success of the provincial park system.

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