

ONTARIO'S PROTECTED AREA NETWORK – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: AN NGO PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Ongoing cooperation by government, the conservation community and forest industry representatives has led to a number of milestones under Ontario's Living Legacy (OLL), most notably, the expansion of our provincial protected areas network. Numerous challenges have been overcome during this process and many reasons exist for optimism regarding the future of our protected areas system. Collaborative planning exercises, like those being undertaken for OLL Signature Sites, and the Room to Grow process offer unprecedented potential for regional land-use coordination and enhanced protection and promotion of provincially significant values. However, aquatic areas in the province are currently lacking in protection and OLL sites continue to be threatened by non-conforming uses. Suggestions are made to improve the effectiveness of our protected areas network design and planning and a case is presented for the addition of aquatic areas to our provincial system of parks and reserves.

Background: The Past

Ontario's protected areas network has come a long way since the establishment of Algonquin in 1893. In just over a century, the network has expanded to 548 areas and over 5.9 million acres of public land off limits to logging, mining and hydroelectric development. Over half of these areas are newly designated parks and conservation reserves and are being created as a result of the 1999 government initiative, Ontario's Living Legacy (OLL). This unprecedented expansion also translates to a protected area system that represents a significant proportion of Ontario's ecosystems and natural features. As this process plays out, the government continues to engage groups like the Partnership for Public Lands (PPL) (Federation of Ontario Naturalists, CPAWS – Wildlands League and World Wildlife Fund Canada) and the forest industry in overcoming challenges and achieving OLL milestones.

OLL Report Card: The Present

The Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON), in its *OLL Report Card*, named the number of outstanding areas still to be regulated (213 as of May 1, 2003), Signature Site planning, and curbing non-conforming uses in protected areas among the issues where greater effort needs to be focused. Through ongoing work by government and partners, more sites have

since been regulated, amounting to over 70% of the total 378 announced during OLL. The government has also since passed landmark legislation designating Kawartha Highland as a Provincial Park rather than a Recreation Reserve, putting ecological integrity as a priority of this park while still recognizing its recreational value.

Signature Sites

Signature Sites represent exemplary opportunities to protect Ontario's unique natural heritage values and plan collaboratively at a landscape level. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that decisions regarding these sites are well supported by the public and sound science. Due to the complexity of the sites and diversity of interests being represented on planning committees, progress overall has been slow and balancing land-uses has proven difficult. Without a firm commitment to the protection of sites like those along the Great Lakes Heritage Coast, the current emphasis on planning for economic development may compromise the original intent of and unique values in Signature Sites. Conservation representatives like PPL staff are following the progress of the nine OLL Signature Sites (Kawartha Highlands, Great Lakes Heritage Coast, Lake Nipigon, St. Raphael, Nagagamisis, Killarney Provincial Park, Algoma Headwaters, Spanish River Valley and Woodland Caribou) closely to encourage that protection of natural heritage values remains part of the equation.

Non-conforming Uses

One of the challenges of having an effective protected areas system is keeping incompatible uses within these areas to a minimum. Non-conforming uses, as they are sometimes called, are activities that have the potential to threaten values within protected area boundaries, be they geological features, wildlife habitat or the wilderness experience to be had by protected area visitors. Two issues that are of concern in OLL areas include motorized vehicle use and potential mining activities. As motorized vehicle use remains to be a significant activity across the province, roads and trails into and around protected areas and Signature Sites are growing. Although new roads and trails are not encouraged in protected areas, approvals continue for their development while few resources are available for enforcement, monitoring and restoration of existing trails. Despite some initial efforts to mitigate motorized vehicle and especially all-terrain vehicle (ATV) impacts, localized vegetation damage and erosion, habitat fragmentation and noise pollution remain to be adequately addressed by protected area managers.

Mining interests in and around OLL sites are also of concern to the conservation community. Working in cooperation with the Ontario Prospectors Association (OPA), FON and the PPL are currently exploring opportunities to disentangle lands under pre-existing mineral tenure from OLL protected areas. The expected outcome is increased integrity for proposed protected areas and no mineral exploration activities within park boundaries. However, mining activities adjacent to protected areas remain to be monitored as potential impacts may result. One such case currently being debated is a proposed development on the Groundhog River, which would see treated mining effluent discharged into a

Waterway Park, home to one of the last remaining sturgeon fisheries in the province. If approved, this case will provide a dangerous precedent for the prioritization of development over the protection of fisheries and the natural heritage values identified as worthy of park establishment.

An Ongoing Commitment: The Future

The conservation community and PPL continue to work toward the improvement and advancement of Ontario's protected areas network. It is expected that over the next year or so, most OLL sites will be regulated and officially gazetted. These sites will require ongoing support from the conservation community to ensure that protection of the values within their boundaries remains a priority. Efforts will also be needed to encourage further advancement of the network to areas currently underrepresented including the far north and the aquatic ecosystems of the Great Lakes. The process calls for innovation and improved collaboration on these fronts.

References

- Federation of Ontario Naturalists. 2003. *Ontario Living Legacy (OLL) Report Card*. Protected Areas Team, Federation of Ontario Naturalists: Don Mills, ON.