

Threats to the Development of Heritage Coast Planning

Evan Ferrari
Wildlands League

Abstract

The protected areas (parks and Conservation Reserves) within the Great Lakes Heritage Coast, have added significantly to the protected areas system in Ontario. However, the standard of care applied to these sites remains inadequate for the key ecological, recreational and cultural role that they play within the Coast designation. Like other Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves, they continue to be burdened with “non-conforming uses” that threaten the very values that they were established to protect. In 2001 there is more land in the system, increased pressures for revenue generation, and new scientific knowledge at our disposal. As part of moving forward with the management of the GLHC we need to think about the advantages of a renewed Provincial Parks Act as a key tool to securing true protection for the Great Lakes coast in Ontario.

Recent Developments in Protected Areas Planning in Ontario

In February of 1997 the Province of Ontario began a land use planning process to decide the fate of 40 million ha of public land. Known as *Lands for Life*, it soon highlighted the need to bring the conservation perspective to the planning process as protected areas covered only 6% of the public land within the undertaking.

Soon after, the World Wildlife Fund, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and the Wildlands League formed the *Partnership for Public Lands* (PPL) to bring the voice of the conservation community to the table. PPL worked to create protected areas in a manner that was science based using ecological representation in determining potential candidate sites.

In the end, PPL was successful in moving the amount of protected area from 6% to 12% (within the area of the undertaking). Known as *Ontario's Living Legacy* (OLL) these protected areas translate into 378 new parks and conservation reserves totaling 2.4 million ha.

The OLL strategy also initiated the *Ontario Forest Accord* and the *Living Legacy Trust*. The Accord spells out the amount of wood available for the forest industry while stipulating that any increase in the amount of wood consumed (within the area of the undertaking) must correspond to a comparable increase in the amount of

protected area. The *Living Legacy Trust* is a \$30 million fund used by the province to fund natural resource management projects that bring economic, social and recreational benefits to Ontario

While OLL has brought about large changes on the landscape, a unique approach to another protected area is currently being played out at the O'Donnell Point Provincial Park on Georgian Bay south of the Massasauga Provincial Park. Here the park separates three portions of the Potowotami of Moose Deer Point First Nation Reserve. Originally designated as an Indian Reserve in the early 1900s, the First Nation has proposed that 120 ha of the park be de-regulated and added to the reserve to unite the community once again. The land transferred will be placed into a 'protected' status by the band while the province and forest license holder on other crown land are considering an extension to the park to make up for the area officially de-regulated. It is hoped that this proposal, when completed, will result in a net increase in protected area within the region and the introduction of a stewardship council that would look at the greater ecosystem including the Provincial Park, First Nations, protected areas and private lands within environmentally sensitive areas. Truly an innovative approach to protected areas.

Threats to the Development of Protected Areas Planning

Ontario's Living Legacy brought with it increases in the protected areas within the Great Lakes region. Unfortunately many of them suffer from an inadequate standard of care for the key ecological, recreational and cultural roles that they play. Non-conforming uses threaten the very values that protected areas were established to protect. These threats include roads/snowmobile trails, mining, forestry, hydroelectric and cottage development.

As an area is opened to motorized vehicles, degradation of the natural environment can soon follow through habitat fragmentation, erosion, pollution, garbage, trail and habitat damage, increased hunting, angling pressures and other development.

One such threat is an all weather road proposed for the Black Bay Peninsula Enhanced Management Area (EMA) on the north shore of Lake Superior. The status of EMAs within the OLL strategy appears to be somewhat vague. While forestry is a permitted use, the designation is supposed to mean a higher standard of care than the surrounding crown land. Currently a forest company operates a winter access road for some of its logging operations in the area. However, it wants to expand this use year round. While the MNR, hunters, anglers and conservation groups all oppose this proposal, the company is continuing to write this road into its Forest Management Plan (FMP). With the potential to have a significant impact on the peninsula's ecosystem, this scenario clearly questions the status of EMAs within the parks and protected areas system of Ontario.

Port development threatens another north shore area, Neys and Rainbow Provincial Park. Here the province is considering a proposal to permit a deep-water port in a designated wilderness zone within the Park. The mining activity outside the park, that would benefit from the port began operation long after Neys was regulated in the 1960s. This proposal is currently being considered within the context of the park's management planning process.

East of Neys, a proposed hydro development threatens the White River near the White Lake Provincial Park additions. Logging, roads and bridge construction are also being proposed within the White River Forest Management Plan. Clearly these developments will have effects on the Provincial Park and potentially Pukaskwa National Park downstream.

Mining constitutes a significant threat throughout the coast and the rest of the province. The *Provincial Parks Act* itself permits mining in 23 specific Provincial Parks. These are:

Kesagami	Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater
Opasquia	Wabakimi
Woodland Caribou	Butler Lake
Slate Islands	Michipicoten Island
Cranberry Lake	Lola Lake
Spruce Islands	Lake of the Woods
Makobe-Grays River	Abitibi-De Troyes
Agassiz Peatlands	Craig's Pit
Edward Island	Gravel River
Thompson Island	Wanapitei
Divide Ridge	Red Sucker Point
Winnange Lake	

Combined, these parks cover over 2 million ha of protected area. In comparison, the entire amount of land added through Ontario's Living Legacy amounted to 2.4 million ha. Regulation 954 (1990) *Provincial Parks Act* stipulates that:

"No person shall engage in prospecting, the development of mineral interest or the working of mines in a provincial park except in a provincial park listed in the following table or under licence of occupation or a lease issued under subsection 176 of the Mining Act."

Within the new Lake Superior Conservation Reserve there are over 600 mining claims. Located east of Pukaskwa along the Superior shoreline, mining exploration has led to oil spillage, vegetation trampling and skidder road construction. In late 2001, the Wildlands League, Federation of Ontario Naturalists and the Sierra Legal Defence Fund jointly requested a review of this and other mining conflicts under the Environmental Bill of Rights. The Environmental Commissioner's response in

September 2002 included the recommendation that “*the Ministry of Natural Resources create a new legislative framework for provincial parks and protected areas, including conservation reserves, with the mandate of conserving biodiversity.*”

Killarney Provincial Park, referred to by many as the crown jewel of the Ontario Parks system, currently has 62 active claims within its new additions. Their small relative size underestimates the threat that they pose to the park. Additions to a provincial park like Killarney must offer high quality recreational experiences while maintaining biodiversity. Mining has the potential to threaten the park’s very existence. Within Ontario over 90% of crown land is available to mining interests. Protected areas need to be free from the threat of mining.

In the southern reaches of the province, Rondeau Provincial Park is one of our last vestiges of Carolinian Canada. It has a long history of cottage development that has unfortunately stressed the natural ecosystem to a point where development and the introduction of exotic invasive species have had significant impacts on the remaining Carolinian habitat. Ontario Parks has engaged in intensive management of the park in an attempt to re-establish a pre-European settlement ecosystem including the use of prescribed burns and culling the deer herd that had grown well past the carrying capacity of the Rondeau area. As invasive species move in and top predators are extirpated from an ecosystem, intensive wildlife management becomes increasingly necessary. Today approximately 300 private cottages remain in the park. The cottage leases were designed to end in 2017 with the full knowledge and approval of leaseholders. Unfortunately, there is currently a movement afoot amongst many of the cottagers to extend these leases indefinitely.

System wide economic development remains an ongoing threat to the coastal protected area system. Within Park Management Plans, ‘maximizing economic benefits’ continues to be an underlying criterion completely inconsistent with the primary objective of the parks system, which is to protect natural and cultural values.

How did this happen? The existing 1950s era *Provincial Parks Act* has been modified over time. However, the original assumptions under which it was written are no longer valid. Indeed, a patchwork of changes has been made that in some cases, like Regulation 954, have actually made the system worse.

We need a *Provincial Parks Act* that has a clear protection mandate, addresses Aboriginal issues and requires completion of an ecologically representative parks system. Park management plans must be produced and regularly reviewed within the context of a clear process for public input entrenching legal standing for all members of the community.

There must be a government commitment to preserve, in perpetuity, the natural and cultural values of provincial parks including broad ecological principles incorporating a greater ecosystem approach.

The Wildlands League has a vision for the future that sees Ontario's parks and protected areas supported by a *Provincial Parks Act* that entrenches ecological integrity.