

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association

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Abstract

Saving Ontario's rare tallgrass habitats is the theme of this association, also known as Tallgrass Ontario. Much of southern Ontario was once covered in prairie, with only about 3% of the estimated pre-settlement area of 1000 km² remaining. Worldwide, tallgrass prairies and savannas are an imperiled ecosystem, and one of Canada's most endangered. As part of Ontario's natural heritage, over 200 plant and animal species officially designated rare at global, national or provincial levels find their habitat in these remaining tallgrass communities. Tallgrass species such as the karner blue butterfly and greater prairie chicken have already disappeared from Canada, with agricultural and urbanization land uses responsible for most of the loss of habitat.

Tallgrass Ontario is working as the recovery team for the southern Ontario 'Tallgrass Recovery Plan' (Rodger, 1998) This conservation effort tackles not the needs of an individual species, but an entire, rare ecological community in which many endangered species are at risk.

Association Overview

In the three years since Tallgrass Ontario (TGO) presented at a poster session at the Parks and Research Forum of Ontario in Guelph, Ontario, much has transpired. In terms of organizational development, the group has grown in size and in scope, and has been incorporated (October, 2001) as a non-profit organization. A founding Board of Directors has been struck, and a Tallgrass Recovery Advisory Committee (TRAC) has been established to deal with the issues raised by and brought to TGO: both are actively engaged in the implementation of the Tallgrass Recovery Plan (Rodger, 1998).

By incorporating a non-profit group, TGO has been able to solidify and organize its efforts more efficiently. Previously, as a loose amalgamation of interested individuals representing the public, conservation groups, academia, consultants, naturalists, and several government agencies and related NGOs, a direction and critical mass were created. Aims and objectives of the newly incorporated TGO group

include:

- the identification, conservation, restoration and creation of tallgrass communities;
- the acquisition and holding of tallgrass lands for conservation;
- the acquiring and the utilization of funds by and for TGO;
- the implementation of conservation practices through management plans and technical assistance;
- the cooperation with other organizations in furthering the TGO mission;
- the education of the public through landowner contact, workshops, and seminars;
- the facilitation and conducting of research on tallgrass communities and species, and the dissemination of results; and,
- the promotion of re-introduction of tallgrass species into areas where they are seriously threatened or where they have been extirpated (Tallgrass Ontario Bylaw #1).

Funding for TGO projects comes from grants received from government and private sources, while membership fees, and the selling of articles such as T-shirts is a basic source of cost recovery for member servicing and a foundation of member contact and involvement.

Goals of the Recovery Plan include public awareness and communication, identifying and protecting remnant communities, encouraging sound management practices, promoting restoration and creation, aiding species at risk, and research. These are being undertaken through connecting interested groups and individuals, and in the development of an information base on tallgrass communities and the Recovery Plan.

Restoration projects are being undertaken in many Ontario communities as alternatives to cultivated landscapes, and to re-introduce viable areas of native habitat. The J.J. Neilson Arboretum at Ridgetown College is closely involved in Tallgrass Ontario and in the work of the recovery team.

As far as project activity is concerned, TGO has been working on a number of projects that address the goals of the Recovery Plan. A major initiative has been 'Save Ontario's Savannas', a landowner contact project that encouraged voluntary private land stewardship and increased awareness. In its first summer of landowner contact, the project was a great success, resulting in 33 voluntary landowner stewardship agreements that conserve 130 ha of tallgrass habitat. Other recent initiatives include intervening in the planning process of a golf course development in southwestern Ontario, where naturally recurring tallgrass habitat is in danger of

being segmented, removed or eliminated. There is also work ongoing with the Nature Legacy Foundation regarding 'pocket prairies'-small remnants that are being identified and efforts made to protect them from development, encroachment, and supposed enrichment by interplanting with trees, etc.

TGO publishes and distributes the *Bluestem Banner* newsletter several times a year, with editorship currently shared among directors of TGO. Articles of interest and pertinence to tallgrass communities and project initiatives, and upcoming events, are presented. A biennial Tallgrass Forum has taken place in 1999 and in 2001 in southwestern Ontario, and is planned for 2003 in eastern Ontario. Attendances of nearly 200 at these events show a high level of interest by those most closely associated with tallgrass ecology and conservation, and public interest is also growing.

The J.J. Neilson Arboretum (JJNA) and Ridgetown College, University of Guelph (RCUG) have been actively involved in TGO activities since its early inception. In 1999 a Research Group meeting was held there to discuss high priority needs for applied tallgrass research, and the two forums have been located at this venue as well. Discussions have been underway regarding academic and research components of TGO, and the possibilities to develop a substantial self-sustaining organization for public and related group interaction. Representation of the JJNA/RCUG on the TGO Board of Directors is an important part of maintaining this relationship, and in developing future alliances. On the campus, two areas of native plant demonstration gardens (native flowers and tallgrass species) have been developed and are being maintained, and a forbs nursery area established in 1999 with the Rural Lambton Stewardship Network is well underway. These plantings of tallgrass species, although not specifically intended as habitat restorations, will demonstrate to the public, the landscape and agricultural industries, and to students, some of the charm, variety, usefulness, and management concerns of native species plant communities that are so little understood by most people.

From the Parks Research Forum of Ontario sessions that took place at Ridgetown College in May this year, some interesting things have developed. In addition to a poster session where TGO had a display, as in Guelph in 1999, a research project using the campus tallgrass demonstration plot has been suggested (Kevan, 2002). The pollination systems and breeding requirements of native grasses are the subject, and the (proposed) study would examine seasonal and daily patterns of both pollen release and stigmatic receptivity, along with weather conditions which are conducive to pollination. Other plans for the tallgrass demonstration plot include an MNR burn school project, where participants would receive training in the planning and implementation of simple prescribed burns for tallgrass restoration purposes. The interest in this management technique is increasing rapidly.

The poster session of TGO at the PRFO has achieved its goal in creating interest and sharing information. More of these activities are planned across Ontario and

even into the United States, at locations where groups with similar interests are gathering.

References

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