

PLANNING FOR NATURE IN URBAN AREAS: THE CASE OF TORONTO, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract

Urban nature conservation provides many societal benefits. However, relatively little work has been done on urban nature conservation, especially when compared to rural or hinterland nature conservation. Yet, there is a long history of urban parks and protected areas and a growing recognition of the need for and value of natural areas in the urban environment. The research reported upon in this paper is an attempt to explore the role of nature conservation planning in urban areas, particularly Metropolitan Toronto/now City of Toronto. An analysis of Official Plans from the 1960s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s will be presented. The analysis reveals a shift toward greater environmental awareness, awareness of the many values of nature, and the need for maintenance and rehabilitation of green spaces, rather than primarily acquisition. The broader research project will be introduced.

Background

Urban protected areas provide many benefits to society, as do their counterparts in rural and hinterland areas. Benefits include:

- meeting human needs – recreation, education, inspiration;
- conserving biophysical resources – protect ecological services, biodiversity, protection from hazards; and
- shaping urban form – buffers between incompatible uses, shape patterns of development (Wright, 2000).

Historically, public parks were set aside for recreation purposes, with some early urban open spaces serving as community meeting places (Wright, 1983). Over time, understanding of the benefits of protected areas, particularly non-urban ones, has expanded to include protection of biodiversity and ecological services, as well as values such as aesthetic and education. Considerable focus has been placed on studying non-urban parks, however, little work has been done on urban areas. Yet, there is a long history of urban parks and protected areas and a growing recognition of the need for and value of natural areas in the urban environment.

This paper provides an outline of research looking into the history of planning for nature in urban areas, using Toronto as a case study. The research is ongoing, and future research directions are discussed at the end of this paper.

Research Outline

The purpose of the research is to work on a history of nature planning in urban areas, using the City of Toronto/former Metropolitan Toronto as a primary case study. The motivation and benefits are twofold. In an academic sense, this is an understudied area and the results should yield benefits to the literature on protected areas and urban and regional planning. In an applied sense, it is anticipated that the results will address the practice of protected area and urban and regional planning.

The first stage of the research was to review and analyze formal plans, in particular Official Plans, for Toronto. An attempt was made to understand how nature - as reflected by parks - was planned for and thought about, and how this has changed over time.

Toronto in Brief

Toronto was established in 1793 as York, renamed Toronto in 1834 (Wright, 1983). It was a middle-class society, in which commerce was very important. Population growth was very rapid. An 1820 population of 1,250 grew to 380,000 by 1911. It was in this setting that the first actions on protected areas was taken.

Until the 1940s, there was very little idea of protecting nature for nature's sake, although there had been some significant green spaces protected by that time (Reeves, 1999). The primary focus of early parks was recreation.

Toronto is in an ecologically significant setting (Fulford, 1995). Within Toronto are hundreds of ravines, which provide a "web of nature" throughout the city. Additionally, there are the major river valleys, the Lake Ontario shore, the Scarborough Bluffs, and in the Greater Toronto Area, the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment.

Early Planning

Early planning efforts included setting aside "park lots" at the outskirts of York. These were reserved for farms, summer homes and country villas for the "socially elite". Despite efforts to control land-use, these lots were frequently subdivided and developed. Park proponents were in the minority, with business interests strongly in favour of commercial development to support the growing community. One place this was particularly evident was the waterfront. Calls for a public walk along the shore date back to 1826 (Wright, 1983). By the early 1850s, however, railway development on the waterfront eliminated the possibility of an esplanade. Commercial development and the development of wharves also contributed to the loss of the waterfront as a possible public amenity for decades to come.

Early Parks

It was in the 1840s–1850s that development of public parks in Toronto truly appears to have begun. Many early parks were created by donation of private lands, or in some cases – notably on the Toronto Islands and the military holdings- through Crown land grants. High Park, created in 1873, was a very significant addition to the parks system. Reeves (1999) has referred to it as Toronto’s greatest ecological achievement of the nineteenth-century. The park was created by donation from John Howard (Reeves, 1999; Wright, 1984). The land had been purchased by Howard for a private estate in 1836. In the 1850s, Howard developed paths and roadways through the estate, inviting picnickers to come and enjoy the property. He visualized the land as a public resort, kept primarily as a natural area accommodating passive recreational uses.

Despite some progress in developing a park system, progress securing large natural areas was erratic, and relied on private initiatives. The business-oriented City council put little effort or money into the parks. Park uses were often abandoned for commercial purposes, likely because there was little perceived need for parkland, land seemingly being in abundance (Wright, 1984).

By the 1870s increasing housing densities and the loss of the waterfront led to growing concerns about open space availability. The 1880s saw the first calls for a park system, although no systematic proposals were put forth until the early 1900s (Reeves, 1999).

Toronto Guild of Civic Art 1909

The Toronto Guild of Civic Art was a citizen’s group with an interest in public art and city planning. Its *Comprehensive Plan for Systematic Civic Improvements in Toronto* (TGCA, 1909) was the first time that Toronto’s natural assets, such as the lake, ravines and river valleys, were linked with a plea for their protection. New parks and the development of a driveway and boulevard system were key features of the plan. The Guild noted that there was a need for deliberate planning to protect the region’s intrinsic character; without it, the natural features would be lost.

Two reports by the Toronto Parks Department in 1910 and 1912 (Chambers, 1912; Wilson, 1910) supported the idea of a driveway, but placed the emphasis on small, neighbourhood parks. These ended up becoming the focus of attention.

No comprehensive action followed any of these plans. Action on a greenbelt or boulevard was not completed largely due to the interruptions of the two World Wars and a depressed economy (MTPD, 1988; Wright, 2000).

The 1940s

The 1943 *Master Plan for the City of Toronto and Environs* stated that the Toronto Metropolitan area had a “priceless heritage”, including the ravines of the Don and Humber

Rivers and their tributaries, that could be incorporated into a greenbelt, reviving the ideas of earlier plans (TCPB, 1943). The greenbelt was seen to be a buffer between present and future development, and would provide for active and passive recreation in an unspoiled natural environment.

The greenbelt idea was further endorsed by the Toronto and Suburban Planning Board in 1946 (TSPB, 1947), and by the Toronto and York Planning Board in 1948 (TYPB, 1949). The Toronto and York Planning Board also supported the conservation of the major valleys and ravines, and increased the proposed size of the greenbelt. Progress was difficult, however, due largely to the cost of acquiring lands.

Regional Planning

In 1953, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto was formed, amalgamating 13 municipalities. The Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board recommended in 1954 that a 2,700 ha park system be developed, based on the major river valleys (Reeves, 1999). The recommendation was adopted by Metro Council. A greenbelt acquisition fund was created and the Board was directed to prepare an Official Plan, required under legislation, that would address the river valleys, the Toronto Island and regional parks.

Later that year, Hurricane Hazel struck Toronto causing significant loss of human life and property damage. In its wake, flood protection and control activities spurred acquisition of valley lands, largely by the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. These lands provided the basis for the regional park system, and it grew quickly.

1966 Official Plan (MTPB, 1966)

The 1966 plan was concerned primarily with economic productivity and growth. Park-related interests were focused on providing for recreation and protecting floodplain from development. Acquisition and development of recreational facilities were priorities. There was no linked, coordinated system of protected areas.

1980 Official Plan (MTPC, 1980)

In the 1980 plan, concern was focused on modifying the urban structure to accommodate population and employment growth, while minimizing social and environmental impacts. More concern regarding environmental matters was apparent, with greater interest in protecting natural features and processes. There was less discussion regarding development within protected areas and more emphasis on ensuring that development would not negatively impact upon natural features or values.

1994 Official Plan (MTPD, 1994)

A number of changes in perspective became apparent in the 1994 Plan. The key concern was with the non-sustainability of urban sprawl and the need for reurbanization. Much more emphasis was placed on developing a linked system of protected areas, focusing planning and management on integrity and protection of natural features and processes. Abutting lands were included in the planning and management of sensitive environmental features. Rehabilitation, restoration and regeneration of environmental features had

become more important. Acquisition was not seen as the only or even major method of building the protected area system, as it was in early years. Cooperative partnerships and stewardship were introduced as key methods.

2002 Draft Official Plan (TUDS, 2002)

In 1998, the 13 municipalities that had comprised Metro Toronto were amalgamated into the new City of Toronto. A new official plan has been drafted to replace those of the former municipalities. The draft plan continued some of the themes presented in 1994, such as sustainable development, quality of life and building a successful city. Greater emphasis was placed on the idea that environmental considerations had to be part of everyday decision-making.

Maintenance of protected areas was emphasized. Development on adjacent lands was recognized as a potential threat to parklands. A natural heritage system was introduced, a new and important inclusion. It highlights the importance of natural features and functions in the urban area, and it allows for a division in thought and effort between green spaces for enjoyment (such as playing fields and other manicured areas) and areas that can provide ecological benefits to the city and broader region. This could provide a greater understanding of the value of nature and nature conservation in urban areas.

Summary

The focus of early parks in Toronto was recreation. The need to provide relief from the built environment was important. In the 1940s, parks began to be seen as potential buffers between development, in addition to their recreational values. After Hurricane Hazel in 1954, acquiring lands for flood protection became an urgent activity. These lands were the basis for Metro Toronto's parks system. It only has been recently, as Reeves (1999) noted, that protecting lands for their ecological value has become important. The recent development of a natural heritage system by Toronto and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, is a significant development in this regard. Overall, there has been an evident shift toward greater environmental awareness, awareness of the many values of nature, and the need for maintenance and rehabilitation of green spaces.

Driving Forces

Several issues helped spur action regarding parks in Toronto. Key early influences included the work of F.L. Olmstead, and the plan for New York's Central Park. One of Olmstead's key contributions to planning was the use of large "rural" type urban parks. This, and E. Howard's "Garden City" ideas, were noted by people in Toronto and influenced early thought regarding the development of a boulevard or greenbelt system for the city (Hodge, 1991; MTPD, 1988).

A second major influence was Hurricane Hazel in 1954, which caused 81 human deaths and \$100 million in property damage. Fulford (1995) wrote "*(t)his accident of nature was a turning point, the most influential one-day event in the planning history of modern*

Toronto." Acquiring land for a greenbelt, centred on the river valleys, had long been a goal in Toronto, but progress was hampered largely by costs and disputes among the municipalities regarding the location of greenbelt lands. After Hurricane Hazel, flood-prone lands were quickly acquired and formed the basis of a parks system. This was made easier by the amalgamation of several Conservation Authorities into the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in the wake of Hurricane Hazel. It is unlikely such extensive land acquisition would have occurred without the impetus the hurricane provided.

What's Next?

The next phase of the research is to explore specific nature conservation initiatives that have taken place in Toronto, and to understand how thought and action has changed over time. Some possible initiatives to be studied include: the work of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; work of the Toronto Field Naturalists; the river valleys; the waterfront; and High Park.

The trends found in the case of Toronto will be compared to other urban areas in North America, and to the literature on protected areas and urban and regional planning. Finally, some thoughts on the future of urban nature conservation in Toronto and generally will be offered, including speculation of possible "ways ahead" for planners and those interested in nature conservation. Themes that might prove useful in this regard will be explored and include regional planning and bioregionalism and the relation of protected areas and planning for water/watershed planning.

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