

Briefing Note: The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System as a model for the first Urban Biosphere EcoPark in Canada



**Prepared by the Secretariat and Management Committee of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark
System**

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For additional information please contact:

Peter Kelly
Coordinator, Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System
Royal Botanical Gardens
680 Plains Road West
Burlington, ON L7T 4H4

905 527-1158 ext. 225
pkelly@rbg.ca

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Purpose:

The purpose of this note is to propose a pilot program that the federal, provincial and local governments would collectively support to assist collaborative initiatives focused on land securement, stewardship and recreation in urban areas. The initiative would lead to a new official designation for protected land in Canada entitled Urban Biosphere EcoParks. This new intergovernmental designation would rely on a funding formula that would include contributions (financial and/or in-kind donations such as land) from federal, provincial and local governments.

Current Situation:

The western end of Lake Ontario north including Cootes Paradise, the Niagara Escarpment and the lands in between are some of the most biologically diverse areas in all of Canada. These lands are also located in close proximity to the expanding urban centres of Hamilton and Burlington.

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System partnership was formed through an MOU in 2013 to connect, protect and conserve natural lands in the region where possible through land acquisition and stewardship. This partnership has been effective but it is difficult to acquire lands for conservation and passive recreation near urban centres as properties with high development potential are also prohibitively expensive.

Proposal:

There is currently no federal or provincial designation to recognize and support local collaborative efforts to protect, connect or restore natural lands in close proximity to urban areas. Some of these areas support high biological diversity and are threatened by urban expansion. Protected natural lands are also needed for passive sustainable recreation opportunities for people moving into expanding urban populations.

With some additional support the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System could provide the ideal model to preserve and protect lands in an urban area and lead to a potential network of intergovernmental Urban Biosphere EcoParks across Canada.

As such, there will be four core requirements for an Urban Biosphere EcoPark designation:

1. A demonstrated need to maintain and expand natural capital and conserve threatened habitats and Species at Risk in close proximity to expanding urban centre(s).
2. A need for expanding the network of passive and sustainable recreation opportunities due to intensification.
3. A formal collaboration of agencies that own natural lands in close proximity to an urban centre working on a central vision and strategic plan. This collaboration would include federal, provincial and municipal governments and other local partners potentially including, but not

limited to: First Nations, Conservation Authorities, botanical gardens, universities, naturalist groups, land trusts, non-profits, and recreation organizations.

4. An annual funding formula in place to support a central secretariat, land stewardship (on both partner and privately owned properties) and recreation planning, as well as a separate land acquisition budget that is also supported on an annual basis. This unique formula would include financial contributions from the federal government, provincial government and local municipal governments and partners.

Next Steps:

Representatives from the partners in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System welcome a dialogue between themselves and the Ministers and staff from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport and Environment and Climate Change Canada to explore the feasibility of the Urban Biosphere EcoPark concept.

Background: an Introduction to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a collaborative initiative to protect, restore and connect ecologically sensitive habitat within a complex urban landscape covering more than 3,600 hectares (9,000 acres), including 1,983 hectares (4,900 acres) of green space owned by participating partners (Figure 1 below).



It is an alliance of nine conservation land-owning agencies and organizations within the cities of Hamilton and Burlington, Ontario. The participating agencies include City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Conservation Halton, Bruce Trail Conservancy, Hamilton Conservation Authority, Hamilton Naturalists Club, Regional Municipality of Halton, McMaster University, and Royal Botanical Gardens, with considerable assistance from the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan Office.

This region is one of the richest in Canada for biological diversity, providing habitat to more than 1,500 species of plants and animals, including 40% of Ontario's wild plant species and more than 50 species at risk. The environmental significance of this area has been recognized at the international, national, provincial and local levels. This area is also of considerable significance to cultural heritage, including numerous archaeological sites related to both indigenous occupation and historical period settlement and use.

However, these natural lands are situated in one of Canada's most vibrant and rapidly growing urban regions, the Hamilton-Burlington region of the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area, or GTHA. Economic growth and development have fragmented natural ecosystems via roads, rail lines, development, and other urban land uses. The result is a disconnected patchwork of smaller protected areas owned by a variety of agencies, each valuable but isolated and ultimately unsustainable. The direct effects of this

fragmentation include loss of native species and significant pressures from invasive species and human uses.

With increasing urban intensification and infill forecast over the coming decades, survival of these natural habitats is in doubt unless the fragmentation can be addressed. There is an urgent need to reconnect, restore and protect these valuable lands, and to create a lasting legacy for current and future generations, so that sustainable recreation, ecosystem services, and biodiversity can go hand in hand.

Since 2006, the partners have secured or committed approximately \$3,757,855 (including land securement, planning, ecological restoration and other programs) to develop and implement the vision for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, and have committed internally an additional \$1,883,231 (including cash and in-kind contributions) to the development and management of the alliance. Significant investments have been made to purchase available lands to better support the ecological connectivity of open space. Since the formal launch of the EcoPark System an additional 90 hectares (223 acres) of open space have been protected in perpetuity by the partner agencies, through purchases, donations, and conservation easements.

The Future

The collaborative nature of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System initiative has allowed the partners to do more together than they would have been able to do alone. However, the long-term sustainability of the EcoPark System requires support and resources that exceed what the partners are able to contribute from their existing resources. The partners are therefore reaching out to the federal and provincial governments for support and welcome their participation in the initiative. By supporting and investing in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario can deliver the significant benefits of urban greenspace and biodiversity conservation at a fraction of the cost of establishing a new federal or provincial park, and without incurring an ongoing liability.

The long-term financial sustainability of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System requires secure and long-term sources of funding. We respectfully suggest that the federal government and/or provincial government consider instituting a fund to support land acquisition near urban centres to secure the future of green space through purchase, long term lease, or other mechanisms, to be used in conjunction with other mechanisms for raising funds. We also invite direct investment in the EcoPark System program through support to our program, to help us achieve this unique vision. We have prepared estimates of overall costs for additional land securement and our on-going program and would be pleased to discuss our needs further (Table 2).

The boards and councils of the participating governments and agencies have approved approaching the Government of Canada and/or the Government of Ontario for engagement in developing mutually-beneficial relationships. The participating agencies would welcome the opportunity to advance this important program in partnership with other levels of government.

Table 2. Estimates of long-term investments being sought to realize Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System vision

Land Securement Costs		Notes
Land Securement	\$23,100,000	a
Total Land Securement Costs:	\$23,100,000	
Annual Operating Costs:		
Habitat Management and Restoration Program:	\$980,000	b
Community engagement and communications	\$80,000	c
Private landowner outreach	\$70,000	d
Total annual operating costs:	\$1,130,000	e

Notes:

- a. Estimated cost in 2017 of purchasing an additional 550 ha of greenspace identified by partner agencies as key to securing ecological corridors and buffers, based on a 2015 purchase of 40 hectares at \$42,000 per ha. These lands are considered to be critical to the ecological sustainability and connectivity of existing protected areas. Estimate includes costs of financing, surveys, etc. Actual purchase prices have not been negotiated with present land owners.
- b. Estimated cost of extending present management costs incurred by Royal Botanical Gardens on 980 ha (approx. \$600/ha/yr) across 1,600 ha of natural areas among all partner lands. This includes costs for built infrastructure such as trails and ecological management systems amortized over 25 years.
- c. Communications and community engagement are vital to raise awareness and support for the EcoPark System.
- d. A specific program is needed to reach out to private land owners in the immediate area of the EcoPark System
- e. At present the partner agencies and funding bodies are contributing approximately \$300,000 per year toward the program of the EcoPark System. We assume substantial in-kind contributions and some funding support from the partner agencies will continue long-term.