

Public and Private Stewardship

Remarks to the Parks Research Forum

Stewart Hilts
Centre for Land and Water Stewardship
University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1

Thanks very much for inviting me to participate in this panel today. Let me say that I have enormous respect for the work and the research being done on parks, and I have known many of you for a long time. But today I have been asked to help generate discussion, so I will play the devil's advocate and try to raise some new ideas.

What do we mean by stewardship?

Let us start with some basic facts. Private stewardship as the term has been used in Ontario, has been largely equated with the landowner contact programs and the Natural Heritage Stewardship Program—voluntary handshake agreements with landowners to protect natural features on their land. In the largest five programs in Ontario, nearly 6000 landowner visits have been conducted, and about 120,000 acres of natural areas are now subject to these handshake stewardship agreements. It should be noted that this has been based on the expenditure of several million dollars over more than a decade.

At the same time, there have been some serious difficulties with these programs. The most important has been the lack of follow-up programs for maintaining relationships with these landowners. This is underlain by a lack of money, and by a lack of commitment among the participating agencies.

So what does this stewardship work amount to?

- it is not 'protection' in the sense afforded by public parks;
- it is an educational approach to landowners, and a philosophy that landowners can be positive partners in conservation—but this is not necessarily easy;
- it is the building of long term relationships with landowners and communities, working for change at the local level—an example is the work of the Credit Valley Conservation Authority.

What therefore are the benefits of such stewardship programs?

There is undoubtedly some protection of natural areas directly, but perhaps more important is the influence of these programs on local community attitudes. In the literature on social movements, it is suggested that once you persuade 12% of the population to join you, you can significantly change society's norms. Most landowner contact programs achieve 40% participation readily. The goal in this sense is a change in public values.

At the same time, as programs spread to involve community projects, we find volunteers and non-government organizations getting involved in direct community action.

This Morning's Presentations

I would like to make five points in reaction to the challenging presentations we have heard this morning.

1. On the positive side, stewardship obviously has a big potential role to play. As Paul [Gray] said, "Private landowners are the key to parks and protected areas in southern Ontario", and Vicki [Barron] pointed out that the Credit Valley watershed, like much of southern Ontario, is 98% privately owned.

There are at least two obvious way that stewardship programs could support parks. First, they could assist in the establishment of larger patches of natural habitats, and corridors connecting them, as well as building supportive communities of landowners surrounding them. The cases of Point Pelee and Rondeau come to mind immediately. Secondly they can help build political support for natural heritage, in turn serving a complementary role to municipal planning.

2. On the other hand, I am struck by the lack of 'selling' of concepts like *landscape*, *ecology*, and *biodiversity* that has been done, especially to the landowners who own that land. For example, among the excellent series of *Extension Notes* available from the *Landowner Resource Centre* on a myriad of topics, there is nothing on these issues, in spite of stacks of studies that have now been done.

We sometimes seem to live under the mistaken impression that scientific research will automatically be translated into public support and forget that there is an intervening step required—the translation of that scientific information into easily understandable terms, and its marketing to the audience we care about—a process known as 'extension'.

3. I am also stuck by the 'Ivory Tower' perspective that seems to dominate here. (As a representative of the 'Ivory Tower' I hope I can say this). Under the sponsorship of three universities and two government agencies, I see a continuing emphasis on terminology and classification systems. For example, Nancy [Pollock-Ellwand] spoke of terms such as landscape, ecology and biodiversity, and bemoaned the slow pace of progress in getting these concepts reflected by action on the ground. Paul [Gray] portrayed maps of ecological land classification that subdivide the landscape from site regions through six levels down to site elements. The tone of the discussion strikes me as heavy with theory rather than focussing on implementation—sometimes indeed, it seems irrelevant to what is happening on the ground.

We tend to forget that landowners, the target we wish to reach, think in simple terms like 'land' and 'water'. And when we have classified the landscape down to the ecosite, we are in fact standing in some farmer's woodlot.

4. I think a lot could be gained by looking to other jurisdictions such as Australia and Europe for ideas. We would find widespread work with, and programs for, individual landowners, landowner groups, and local communities to promote conservation. We would also find widespread financial assistance pro-

grams—the beautiful rural British landscape that we often admire does not just happen; it is deliberately created by paying farmers to practice agriculture in certain ways.

5. Finally, let me stick a word in for students. It is encouraging to see a young audience here today; this bodes well for the future. I'm sure that I haven't had many creative new ideas in 10 years; maybe those of us who have been around for awhile just need to get out of the way and let new minds take over.

Conclusion

Let me draw on an analogy. I teach here in the Ontario Agricultural College, and I'm sure some of you are familiar with jokes about the College. The image of a cow, and the very applied nature of the research that is carried out does not appeal to everyone in the 'Ivory Tower'. But the very essence of OAC is working WITH farmers and farm groups. This is a tradition that we could well learn from.

The work of stewardship programs is not easy; in fact I would say:
the work is soft, messy, slow, long term and ongoing, emotionally and personally demanding, and can't be done in the office!

But there are very positive things happening. You only have to look at recent municipal planning efforts such as in the Credit Valley, or here in Wellington County, to see the benefits. I suspect myself that the progress and innovation is now occurring in municipalities and non-government groups; academic research on ecosystem planning is increasingly irrelevant and unconnected from the public.

Thank You.