

We Require a Southern Ontario Conservation Needs Template

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Judging from audience response to earlier speakers most of us agree a natural conservation-oriented landscape (or greater) scale land-use mosaic is essential for a more sustainable future society in southern Ontario. We might say: "Secure, high-quality, viable, protected areas should be the core of a hierarchically connected representative network including satellite natural areas, linkages and compatible surrounding land and water uses. This network would be designed as part of a planned land-use mosaic and, along with contributions from agriculture, forestry, and human settlement lands, would ensure in-situ biodiversity conservation as well as a range of other social benefits that derive from nature (Stephenson, 1994).

When we look at the landscapes of southern Ontario as fundamental planning units it is immediately apparent that we are a long way from any credible sort of on-the-ground conservation network integrated with the overall land-use mosaic. We also seem to have a consensus that restoration is a critical strategy. The land-use pattern we need is not just sitting out there waiting for us to recognize it—we need to create it.

Our ultimate goal is an ecologically healthy landscape. Ecological health is a balance between human use lands that are functionally and compositionally simplified and subsidized (e.g. energy, nutrients, genetically selected crops) with relatively low ecological integrity and natural conservation lands with higher ecological integrity. Together the entire system remains viable, retains as much of its original biodiversity as possible, provides for today's human needs and keeps society's options open for the future.

Southern Ontario is not uniformly degraded by human use however. Although we could subdivide further lets just draw a north-south line from the east side of Toronto past Lake Simcoe. To the east much natural land remains, but to the south-west most land is alienated through human use.

Eastern Ontario could maintain most of its biodiversity. For example: moose, black bear, wild turkeys, lynx, and fishers remain; wolves are returning from the Algonquin area; informally reintroduced cougars have been found near Peterborough; and, there are formal plans to reintroduce elk. Restoration is a local strategy but the key is establishing land-use plans that keep society from traveling too far down the path to ecosystem disfunctionality. While some new land "development" is possible and some restoration is needed, the price in current and future dollars is not great compared to the benefits.

Southern Ontario is on the other hand, seriously "overdeveloped". All of the larger mammals (except "vermin" like white-tailed deer and coyotes) are gone and many populations of plants and animals are near extirpation. The fact that in some areas over 97% of the uplands, wetlands and riparian systems have been converted to

mainly agricultural, urban and residential uses speaks for itself. Social restraint is not the answer here as it is in eastern Ontario. Immediate comparatively expensive restoration is needed and still the result will not be the re-establishment of most native biodiversity. Remaining populations can be protected and some others reintroduced but the practical result will simply be a more sustainable healthier landscape that will need perhaps hundreds' of years of recovery and on-going human effort. The benefits that warrant the sacrifice of tangible short term profit must be brought home to decision-makers. These benefits are more social and psychological (individually and collectively) and related to the intangibles of the "quality of life" than they are economic or material.

Ecologically healthy landscape designed to limit land development is the approach for eastern Ontario while ecologically healthy landscape designed to direct restoration is the approach for southern Ontario.

In each case large-scale templates to guide conservation efforts are needed. Who will provide and monitor achievement of these spatial visions? In southern Ontario—unlike in northern Ontario which is largely Crown land—the provincial government cannot take the lead and essentially "dictate" overall land-use patterns. Similarly, private individuals or small groups working on local issues or sites no matter how dedicated, cannot take the lead successfully as they have too narrow a scope. Some effectively led broader assembly of interests is needed.

In eastern Ontario some existing broad based group could draw in partners to develop an overall conservation oriented land-use template. Possibly the Eastern Ontario Model Forest along with the Algonquin to Adirondack (A to A) group and the hunting and fishing community as well as other interests may be suitable. A likely lead organization already exists in southwestern Ontario—the Carolinian Canada Coalition. The Coalition has already begun this work and I will be a bit more specific about their initiative keeping in mind the fact that the Carolinian zone does not quite correspond to all of southern Ontario—a strip of land south of the Canadian Shield is missing.

In 1984, Carolinian Canada established a large scale template or spatial vision for the zone based on current science at that time—38 core sites plus provincial and federal protected areas. Advances in science, particularly conservation biology and landscape ecology, have demonstrated that core areas need to be linked. In response, the Carolinian Canada Coalition is developing a new spatial vision—or template—in cooperation with its conservation partners (e.g., Nature Conservancy of Canada, World Wildlife Fund, Federation of Ontario Naturalists), local interests (e.g., nature clubs, conservation authorities) and Wildlife Habitats Canada. The Natural Heritage Information Centre is preparing an analysis to use existing natural values and land-use information to confirm the cores, give them natural boundaries rather than surveyed ones and identify the best connections among them. A Technical Panel to review the methodology and refine the results has been established. The analysis portion of the project will be done in 1999. In 2000, a communication strategy is planned to entrench the improved conservation template in the public's mind and demonstrate its usefulness to land-use planners and conservation interests in southern Ontario. Primary products include a poster "map", newspaper articles and speaking opportunities as well as two pilot projects conducted

with jurisdictions in the Carolinian Zone to demonstrate the "Big Pictures" usefulness and to integrate it with local land-use planning.

The Carolinian Canada Coalition will use this spatial vision to assess overall conservation progress. Individuals and local organizations along with conservation authority and municipal level planning departments tend, quite correctly, to concentrate on solvable issues or priority locations at a small scale. They also tend to do this essential work with a degree of isolation. One of the communication functions which the Carolinian Canada Coalition sees as critical is this "Big Picture". The Coalition anticipates that understanding how local initiatives fit into the Carolinian Zone "Big Picture" will help focus needs, target sites, create consistency across jurisdictions, coordinate efforts and result in a more effective and efficient multi-interest conservation program in southern Ontario.

In your workshops this afternoon, I encourage you to consider the need for a complete "Big Picture" or spatial vision to act as a conservation template to guide all our efforts across southern Ontario. And keep in mind that at the scale of "Big Picture", we are not "drawing lines" that constrain any landowner or jurisdiction. The "lines" must be drawn by the decision-makers and the citizens themselves and they will be if we can convince them of the value of a template and the benefits of conservation land-use planning.

References

- Stephenson, W. R., 1994. Adequacy of Canadian Protected Areas Network. In *Biodiversity in Canada: A Science Assessment for Environment Canada*. Biodiversity Science Assessment Team. Environment Canada, Ottawa: 199-220.