

# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

## Giving Back

Let's ignore, for a moment, the Don watershed's integral place in nature, and all the ways it supports the lives of countless plants and animals. Let's look at it instead through a decidedly selfish and human-centred lens. It truly must be said that the Don watershed ecosystem has been very good to us. Very good indeed.

For centuries before and after European settlement, the Don has provided food and resources for generations of people to live. The river itself has irrigated our lands, powered our mills and graced our landscape. We've swum there, fished there and walked there. Today, the River's valleys are used for many of these same activities and many new ones.

For the past 50 years, Federal and Provincial agencies and the Don watershed's municipalities have been cooperatively pursuing land conservation by acquiring and protecting vital valley lands. The result of these and other collective efforts can be seen in much of the green space we have left in this highly developed watershed. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, it was clear to many people that more effort was needed and the community once again banded together to call for substantive improvements to the Don. In 1992, the Don Watershed Task Force, later named the Don Watershed Regeneration Council, was formed by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. In 1999, the City of Toronto's Task Force to Bring Back the Don celebrated its 10th anniversary. During the past decade, many other community groups have adopted specific areas of the Don and have contributed mightily to the watershed's rebirth.

Yet, ten years of activity pales in comparison to the millennia it took to form the Don watershed and the centuries it took to almost destroy it. The fortunes of an urban watershed don't turn around instantly, by mere command or force of will. Restoration of an ecosystem in a built up watershed like the Don is a long term prospect. But, however slow it may be, progress must be sought and it must be measured. We must continually assess the Don's health in order to modify our approach and take new actions to continue its rebirth.

In the strategy document, *Forty Steps to a New Don (1994)*, the Don Watershed Regeneration Council, a watershed wide advisory committee comprised of elected representatives as well as representatives of the general public, municipalities, agencies and environmental groups, was instructed to "publish a Report Card every three years to mark and celebrate progress in the Don's

regeneration." This report is the second such report card, following the inaugural, *Turning the Corner, The Don Watershed Report Card, (1997)*.

This is the state of the Don at the turn of the new millennium. This is *A Time For Bold Steps*.

## Why Bold Steps

In reading this report card you will find that in many ways, the Don is still turning that metaphorical 'corner' that was referred to in the last report card. Since 1997, meaningful progress has been made. More people are volunteering for the Don than could have been imagined even three years ago. Salmon are once again gaining access to the river and are trying to spawn. The 31 hectare Baker Sugar Bush in Vaughan came into public ownership and is now protected. In the Lower Don, The Don Valley Brick Works site is being transformed from a wasteland into a cultural and natural urban oasis. One hundred and thirty new regeneration projects have been undertaken throughout the watershed. Public support for the sustainable development of the Oak Ridges Moraine, the headwaters of the Don and many of Toronto's other watercourses, has gelled into a true movement.

But all is not well. Provincial and federal cutbacks have (in part) severely limited monitoring, to the point where it is difficult to keep track of what is happening in the Don ecosystem. Today, the Province monitors only one

water quality station in the Don and there is still no Provincial policy in place to adequately protect the Oak Ridges Moraine. In 1997, we called for a funded plan to eliminate combined-sewer overflows in the City of Toronto; in 2000, much background work has been done to develop that plan, but funding is not yet a reality.

Increasingly, we are finding that our collective actions are falling short of the ecosystem approach to regeneration we've been advocating. The vast majority of the 130 regeneration projects undertaken between 1997 and 1999 are small scale projects such as planting 50 trees or creating a wildflower garden. There is concern that the potential cumulative benefits of these small actions will not be fully realized until they are complemented by larger scale ecosystem restoration projects designed to improve the River's water quality and reduce its destructively high peak flows. These major issues, including the periodic overflow of raw sewage into the River, and the inconsistent and inadequate state of stormwater control, must be addressed. In essence, it means taking bold steps now, while the opportunity for regeneration still exists.

*We've taken a lot  
from the Don,  
but we're only  
just beginning to  
"give back."*



📍 Yes, this is the Don (at Pottery Road).

Larger-scale action is also required in the Don's fishery. The successful mitigation of five weirs on the Don should now allow salmon to access the Don's upper reaches in York Region for the first time in over a century. Unfortunately, successful spawning is virtually impossible due to the River's high peak flows and its high level of suspended sediment.

Large scale water quality and quantity measures are essential in order to address the Don's destructive flow regime and support the extraordinary habitat work of the Don's committed and passionate community volunteers. We need a more integrated focus that balances local site specific actions with watershed-scale improvements.

We've also come to recognize the need for a Natural Heritage Strategy to direct regeneration action as well as the need for Stormwater Management Upgrade Plans to help prioritize activities on a site-by-site and a regional basis.

And finally, while volunteerism in the community and stewardship activities of municipalities are up, awareness and understanding of watershed issues is unchanged from 1997. The majority of respondents to the 2000 public opinion survey cannot correctly define a watershed. The general public doesn't understand the vital connection

between the River's health and their own behaviours and actions. WE don't understand that WE, and not industry, are the primary polluters of the Don.

Ten years of action to restore the Don has taught us all many things and has greatly emphasized the limitations of our current efforts. It's time to redefine the way in which we approach urban watershed revitalization, using a more holistic and integrative methodology. It's time for governments to recommit to water quality monitoring and to provide a sustainable urban green infrastructure that will, among other things, help ensure the GTA's economic competitiveness in the future. It's time to act on the large scale water quality and water flow issues that must be addressed in order to support the smaller regeneration achievements we've already realized.

The three years since the last report card have been witness to many political and environmental changes. A new City of Toronto has been created. The issue of climate change and its potential harmful impacts on our country, our communities and our River has come into greater focus. These were years of change and upheaval, yet many important and innovative new initiatives were undertaken during this time. The new City of Toronto initiated an



unprecedented list of innovative environmental actions that, if pursued and effectively implemented, will establish Toronto as a world leader in urban sustainability. York Region municipalities also continued their progression toward sustainability by launching a number of exciting initiatives. The need for bigger actions has been recognized and these past three years have laid much of the foundation on which to build a new future for the Don.

The time is ripe for revitalizing our commitment, for taking the Bold Steps.

## How to Read This Report Card

This 2000 report card provides an updated assessment of the Don's health as determined by measuring progress on the 18 indicators, or signs, of watershed health originally assessed in 1997.

Most of the indicators in the Report Card are interconnected. For example, increasing the amount of **wetland** in the watershed (Indicator 6) should also improve **water quality for aquatic habitats** (Indicator 3), increase and diversify **frog and fish** populations (Indicators 9 and 10), improve the Don's flow regime (Indicator 1) and enrich people's **responsible use and enjoyment** of the Don (Indicator 13). Everything really is connected to everything else!

Like the 1997 Report Card, this report is organized into six major chapters. The first three chapters are based on the three themes of *Forty Steps*: Caring for Water, Caring for Nature, and Caring for Community. The final three chapters are based on the three "principles" of *Forty Steps*: protect what is healthy, regenerate what is degraded, and take responsibility for the Don.

The first three chapters are primarily concerned with the condition of the watershed and the community's relationship to it. How clean is the water? How much of the land space do wetlands occupy? How often do local schools use the Don as a teaching tool? The final three chapters focus more on our actions to regenerate the Don. How well are natural areas protected? What regeneration projects are underway? Are residents good stewards of the Don in their daily lives?

## Targets

Each of the 18 indicators is accompanied by three sets of targets or specific aims to be achieved by the years 2003, 2010 and 2030. The year 2003 targets are ones that we believe are achievable by the next Report Card. The targets for 2010 and 2030 are set to guide improvement over the medium and long terms.

## Evaluating Progress

This report card judges progress, wherever possible, by determining how much has been accomplished since the last report card in 1997. For each indicator, trends in improvement or decline are expressed as arrows pointing up, down or sideways (no-change), as follows:



UP ARROW - Making progress



DOWN ARROW - Losing ground



SIDEWAYS ARROW - Breaking even

## And Finally

In 1994, the Don Watershed Regeneration Task Force asked everyone "to take 40 steps to a new Don". Thousands of people, from many cultures and backgrounds, have taken those steps. There have been over 230 regeneration projects completed or initiated since 1994. These small steps are vital. But in the end, the success of our efforts hinges on our ability to complement these first steps with some much bigger strides.

*It's now time to take the Bold Steps.*

### Volunteer and Municipal Initiatives Need Provincial and Federal Support - NOW!

Canada's future economic competitiveness and continuing quality of life for its citizens rests in large part on protection and restoration of a healthy natural environment.

Tomorrow's centres of business and commerce will thrive only if they are places where people want to live. Clean air, clean water and a green mosaic of valleys, parks and beaches are as critical in nurturing well-being as jobs and housing. The time for planning and acting "sustainably" has come.

Only with a renewed commitment of assistance for funding and policies from the Provincial and Federal governments can we move forward.