

## Commentary

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As I listened to the various presentations and discussion groups, I came away with the sense that there is broad support here for some of the existing aspects of parks management in Ontario – that there should be a broad range of goals for the parks system, that different classes of parks and zones within parks are needed. However, there is also a clear sense that at present there is a lack of balance among those goals. In particular, many participants feel that recreational use and associated revenue generation currently have too much emphasis, and that natural heritage protection has far too little. As one participant observed, “biodiversity is the hardest value to protect, and the easiest to destroy”.

A number of themes emerged that are specific to the role of parks in southern Ontario:

- We need to build a broad consensus on the where, why, and how of completing the parks system in southern Ontario. While the technical factors and analysis is an essential part of this process, even more important are the social factors, leading to community and political support.
- We need new and applied research on what motivates communities to support or oppose parks and protected areas, and on better processes to build consensus and to balance broad policy interests with local interests.
- We need to broaden our toolbox of protection techniques and roles to bring in innovative ways of achieving our protection goals. For example, we need mechanisms that would allow us to enroll some of the conservation authorities' public land base into the protected areas system. We need to find ways to strengthen the involvement of natural lands in private hands, and to more effectively involve the growing land trust movement. In working with private landowners and community groups, we need both to educate them, and to genuinely listen and respond to their concerns and perspectives. This whole area of cooperative protection programs has enormous potential, but we must identify the key opportunities and the constraints or barriers to be overcome.
- We need to consider the whole landscape, and the science of landscape ecology, in choosing priorities for protection. We should be looking at individual landscapes to identify core areas and connecting corridors, or to set minimum forest cover targets, rather than looking only at islands of significant habitat.
- Both park managers and park supporters need to reach out beyond the boundaries of formal protected areas to create cooperative relationships with surrounding communities. Parks people need to be 'advocates' of protected areas and use re-vamped interpretive programs, personal contacts, 'Friends' organizations and the like to help create the critical level of 12% or more of

the land in protected areas. Reaching out should not start when there is a crisis or controversy over a management plan, but rather as a long-term building process to develop cooperative strategies and shared visions with surrounding communities.

- Finally, there is a need to act “on the ground” in small ways as soon as possible, rather than waiting for “big picture” strategies to be completed. Those strategies are important, but we know enough now to act in many places.

From these observations, I suggest three actions that should be taken in the near future:

- It is clear that more staff and financial resources, or a re-allocation of existing resources, are needed to plan and manage the parks system in southern Ontario properly. With the completion of the *Lands for Life* program in central and northern Ontario, it is time that we turn our attention to the stressed landscapes of the south.
- A mechanism should be developed to bring together key actors from parks, conservation authorities, municipalities, non-government organizations, and other stakeholders to develop strategic directions and avenues of cooperation for a major protected areas push in southern Ontario.
- The provincial government should develop innovative means and financial incentives to fan the flames of a ‘brushfire’ of community action to conserve natural areas and landscapes in the coming decade.