



Caring for Community

☞ *The Mill Pond in Richmond Hill — a part of the Don community.*

People

As cities and other urbanized areas continue to grow, and as the pace of life continues to accelerate, humans often feel a strong need to slow down and take refuge from the changes around them. Where do they turn? For many urbanites, a city's parks, rivers and natural areas become a top 'escape' destination. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Don watershed.

According to the June 2000 Angus Reid Public Awareness Survey, 86 percent of respondents agreed that the Don River was "a good place to walk or bike" (a significant increase from the 75 percent of respondents in 1996 who agreed with the same statement). And 91 percent of all respondents to the 2000 survey agreed that the Don River was "important to my community's quality of life."

How is that reflected in the education of our younger generations? Sadly, the new curriculum introduced in 1998 downplays both the importance of the local environment and the need to build and nurture close connections to our ecological systems. The Don flows in close proximity to hundreds of schools but we do not know how many classes actually choose to use the river as an educational resource. However, we do know that Don schools often choose to visit the Kortright Centre for Conservation or the numerous residential field centres operated by Toronto and Region Conservation and the local Boards of Education. Most of these facilities are located outside the Don watershed.

Awareness

Have public attitudes about the Don changed since the last report card? Yes and no. When we compared the results of the June 2000 Angus Reid Public Awareness Survey to the 1996 survey, we discovered there were no significant differences in a range of perceptions, including:

- the correct definition of a watershed (23 percent in 2000 vs. 27 percent in 1996)
- the proportion of respondents¹ who knew they lived in the Don (44 percent in 2000 vs. 36 percent in 1996)
- the proportion of respondents who agreed that the Don was "very polluted" (74 percent in 2000 vs. 71 percent in 1996)

These attitudes are worrisome indeed, but there is hope. We are cautiously optimistic that key messages, particularly those about stormwater, are being heard. Seventy-one percent of respondents to the 2000 study — an improvement of 10 percent from the 1996 survey — knew that water from storm drains goes directly into the Don.

When people understand what a watershed is, and where stormwater goes, they are far more likely to become better stewards of streams, stormwater and the river. Yet there still is a high degree of misinformation among watershed residents. More than half of the interviewees still thought that the majority of pollution in the Don comes from industry when, in reality, stormwater is the real culprit. Most surprisingly, 61 percent of those surveyed now believe that the Don is less polluted than it was 10 years ago — a 15 point increase from 46 percent in 1996. We wish that were true! (See *Caring for Water*)

¹ *Only those who correctly defined the term watershed were asked this question.*

Responsible Use and Enjoyment

The Don continues to be well used and appreciated by local residents. And while some people may not visit it on a regular basis, the Don is a remarkable inspiration for those who do visit.

The river's silent charm wins over virtually everyone who walks its paths, cycles its trails or appreciates its flora and fauna. 100 percent of those respondents who had visited the Don between June 1999 and June 2000 felt the river was a good place to walk or bike. 97 percent of those same respondents felt the Don was important to their community's quality of life and 92 percent insisted that the Don was important to their own personal quality of life. If only we could get everyone to visit the Don!

Baby boomers seem to visit the Don more often than younger respondents, and the residents of the Lower Don are significantly more likely (54 percent) to have recently visited the river and its parks than residents of the Middle (37 percent) and Upper (28 percent) Don. The two most popular activities in the Don are walking (89 percent) and bird watching/nature appreciation (65 percent).

As the popularity of these peaceful activities increases, the rate of potential conflict with other trail and park users will almost certainly increase. Off-leash dogs disturb habitats and often chase birds and wildlife. In-line skaters and cyclists may clash verbally with walkers and birders, each holding the perception that they alone have access to that space at that time.

As the population ages and makes the transition from sports like tennis and skiing to walking and birdwatching, we will face increased pressure to expand access to the Don. We must strike a balance between access and protection — sensitive and regenerating areas must remain free from human interference. In those areas that are suitable for human use, we have established ambitious, long-term targets for trail extensions and improvements. This careful balance between protection and access will hopefully make the Don one of the green places to be in the region.



☞ 'Paddle the Don' is a popular springtime event for urban paddlers.



☞ The Yellow Fish Road project helps us remember that our storm drains are a direct connection to our River.

Classroom Education

The new provincial curriculum introduced in 1998 completely changed the environmental education landscape. While significant components of environmental education are contained in the new curriculum, the new guidelines focus more on the economic value of the environment than the need to make close, personal connections with the all important local, national and global environments.

These curriculum changes, coupled with decreased staffing, amalgamations and financial restructuring, left most education administrators with little time to respond to our progress surveys. Given our meagre four percent survey response rate, we were unable to assess progress toward the classroom targets we set out in the first Don Report Card.

However, we were pleased to learn that almost one quarter of all Don schools visit Toronto and Region Conservation's (TRCA) environmental field centres (residential) each year, and more than half of all Don schools visit the Kortright Centre for Conservation (day visits). Since the last report, the TRCA's Yellow Fish Road project, the hands-on program that paints yellow fish beside storm drains to symbolize their connection to the river, engaged 90 groups. In that same period, the TRCA's Watershed on Wheels brought their environmental outreach program to more than 90 classes.

Our targets for 2003 and 2010 are ambitious, but necessary. We believe that responsible, aware children become responsible, aware adults. The future health of the Don — and the planet — depends on it.



INDICATOR 11: PUBLIC

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT

How well do people understand watershed issues?

Where we were: (1997)

Ninety percent of Don watershed residents surveyed (1996 public attitude survey) believed that the Don was “important and necessary” to their community. Twenty-seven percent knew what a watershed was, but only a third of those people knew that they lived in the Don watershed. Sixty-one percent knew stormwater goes into the Don but 53 percent incorrectly believed that industry was the river’s main source of pollution. Several hundred people throughout the watershed acted as volunteers to help the Don’s regeneration.

2000 Target:

- 1) Maintain current levels of public support.
- 2) Three thousand people will be active volunteers for the Don — committed to its regeneration through actions and/or donations.

Some Responses from 2000 Angus Reid Survey *“Can you tell me what a watershed is?”*

“A shed full of water”

“Drainage for a particular land area”

“It sheds the water down off the home (roof)”

What is a watershed, really?

A watershed is the land area from which water drains to a particular surface water body.

WHAT'S THE TREND?

in 1997



in 2000



Voluntarism up; people still believe industry is the primary polluter of the Don, not them; strong support continues.

Community based action helped transform the Don Valley Brick Yard into a living, breathing natural park.



Get involved at an early age!

Where we are: (2000)

A June 2000 Angus Reid Public Awareness Survey showed that, as in 1996, support for the River's protection and restoration is very high. The majority of those surveyed (91 percent) believe that the Don River is important to their community. However, as in 1996, most people have limited understanding of watersheds and their problems. Only 23 percent of those surveyed could correctly define a watershed and only 44 percent of those people were able to identify that they lived in the Don watershed. The percentage of those surveyed who believe, incorrectly, that "most of the pollution in the Don River is industrial pollution", is statistically unchanged from 1996 (53 percent with this statement in 1996; 55 percent agreed in 2000). Perhaps as a consequence of this misperception, 57 percent of respondents identified industry as "completely responsible" for cleaning up the river while only 29 percent were willing to hold individuals completely responsible. Those people reporting regular visits to the valley lands are more likely to have donated time or money to local environmental causes.

According to the 2000 Survey, local residents don't know where to volunteer within their community. When asked what they consider to be the major barriers (besides being too busy) that prevent them from getting involved with local organizations, forty percent of respondents cited "lack of awareness/knowledge." Over the past three years, however, there have been at least 9,000* volunteers working toward Don watershed regeneration, equalling the 2000 target of 3,000 per year set in 1997.

Consistent with the themes of the 1996 study, seventy-eight percent of people surveyed indicated that the Don was "important to their personal quality of life." As well, there continues to be strong support for the notion of adding a small fee to the water bill to

clean up the watershed, with 85 percent of respondents agreeing with this approach. As well, 64 percent of respondents indicated that they would be either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to donate money to an organization to clean up the Don Watershed.

** The number of volunteers reported is the cumulative total of volunteers attending events or other regeneration efforts. As such, it may count one individual numerous times, if he/she attended more than one event.*

Where we want to be:

By 2003:

- 1) An increasing percentage of people will understand the connection between their homes and/or workplaces and the storm drains and the River. More people will understand that stormwater is the primary polluter in the Don. People will become more aware of the impact of their actions on the environment.
- 2) There will be a renewed outreach effort to educate the public on stormwater through expansion or modification of existing programs, such as Watershed on Wheels, Yellow Fish Road, Not Grate for the Lake, and/or the development and funding of new programs (specifically, programs combining education and action such as volunteer monitoring programs).
- 3) More people will have taken the step from awareness to action by altering their behaviour and getting involved with efforts to improve the local environment; twelve thousand people (4,000 per year) will be active volunteers for the Don — and committed to its regeneration through actions and/or donations.

- 4) There will be funding for coordination of volunteers across all environmental agencies and groups, making information on volunteer opportunities easier to obtain.

By 2010:

- 1) Eighty percent of watershed residents will know that stormwater goes directly into the Don and is its major source of pollution.
- 2) Fifteen thousand people (5,000 per year) will be active volunteers for the Don.

By 2030:

Ninety-five percent of watershed residents will be knowledgeable about the Don and will be taking positive actions to care for it.

How to get there:

Don municipalities, the Federal and Provincial governments and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority must work together to systematically address the level of public understanding, starting with the most basic awareness messages. For those people already aware of watershed issues, a central, accessible and easy-to-find Don River Volunteer Information Network should be established to help bridge the gap between awareness and action. This network could be as simple as a web site listing of all the groups, contact numbers and the types of volunteer work they perform. Funding should be made available to coordinate this effort and to assist in recruiting, training and deploying volunteer effort.



INDICATOR 12: CLASSROOM EDUCATION

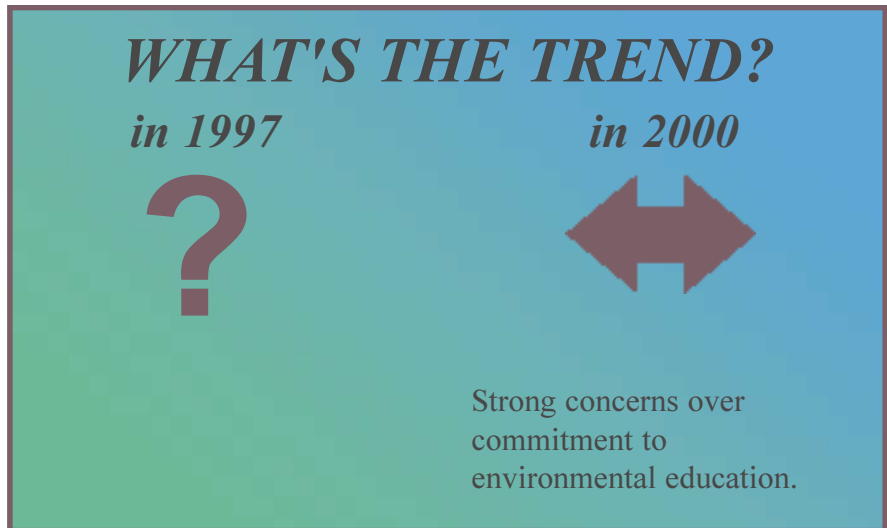
Are our children learning about the local environment?

Where we were: (1997)

Nine percent of elementary schools responding to the 1996 survey had classes visiting the Don. In the upper grades, exposure to watershed curriculum varied from 5 percent to 90 percent, depending on the Board of Education. Currently, Provincial and/or Board level curriculum guidelines for watershed studies are in place. The Don Council's grade 7 teacher's kit, *Don Watershed Education Program*, is in the hands of 50 teachers from 20 schools representing all the Boards in the watershed, although it is not yet known how many teachers are using it.

2000 Targets:

- 1) Twelve percent of elementary school students will have classes visiting the Don.
- 2) Establish a baseline for junior high and high school students who will take watershed studies for at least one semester during their school career.



☞ The Kortright Centre for Conservation is a popular destination for the Don watershed's many school groups.



☞ Watershed on Wheels outreach program at the Toronto French School.

Where we are: (2000)

The prominence of the environment in education was substantially altered through changes to the provincial curriculum in 1998. While significant components of environmental education are contained in the new curriculum, the new guidelines downplay both the importance of the local environment and the need to cultivate close connections to our ecological systems. Under the new guidelines, environmental importance is to be presented in largely economic terms. There are, however, significant opportunities for the watershed message to be presented to students in Grades 7 and 8.

Only 14 of 314 schools responded to a 2000 survey of their environmental education practices. A number of Principals who were contacted indicated that while they were interested in environmental issues, the sheer number of changes in the educational system (new curriculum, decreased staffing, Board amalgamations, financial restructuring) had left them with little time to answer the many surveys they receive. Despite these challenges, the number of Don schools paying visits to Toronto and Region Conservation's (TRCA) conservation field centres (residential) or Kortright Centre for Conservation (day visits) has remained high. Twenty-two percent of Don schools (86 schools) sent classes to the field centres between 1997 and 1999 and 53 percent of Don schools (205 schools) sent classes to Kortright. The TRCA's Yellow Fish Road Program engaged 90 groups in painting yellow fish beside storm drains to signify their connection to the river. The Watershed on Wheels Program, administered by TRCA, visited 91 classes over the three years. In addition, Board-operated outdoor education field centres, including the Forest Valley Outdoor Education Centre in the Don, continue to educate students in a field setting. Numerous other fine programs delivered by municipalities and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) helped connect students to the watershed and to the local environment.



☞ Our goal for 2003: The Don Valley Brick Works Park will be promoted as an education centre.

Where we want to be:

By 2003:

- 1) All School Boards will have a target for mandatory outdoor residential learning experience (e.g., City of Toronto Board of Education model).
- 2) TRCA (and other) outreach programs will be targeted to meet the requirements of the new curriculum, particularly for grades 7 and 8.
- 3) The Don Valley Brick Works Park will be promoted as an education centre.
- 4) Use of all outdoor education centres will increase and resources will be found to ensure that these educational opportunities continue.
- 5) Governments will recognize both the value of environmental education and the intrinsic importance of "hands-on", outdoor education experiences.

By 2010:

- 1) Sixty percent of elementary schools will have classes visiting the Don.
- 2) One hundred percent of junior high and high school students will take watershed studies for at least one semester during their school career.

By 2030:

All students will study the Don watershed as an integral part of their school life.

How to get there:

Curriculum changes have made it even more important to find and directly link environmental curriculum strands to outdoor environmental education opportunities. Groups, including the TRCA and the Don Council, should provide and promote the existence of materials for both in-class and outdoor learning opportunities. Governments should recognize the importance of hands-on, local environmental education and find ways to support both the inclusion of ecological studies in the curriculum and the operation of existing field/outdoor education centres. Partnerships should be established between school boards, environmental groups and agencies to lobby governments for funding of outdoor environmental education.



INDICATOR 13: RESPONSIBLE

USE AND ENJOYMENT

How many people value the Don as a place for recreational use?

Where we were: (1997)

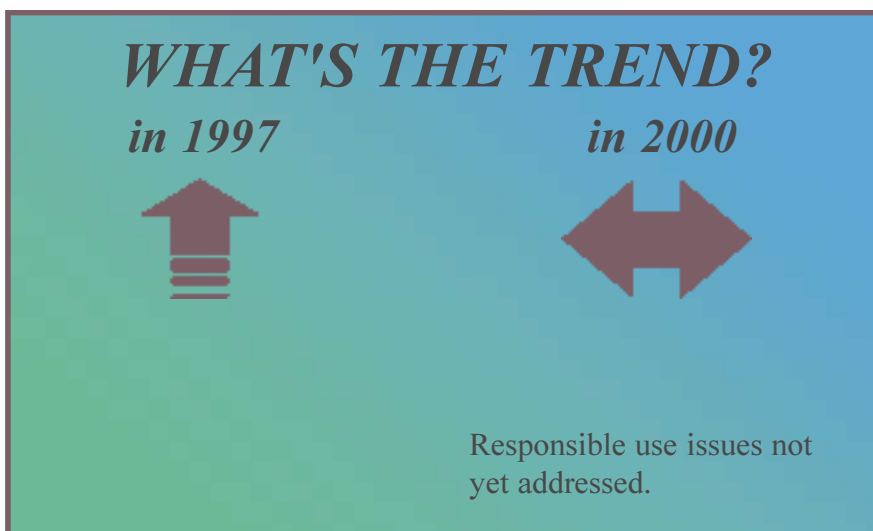
Forty-three percent of survey respondents had visited the Don at least once in the previous year, which means that approximately 344,000 residents were actively using the Don. Within this group, walking was the most popular activity (38 percent walked more than ten times in the previous year) and cycling was second (17 percent cycled at least ten times). Issues of conflicting or irresponsible uses of the Don's resources were arising. All Don municipalities had identified important cultural heritage sites in the watershed, which were being included in the Don Council's heritage sites inventory report, *The Don Millennia*, and on Community-Based Maps of trails.

2000 Targets:

- 1) Complete 50 percent of Don Council's Community-Based Maps of trails.
- 2) Improve and increase year-round access points.
- 3) Local governments and Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACACs) should develop preservation master plans for their important cultural heritage sites, along with property owners and partners.
- 4) Local governments should identify conflicting and problem uses in the Don and develop management plans.

The Don's trails are used by walkers, runners, skaters and more.

Damage to sensitive vegetation can be minimized by staying on marked trails.



Where we are: (2000)

As a whole, the percentage of respondents to the June 2000 Angus Reid Public Awareness Survey indicating that they had visited the Don in the past year was similar to 1996 (43 percent), meaning that approximately 344,000 residents continue to actively use the Don. In the Lower Don watershed (the area south of Eglinton Avenue), 54 percent of those surveyed reported they had visited the River. Once again, walking and cycling were among the most popular activities. Interestingly, bird-watching/nature appreciation, a combined activity that wasn't prompted for during the 1996 survey, was cited as the second most popular use of the Don in 2000. Issues of conflicting uses, which include off-trail mountain biking, dogs off leashes, the harvesting of plants, and the release of non-native pet species into natural habitats, continue to persist though some municipalities have begun to address the concerns. To date, only a few Management Plans have been completed for small areas.

A full 93 percent of dog owners surveyed indicated that they "stoop-'n-scoop" in public areas, thus helping the Don's water quality. However, of those that do, only 85 percent indicated that they "always" stoop-and-scoop. In addition, three in ten dog owners let their dogs off their leashes in public areas other than in designated dog areas. Pet access to natural areas can result in trampled vegetation, disruptions to wildlife and degeneration of streambanks.

The Don Council did not achieve its target of completing six of the 12 planned Community-Based Maps of trails as the initiative was too resource-intensive to pursue. The City of Toronto, however, has produced an excellent cycling map showing trails and the Toronto Green Tourism Association has published a unique *Green Tourism Map of Toronto* containing elements of the

Don watershed. The City of Toronto developed a series of self-guided Discovery Walks in the Don, which are augmented by way-finding and interpretive signs and brochures. As well, the Town of Richmond Hill produced the *Richmond Hill Cycling and Trails Map*, the Town of Markham has published *Markham Pathways — They're All Yours*, and the Toronto Health Partnership is working on a series of Walking Route Maps for the West Don River, East Don River, German Mills Creek, Duncan Creek and part of Newtonbrook Creek.

As a consequence of many developments, including municipal amalgamations and LACAC restructuring, site specific Master Plans for important cultural heritage sites have not been completed as targeted. However, the volunteer heritage community within the City of Toronto (including the Community LACAC volunteer members) has coalesced through an effective coordinating body of some 35 organizations, known as the Toronto Heritage Association (THA). The Don Valley Brick Works Park was opened in 1997 and the culturally and environmentally significant Baker Sugar Bush was publicly purchased in 1999.

Where we want to be:

By 2003:

- 1) Local governments should identify conflicting and problem uses in the Don and develop management plans identifying locations for these uses.
- 2) A specific media and educational campaign should be launched to address issues surrounding human and pet impacts in natural areas.
- 3) Way-finding signage should be enhanced throughout the Don public lands system and should include messages about sustainable use of

these public lands (e.g., dog walking, plant harvesting, mountain biking, etc.).

- 4) Intensive discussion of cultural heritage issues within each of the watershed municipalities, involving LACAC volunteers and staff, Planning Departments, and the THA, will have taken place and site-specific heritage Master Plans will be under development using the criteria established.

By 2010:

Complete a continuous trail network, avoiding sensitive natural areas, from the lakefront to the headwaters, with way-finding and interpretive signage incorporating natural and cultural features.

By 2030:

Expand the marked trail network, avoiding sensitive natural areas, to include the Don's smaller creeks and streams, and to link the Don to the GTA's other watersheds.

How to get there:

Municipalities should develop management plans to specifically address and identify appropriate locations for high impact activities (e.g., dog walking, mountain biking). Management Plans and efforts to improve signage should be undertaken in conjunction with a media/education campaign, alerting the public to the destruction caused by improper use of natural lands. There should be a renewed multi-stakeholder effort toward the identification and protection of cultural heritage sites.

