Landscape Guides for the Niagara Escarpment: A Vehicle for Heritage Conservation and Planning

Susan M. Preston and J. Gordon Nelson,
Heritage Resources Centre, University of Waterloo

Abstract

This paper outlines our intentions to prepare Landscape Guides for several localities along the Niagara Escarpment. The Landscape Guides are an attempt to address the needs that citizens, professionals, and specialists of different kinds have for ways of integrating information about the many environmental, social, and economic changes that are going on around them. The organizing concept around which the synthesis and interpretation of the information will occur is Landscape. Most people understand this term as referring to a broad range of natural, social, cultural, economic, and scenic attributes of an area. The Niagara Escarpment is renowned for being a landscape that is valued for such reasons, but primarily for scenic and natural ones. In our Guides we are attempting to provide a fuller picture of these attributes of the Niagara Escarpment landscape in the context of some of the communities that are situated along it. Our intent is to provide people with information that they can use to understand where they are coming from, where they are going, and to adapt more readily to conservation needs and sustainable use priorities.

Introduction

This paper describes research currently underway in localities within Ontario's Niagara Escarpment landscape, an area designated for protection under provincial legislation (Ontario, 1973; Niagara Escarpment Commission, 1985) and recognized internationally as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve. The study falls under the auspices of the Great Arc research program at the Heritage Resources Centre, University of Waterloo. The intent is to identify valued places in the Escarpment landscape from local people's perspective, and to document initiatives and policy aimed at protecting these valued places. A significant product of the study will be a series of Landscape Guides summarizing the findings, to be offered as planning tools to participating communities.

Impetus for New Research

In evaluating the current state of landscape and community planning, one overarching theme that emerges is the difficulty scholars, professionals, and decision-makers have in responding to the magnitude and pace of change confronting society. Changes of all kinds are proceeding very rapidly in Ontario just as they are in other parts of Canada and the world. These changes are sometimes so rapid and complex that while people may be aware of and concerned about them, they do not always understand or know how to deal with them. Different agencies and organi-

zations discuss them using varied terminologies and conceptual structures, so that they are difficult to think about in an interrelated fashion. The changes are often labelled as economic, social, environmental, or institutional and are not linked to one another in terms of their interactive effects on people and communities. They are also often seen as the domain and responsibility of particular disciplines and fields of study and certain sectors, agencies, or organizations.

Not much thought is given to how information from the various disciplines and organizations will be put together, not only in the minds of citizens, but also by professionals or specialists of one kind or another. Society is seen as functioning largely in terms of messages from specialists and not in terms of citizens who are receptive to and capable of bringing together and using information of many kinds in the context of civil society. In these circumstances the situation can be seen not as one in which we do not have enough information; rather it is one in which we are awash in diverse information that we do not know how to organize and deal with efficiently, effectively, and equitably.

Conceptual Framework

In consultation with professionals and especially with citizens, we aim to develop means whereby people can understand and cope with some of the many diverse changes typically going on in the world around them. We are particularly interested in doing this at the local level. In this context changes can be related to one another through certain general or integrative ideas or concepts. One such concept is landscape, a term that is widely understood by professionals such as architects, engineers, geographers, historians, and planners, as well as by citizens, to refer to the scenic, natural, cultural, socio-economic, and historic features and values that describe and typify a place and distinguish it from others. The historic or heritage dimensions of the term are especially important because they tie the current landscape and people to what has gone before. From a heritage perspective landscape can link natural and cultural changes with those of the past and provide a set of values and meanings within which ongoing changes can be understood and evaluated.

The value of the idea of landscape has been demonstrated in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States through, for example, the work of the Countryside Agency and the programs of the U.S. National Park Service on both natural and cultural heritage landscapes (see for example Birnbaum and Peters, 1996; McClelland, 1995; Parker and King, 1995; Countryside Agency, 2000). In these and other countries a rich literature has developed around studying and understanding landscapes which are often seen as emblematic of areas and localities such as the Lake District, the Moors, and the New Forest (for example Cronon, 1983; Hoskins, 1955).

Identifying and understanding such landscapes and the economic, social, natural, and other changes that have gone into their creation over the years, strengthens

sense of place and community and provides a framework to deal with change. Scholars and professionals have most often taken the view that heritage landscapes are of two broad types: cultural or natural. While being very aware of this division, we also are aware that local people might not necessarily think in these terms. In our work we are adopting a landscape approach that sees both cultural and natural heritage as interrelated, especially in the context of settled environments where, from the local point of view, they are generally not conceived of as distinct from each other.

The concept of landscape therefore has considerable applicability and utility in urbanized and highly settled areas such as Ontario. However, in spite of efforts by numerous people over the years, the idea of landscape as an organizing framework for understanding, planning, evaluating, and responding to change has not been widely accepted in Ontario, nor indeed in Canada generally (Pollock-Ellwand and Nelson, 2000; Pollock-Ellwand, 1997).

Context

One exception is the Niagara Escarpment, which has been the focus of one of the most vigorous landscape planning programs in Canada since the late 1960s, through the work of the Niagara Escarpment Commission and related organizations such as the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF) and Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE). Having said this, the general sense of the Escarpment is as an outstanding geologic and scenic feature, with bedrock, cliffs, waterfalls, and other features that distinguish it as a landform in central and southern Ontario.

A wider perception of the Escarpment as a bioregion or a broad cultural landscape with many distinctive natural and cultural features has not yet emerged among scholars and professionals. Neither has there been substantial recognition of the various rather different cultural landscapes that exist along the Escarpment. This is not to say that efforts to understand the interaction between culture and nature have not been made for the Escarpment, but rather that they have tended to be universalist in approach. The Escarpment's appearance and character differ considerably from Niagara Falls through Milton, Forks of the Credit, Blue Mountain, the Beaver Valley, Owen Sound and the Bruce Peninsula to Tobermory. Indeed, authors such as Kosydar (1996), and Moss and Milne (1998) have attempted to characterize the Escarpment according to its major physiographic features. In the broad context of the Escarpment as a whole there are undoubtedly a variety of landscape values and images, as there are likely to be at the local and regional scales as well.

In this context, the Heritage Resources Centre has recently been doing work at an international scale on the idea of Ontario's Niagara Escarpment as part of a very extensive landscape complex called the Great Arc (Nelson, Lawrence and Beck, 2000). This emerges near Rochester, New York, and sweeps through southern Ontario, Manitoulin Island, Michigan, and Wisconsin into Illinois (Figure 1). This

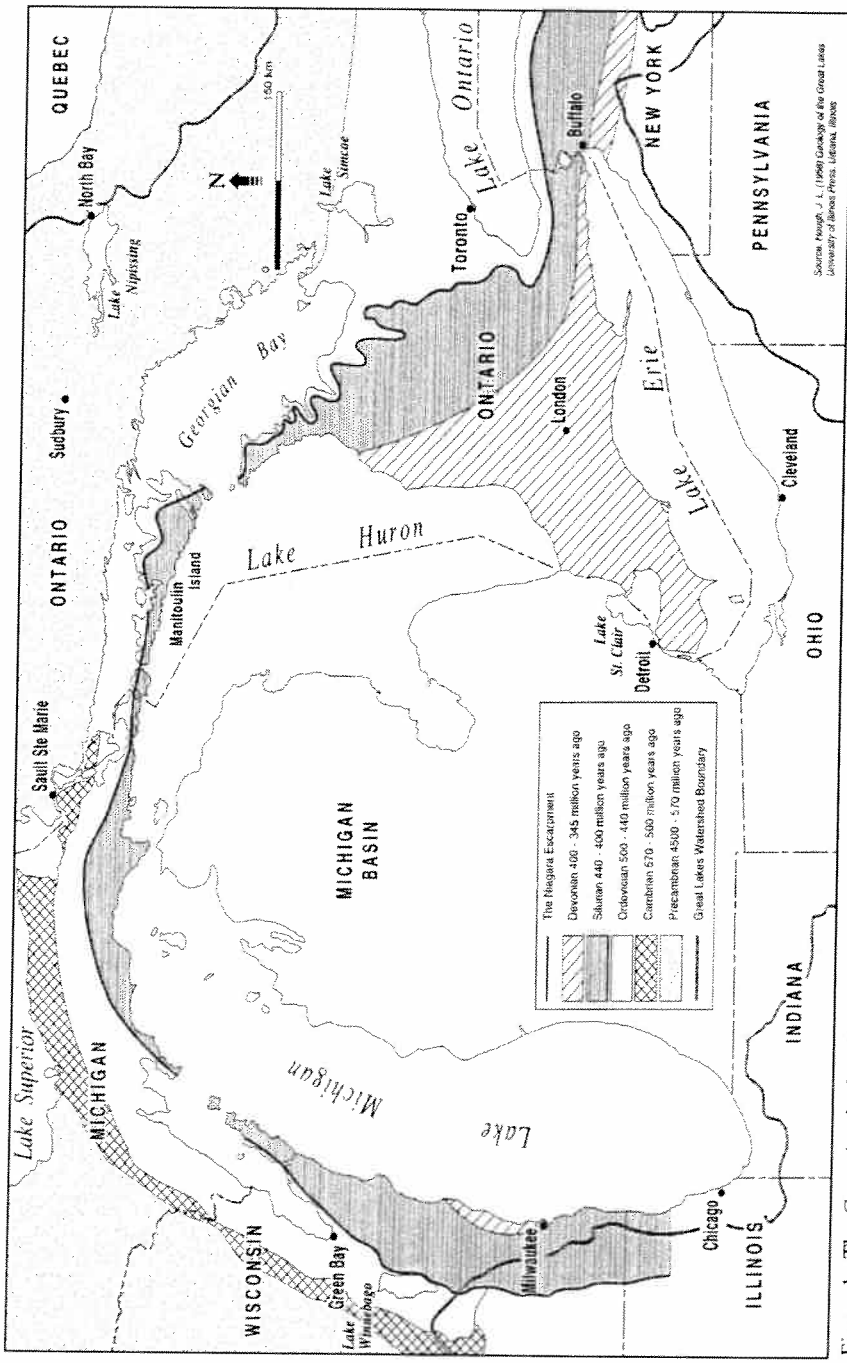

Figure 1. The Great Arc in the Great Lakes Basin. (Nelson, Lawrence, and Beck) 2001)

extensive landscape image has great potential value in that it could serve to integrate thinking about land use change and its socio-economic and environmental effects throughout much of the Great Lakes basin. We have made contact with and secured positive response to further work on the Great Arc from concerned persons in New York and Wisconsin.

At this stage however, our focus is on the identification and description of local landscapes in localities such as Grimsby, Dundas, Owen Sound, and Creemore that are parts of larger landscape images of the Niagara Escarpment or the Great Arc. These larger images generally reflect the view of professional planners as well as people who live outside the Escarpment area and tend to value it for recreational, tourism, and conservation purposes. Local landscape images can be discovered through close consultation with local people and can reflect their understandings and values about natural and cultural heritage and the socio-economic or working landscape in which they live. Understanding these local landscape images and their similarities to and divergences from one another - as well as the more general and essentially professional image of the Escarpment as a whole - may help all concerned to work together more efficiently, effectively, and equitably (Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Hillier, 1997, 1999).

We especially wish to explore the similarities and differences that exist in local people's perspectives about landscape and heritage, and the implications that these patterns have for planning. We anticipate that differences in the valuing of features or areas composing the landscape will be important in understanding past and present issues and challenges. Further, we envision that in understanding these differences, local residents, experts, and decision makers will be able to plan in ways that make it less probable that the differences will be confronted as directly and strongly as they have in the past. Conflict over future planning is thus not so likely to occur.

Approach

The specific means or vehicle that we wish to produce to help people understand landscapes along the Escarpment is the local Landscape Guide. These Guides are basically succinct descriptions of the landscapes around localities which people can identify and relate to as a framework for judging the effects of change. The intent is to document local people's expressions of significant heritage in terms of their own standards or criteria, whatever they may be. A series of maps will also be prepared that are intended to represent one or a number of local images of natural and cultural heritage. Together, the text and maps will be complemented by information obtained from other sources both within and outside of the local area, and organized into a Landscape Guide for each participating locality. Historic and modern illustrations and photographs will also be incorporated where possible.

It is anticipated that different landscape images, or senses of local heritage and valued places, will exist within each locality or community, and that these Guides

will be able to reflect these different images, helping to understand the nature of the community itself. The Guides will generally enrich professional and citizen understanding of the area and the changes and planning needs applying thereto.

Our methodology is based on the principles of collaborative, participatory, and interactive planning that sees shared learning among all participants as a capacity-building and enriching process (Friedmann, 1987; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1998; Nelson, 1991). The methods we are using include analysis of written materials on the heritage of the Niagara Escarpment and towns or municipalities along it, with special emphasis on the localities selected for this study. Once a background understanding of each of the study localities has been completed, contact is made with a small number of individuals in each locality who are known for their understanding of local heritage, activities, and planning issues. These individuals are looked to as luminaries, or knowledgeable persons, with whom we hope to refine study details in locally appropriate ways.

Techniques for recording local perspectives on valued places include interviews, workshops or focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires. Considerable preparatory work has been undertaken on this in a pilot project conducted in Grimsby, and in association with other community-based heritage initiatives (Preston, in press). Encouraged responses are in the form of words, photographs, maps, and illustrations. These will all be summarized and brought back to participants for comment and clarification before the final version is prepared. The Landscape Guides will be prepared on computer, and will include composite maps, photographs, and illustrations. The Guides can then be available in printed and electronic formats, and are planned to be accessible on the Internet.

Anticipated Benefits

The proposed Landscape Guides are seen as a vehicle for synthesizing and building better understanding of local heritage and planning challenges. They will be produced in tandem with doctoral research that explores the relationship between local people's sense of valued places and those of professionals, and how that relationship is played out in the planning process. Among the key issues that will be revealed is the local perception of the adequacy of current levels of protection for valued places, features, and landscapes.

This effort can ultimately result in the development of a network of people within and among localities along the Escarpment who can communicate and build upon the landscape idea as a way of understanding and dealing with their heritage and with the planning challenges they are facing. We hope that the Landscape Guides and associated products would be found to be of general value to others who might wish to prepare their own Guides. In this respect we intend to prepare a manual for the preparation of Landscape Guides based on the work and experiences put forward in this proposal to facilitate the general application of the procedure elsewhere.

In a general way, what has been said in the foregoing is that a more inclusive, civic approach is required in moving forward with planning for landscapes, heritage conservation, and sustainable communities and environments. We believe that what is generally lacking in Ontario is an approach to understanding landscapes, and especially valued places, that primarily reflects the perspectives of local people themselves.

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