
Submission to Greater Golden Horseshoe, Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and Greenbelt Plans

Main Points of the Ontario Woodlot Association (OWA) submission

All wooded areas (and associated wetlands) are of critical importance for the delivery of biodiversity services for the benefit of all residents of the planning areas. Due to the relative scarcity of such environments in this high population and farming environment, it is inappropriate to attempt to classify some natural areas as critical, thus implying that others are less so.

Most of these natural areas are privately owned; the owners, therefore, are the custodians that conserve the bulk of biodiversity in the plans area. They should, therefore be given special support and recognition. The specific nature of that support is outlined in greater detail later in this submission.

The mission of the Ontario Woodlot Association (OWA) is to promote the sustainable management of Ontario's privately owned forest by providing our members with guidance and advice. OWA is working to ensure that Ontario's privately owned forest will always contribute to the health of our society, the environment and the economy. It is from this perspective that we comment on this planning exercise.

The particular elements of the plans on which we are commenting are the following.

Section 4.2.2 for the **Greater Golden Horseshoe** plan deals with "natural heritage systems" and proposes that "A comprehensive, integrated and long-term approach will be implemented to maintain, restore or enhance the diversity and connectivity of natural heritage features and areas in a given area, and their long-term ecological functions." Further, "Official plans will incorporate a *natural heritage system* as mapped by the Province, and will apply appropriate designations and policies to maintain, restore or improve the diversity and connectivity of the system and the long-term ecological or *hydrologic functions* of the features and areas"

For the **Oak Ridges Moraine** plan relevant objectives are:

- a) protecting the ecological and hydrological integrity of the Oak Ridges Moraine Area;
- b) ensuring that only land and resource uses that maintain, improve or restore the ecological and hydrological functions of the Oak Ridges Moraine Area are permitted;
- c) maintaining, improving or restoring all the elements that contribute to the ecological and hydrological functions of the Oak Ridges Moraine Area, including the quality and quantity of its water and its other resources;

With respect to the designations of "natural core areas" and "natural linkage areas" benefits listed in sections 11. and 12. For instance:

"(1) The purpose of Natural Core Areas is to maintain and where possible improve or restore the ecological integrity of the Plan Area, by,

- (a) maintaining, and where possible improving or restoring, the health, diversity, size, and connectivity of key natural heritage features, key hydrologic features and the related ecological functions;
- (b) maintaining or restoring natural self-sustaining vegetation and wildlife habitat; (c) maintaining the quantity and quality of groundwater and surface water; (d) maintaining groundwater recharge; (e) maintaining natural stream form and flow characteristics; (f) protecting landform features; and (g) protecting and restoring natural areas and features that sequester carbon and provide ecological functions, including water storage, to help reduce the impacts of climate change."

The **Greenbelt Plan**, Natural Systems section lists “key” natural heritage features:

- Habitat of endangered species and threatened species;
- Fish habitat;
- Wetlands;
- Life science areas of natural and scientific Interest (ANSIs);
- Significant valleylands;
- Significant woodlands;
- Significant wildlife habitat;
- Sand barrens, savannahs and tallgrass prairies; and Alvars

“The Plan further states that the Protected Countryside contains a **Natural System** that provides a continuous and permanent land base necessary to support human and ecological health in the Greenbelt and beyond. The Natural System **policies** protect areas of natural heritage, hydrologic and/or *landform features*, which are often functionally inter-related and **which collectively provide essential ecological goods and services, including water storage and filtration, cleaner air, biodiversity, habitat, crop pollination, carbon storage and resilience to climate change, which supports overall ecological integrity.** (OWA emphasis)

The Plan further states that “the numerous watersheds, sub-watersheds and groundwater resources, including the network of tributaries that support the major river systems identified in this Plan, are critical to the long-term health and sustainability of water resources and biodiversity and overall ecological integrity. Official plans and related resource management efforts by conservation authorities **and others** shall continue to assess and plan for these natural and hydrologic features in a comprehensive and integrated manner, through the identification and protection of natural systems, building upon and supporting the natural systems identified within the Greenbelt.”

The **Niagara Escarpment Plan** identifies natural areas as “escarpment features that are in a relatively natural state and associated valleylands, wetlands and forests that are relatively undisturbed are included within this designation. These areas contain important cultural heritage resources, in addition to wildlife habitat and geological and natural heritage features that provide essential ecosystem services, including water storage, water and air filtration, biodiversity, crop pollination, carbon storage and resilience to climate change. These are the most significant natural and scenic resources of the Escarpment and resemble the core areas of a Natural Heritage System. Policies aim to maintain and enhance these natural areas.”

Escarpment Protection Areas “are important because of their visual prominence and their environmental significance, including increased resilience to climate change through the provision of essential ecosystem services.”

Relevant Objectives:

- To maintain and enhance the open landscape character of the Escarpment environment.
- To recognize and protect the natural heritage system associated with the Niagara Escarpment Plan area and maintain natural areas of regional significance.
- To encourage forestry and recreation.

The Niagara Escarpment Plan with respect to measuring performance states that “The Province, in consultation with the Niagara Escarpment Commission, municipalities, other public bodies and stakeholders, will develop a set of performance indicators to measure the implementation of the policies in this Plan. The Province will monitor and report on the

effectiveness of the policies in this Plan, including examining performance indicators concurrent with any review of this Plan.”

OWA Commentary (*in italics*)

To give proper recognition of the importance of natural areas and systems it is useful to refer to the excellent Environment Canada reference “How Much Habitat is Enough”

(https://www.ec.gc.ca/nature/default.asp?lang=En&n=E33B007C-1#_02_3_1)

Just with reference to woodlands, in their estimation “30% forest cover at the watershed scale is the minimum forest cover threshold. This equates to a high-risk approach that may only support less than one half of the potential species richness, and marginally healthy aquatic systems;”

Moreover, for having confidence in protecting full potential species richness Environment Canada feels that 50% forest cover is needed.

In the area covered by the plans, therefore, which features many areas of heavy development and farmland, especially in the more southern portions, it is likely that the percent forest cover is significantly less than 30%, never mind the ideal 50% figure. Only in the more northern portions of the Niagara Escarpment plan area is it likely that forest cover percentages are relatively sufficient.

To buttress our case about the pre-eminence of forested lands (including wetlands) in providing essential ecosystem services in southern Ontario is an October 26th announcement by World Wildlife Fund about the serious decline of wildlife populations since 1970; about 58% in the case of vertebrates. According to the press release, “The top threat to wildlife is habitat loss and degradation, driven primarily by increasing demand for food and energy.”

*The key fact, not mentioned in any of the plans is that **the greater part of the wooded areas are privately owned**. This means the ecosystem services so ably outlined in the Greenbelt Plan, i.e., “essential ecological goods and services, including water storage and filtration, cleaner air, biodiversity, habitat, crop pollination, carbon storage and resilience to climate change, which supports overall ecological integrity”.*

Not mentioned in the foregoing is that actively managed privately owned forest land, which provide all of the foregoing, also provide a steady supply of logs to local mills and many landowners use wood heat which supplants fossil sources of heat for houses. Sustainable forest management such as promoted by the OWA provides such services without in any way compromising the ecological value of woodlots.

Furthermore, an active forest planting program, available from Forests Ontario, in the area will have big carbon storage benefits as well as the provision of current economic benefit by employing tree planters. This program also supports the several forest nurseries in the area. All of this has both carbon positive impacts and positive rural social and economic impacts.

OWA particularly noted the recognition given to supporting the retention of class 1,2 and 3 farmland and to recognizing the role of farmers in keeping farms active and providing the foods so essential to our society.

We were impressed with the following in the Greenbelt Plan:

3.1.5 Agricultural Support Network

“Planning authorities are encouraged to implement strategies and other approaches to sustain and enhance the Agricultural System and the long-term economic prosperity and viability of the agri-food sector, including the maintenance and improvement of the Agricultural Support Network by:

a) Providing opportunities to support local food, urban and near-urban agriculture and promoting the sustainability of agricultural, agri-food and agri-product businesses through protecting agricultural

[3] Ontario Woodlot Association – dedicated to the wise use of Ontario’s private forests.

resources, and minimizing land use conflicts;

- b) Considering the Agricultural Support Network in planning decisions to protect or enhance critical agricultural assets. Where negative impacts on the Agricultural Support Network, a component of the Agricultural System, are unavoidable, they shall be assessed and to the extent feasible, mitigated;
- c) Undertaking long-term planning for agriculture, integrating agricultural economic development, infrastructure, goods movement and freight considerations with land use planning;
- d) Preparing regional agri-food strategies or establishing and/or consulting with agricultural advisory committees, or liaison officers; and
- e) Providing opportunities for agriculture-supportive infrastructure both on and off farms.

Given the critical importance to the people of southern Ontario of the natural environment, social development and economic development services provided by owners of woodlands in the plan(s) areas, we would urge a parallel approach to supporting woodlot owners in serving the people of Ontario.

Borrowing from the Greenbelt Plan, section 3.1.5, we would like to see something like the following:

Woodlot Owner Support Network

Planning authorities are encouraged to implement strategies and other approaches to sustain and enhance the Woodlot owner population across the planning area and the long-term economic prosperity and viability of this sector, including the establishment of a Support Network (Private Woodlot Owner Support Network?) by:

- a) *Providing opportunities to support woodlot based support organizations such as the Ontario Woodlot Association, Forests Ontario and others and minimizing land use conflicts;*
- b) *Considering the Private Woodlot Owner Support Network in planning decisions to protect or enhance natural forest assets (they are all critical). Where negative impacts on the Network, are unavoidable, they shall be assessed and to the extent feasible, mitigated; to include the network in developing any performance indicators and in preparing performance reports;*
- c) *Undertaking long-term planning for forest management, integrating forest economic development, infrastructure, goods movement and freight considerations with land use planning;*
- d) *Preparing regional forest support and forest industry strategies or establishing and/or consulting with woodlot owner advisory committees, or liaison officers; and*
- e) *Providing opportunities for woodlot owner-supportive infrastructure both on and off woodlots.*

Examples of existing support programs for woodlot owners are those of OMNRF's Managed Forest Tax Incentive Plan and their support to the 50 Million Tree (planting) Program administered by Forests Ontario. Furthermore, OMAFRA supports both the Environmental Farm Program and Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association that have tree cover elements to them.

As a parting thought, we quote E.O. Wilson, a distinguished academic from Harvard University who has devoted huge energy to the imperative of conserving biodiversity "A conservation ethic is that which aims to pass on to future generations the best part of the non-human world. To know this world is to gain a proprietary interest in it. To know it well is to love and take responsibility for it".

However important publicly owned woodlands are in the conservation game, woodlot owners have a personal relationship with their land. They would understand and identify with that last sentence by Ed Wilson. That is why they are so important to achieving and expanding biodiversity conservation outcomes for the planned areas.

The OWA is proud to be in the biodiversity game. We believe that we have much to offer both the content of the plans and in making them work for the benefit of our natural world in southern Ontario.

Ontario Woodlot Association