



# Protect What is Healthy

☞ *Chester Springs Marsh, located south of the Bloor Street Viaduct, is a wonderful public green place that humans — and wildlife — enjoy!*

## ***Public Ownership and Protection***

The best way to protect our natural places is for public agencies, Conservation Authorities, other conservation groups such as The Nature Conservancy, and local municipalities to own them outright. Natural areas come into public ownership in several ways: through direct purchase; as gifts; as the result of being ‘set aside’; and through the development process, in which valleys and some tableland features such as woodlands are given to either municipalities or Toronto and Region Conservation.

While Conservation Authorities across Ontario rely on Valley and Stream Corridor Management programs to protect green places, municipalities use a wide range of land planning designations and by-laws to protect natural areas. Of course, each municipality has different by-laws and regulations defining boundaries and areas to be conserved, making greenspace protection and use inconsistent across the watershed.

As land prices escalate, collaboration between public agencies for green space acquisition becomes critical. The recent successful collaboration of four agencies — the Province of Ontario, City of Vaughan, The Regional Municipality of York and Toronto and Region Conservation — saved the Baker Sugar Bush in the upper Don from approaching development. The Baker Sugar Bush is a key habitat link for many birds and animals, and is listed by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON) as one of southern Ontario’s 20 best remaining examples of old growth forest.

Despite these creative partnerships, there is simply not enough public money available to save all the land that needs to be saved. And protective designations, such as the Province’s Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs), Provincially Significant Wetlands, and Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs), can be and are frequently challenged by landowners who disagree with their classifications.

Easements (specific rights acquired directly from the landowner) and covenants on title (restrictions placed on certain uses of the land) are positive steps but they cannot always be enforced. Good stewardship by those who own ecologically sensitive lands is still critical to the long-term protection of our green places.

Clearly, there is no single or easy solution to greenspace protection.



☞ *Let's protect what we already have.*

## ***Protected Natural Areas***

At this point, it would be easy to get discouraged. There are so many needs that it's hard to know where to start.

We went back to *Forty Steps to a New Don*, our original 'blueprint' to regenerate the Don, for some guidance and, in all honesty, a little bit of clarity. We immediately found what we were looking for, and it all seems so incredibly simple — we cannot move forward without first protecting what we have today.

“Protect what is healthy” is the first of the three guiding principles of *Forty Steps to a New Don*. After all, it doesn't make much sense to create more natural areas if those that already exist are not protected. We need only to look as far as the public outcry to 'save the Oak Ridges Moraine' to know our thinking is correct. Forty-seven percent of the respondents to the June 2000 Angus Reid Public Awareness Survey suggested they were either likely or somewhat likely to “write a letter to government demanding the regeneration and protection of the Don Watershed.” All we can say is, “Wow!”

Just over 15 percent of the remaining natural areas in the Don watershed are owned and protected by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). Local municipalities also own natural areas and use their Official Plans to assign protective designations to some privately owned natural areas.

But protection is a lot easier said than done. Development is proceeding in the headwaters of the Don, and many of the watershed's natural areas are now vulnerable.

The best protected areas are the streams themselves and their floodplains, which are formally protected under Provincial policies that are implemented through the TRCA's Valley and Stream Management Program and other local regulations. What does that mean? Wide ribbons of greenspace in the lower and middle Don are protected, but only thin threads of green are safeguarded in the headwaters. Toronto and Region Conservation is currently working to expand its valley and stream corridor mapping so the precious coldwater streams in the headwaters of the Don (and other local watersheds) will be regulated as well as those wide ribbons of green in the lower Don.



## INDICATOR 14: PROTECTED

# NATURAL AREAS

### *Are the Don's remaining natural areas being protected?*

#### **Where we were: (1997)**

Six hundred and forty-five hectares, or 15 percent of the watershed's natural areas (woodlands, wetlands and meadows) were in public ownership of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). In addition, there were other lands (public and private) that were under protective designation. Very little tableland was publicly owned and/or designated for conservation. In the headwater areas, the remaining natural areas, almost all of which sat on tableland, were extremely vulnerable to development.

#### **2000 Targets:**

- 1) Identify specific areas for protection in order to meet targets in Indicators 5, 6, 7 and 8.
- 2) Protect all vulnerable and significant natural areas.
- 3) Establish targets for the protection of meadows and riparian habitat.

### ***WHAT'S THE TREND?***

*in 1997*



*in 2000*



No appreciable policy changes to protect areas; the lack of funding to acquire lands remains an issue.

### **The Oak Ridges Moraine**

The Oak Ridges Moraine is a 160-km long ridge of beautiful rolling hills, kettle lakes and gentle streams that stores water deep underground and feeds our region's many waterways, including the Don. Portions of the moraine are under serious threat of development.

Protection of the Moraine — its features, functions and linkages — is important to the water quality, biodiversity and baseflow of the Don.

The regional governments of Durham, York and Peel, and Toronto and Region Conservation have identified four steps to protect this delicate masterpiece of nature:

1. Identify the all-important green corridor.
2. Protect the corridor.
3. Manage and restore the corridor.
4. Enhance public education and access.

*The typical landscape of the Oak Ridges Moraine. ↗*



### Where we are: (2000)

Development is proceeding in the headwaters of the Don, and applications have been received for development both within and adjacent to some of the most significant habitats remaining in the watershed. Public interest in protecting these areas is high, as witnessed by the recent protests over development on the Oak Ridges Moraine in Richmond Hill. At the very time when the health of the Moraine is most at risk, there is still a lack of funding available for public land acquisition. Protection measures implemented through the planning process do not always consider specific watershed issues; decisions are often made which are based on GTA bioregional criteria which may or may not give significance to the remaining natural areas in highly urbanized watersheds like the Don. With the recent public acquisition of the 31 hectare Baker Sugar Bush in Vaughan, the amount of TRCA-owned natural area in the Don has increased to 676 hectares. The Baker Sugar Bush acquisition is significant for many natural and cultural heritage reasons. It is: one of the few remaining continuously-operated sugar bushes; designated as a Provincial Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) and a Regional Environmentally Significant Area (ESA); and its acquisition is the largest public purchase of tableland woodland in the history of the Don watershed.

The City of Toronto's efforts toward the development of a new and visionary Official Plan and the work accomplished by its Environmental Task Force represent efforts with the potential to foster true achievement of sustainable urban living and planning ideals. The Greening of York Region initiative has similar objectives.



✎ Aerial Forest Cover, Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) 73 in Vaughan.

### Where we want to be:

#### By 2003:

- 1) The Natural Heritage Strategy should be completed and adopted, identifying all areas for protection, including linkages.
- 2) Criteria for planners to properly evaluate the Don's unique natural area requirements will be developed.
- 3) Municipalities in the Don will identify and protect natural features under appropriate designations and supportive policies in their Official Plans.

#### By 2010:

All natural areas (woodlands, wetlands, meadows, valleylands and stream corridors) will be protected, including newly created natural areas.

#### By 2030:

Maintain high levels of protection.

### How to get there:

It must be recognized that the more than 80 percent urbanized Don watershed has unique needs and that regional criteria for assessing significance cannot apply to such a degraded ecosystem. Every woodland in the Don is potentially significant and this must be communicated and enforced through the planning process. The Oak Ridges Moraine studies must be completed and protective measures must be implemented. The Province of Ontario must provide leadership and funding for the implementation of an Oak Ridges Moraine Strategy which would support the municipalities in achieving the intent of the Planning Act to protect ecological function. Additional tableland habitats must be acquired by public bodies. The significance of natural areas must be assessed through inventory and monitoring, and communicated to municipalities and the public to build the support needed for retention/protection. The Don Watershed Natural Heritage Strategy must be completed in order to identify all areas to be protected and enhanced.

