

Oak Ridges Moraine Red Flags

The Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation (the 'Foundation') identified five major areas of concern where deficiencies in current implementation efforts pose serious threats to the effectiveness of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (ORMCP) and more importantly to the health of the Oak Ridges Moraine ecosystem.

These red flagged issues represent areas where the Foundation believes that future management efforts should be focused on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Policy Development and Monitoring

a) Policy

Through its *Measuring Success* project, the Foundation identified many serious policy gaps and deficiencies that hamper the ability of the Province and municipalities to effectively meet the expectations laid out in the ORMCP.

A number of situations were cited where lack of proper regulatory tools such as site alteration by-laws, tree conservation by-laws and watershed plans make it impossible to prevent numerous kinds of degradation to natural habitat, landform or water resources on the Moraine. In addition the ORMCP, which was developed primarily as a planning vehicle operating under the provisions of the Planning Act, has inadequate regulatory linkages to other legislation and regulations that are absolutely essential for the effective execution of the Plan's policies. For example, there are no clear linkages or paths of accountability for water taking permit applications processed under regulations of the Ontario Water Resources Act. Similarly there is no clear direction on how infrastructure works such as roads, municipal waste disposal systems, municipal water supplies and hydro lines will ensure that such activities comply to the requirements of the ORMCP.

Another significant concern is the lack of technical guidance available to help municipalities and others interpret and implement certain policies of the ORMCP. Section 41 of the ORMCP, for example, needs policy clarification on what constitutes “need” and “reasonable alternative” in order to determine if an infrastructure proposal should be permitted in certain parts of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

In order to address these concerns the Foundation in conjunction with many of its partners has:

- Completed a stakeholder survey; two workshops with planning experts; and developed detailed comments on policy improvements that should be considered for the ORMCP. These have been shared with appropriate staff at the Province; and
- Submitted an Application for Review under section 61 of the Environmental Bill of Rights to the Environmental Commissioner’s Office asking for a formal review of the ORMCP and related initiatives.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue operations it would, through its education and capacity building programs, work with others to encourage and support the adoption of appropriate regulatory tools to properly implement the ORMCP. The Foundation would also consider the development of technical guidance materials where appropriate.

b) Monitoring

Currently there is no monitoring program in place to assess the effectiveness of the ORMCP. In spite of the fact that the Province specifically committed to develop performance indicators and a monitoring network in the implementation section of the ORMCP, nothing beyond very vague and incomplete discussion papers have been developed to date. This is a serious deficiency because without monitoring it will be very difficult to measure the effectiveness of the ORMCP at its scheduled 2015 review.

As part of its *Measuring Success* project the Foundation, in partnership with the Conservation Authorities Moraine Coalition, explored and was

able to identify almost 30 performance indicators that could be used to measure trends in ecological and hydrological health and/or measure agency effectiveness in implementing the ORMCP. This work also identified potential targets to measure success and populated a draft monitoring matrix with existing data that allowed the Foundation to assess the adequacy of existing information. This preliminary work has been a first attempt at developing a baseline of information that has provided some general conclusions about the health of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

The work done in this exercise showed that there was still a general lack of good data to comprehensively assess the health of the Moraine. It also points to a need for the development of data collection practices across the Oak Ridges Moraine that are standardized and comparable across time and space.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue its operation, it would dedicate significant resources and efforts to the development of an enhanced monitoring system in time for the 2015 review of the ORMCP. This would include:

- Continuing support of its watershed assessment report developed in conjunction with the Conservation Authorities Moraine Coalition to improve its effectiveness as a monitoring tool including development of additional data and improving the comparability of data between watersheds;
- Seeking additional partnerships in monitoring to encourage commitment to the development of a monitoring network; and
- Supporting research that looked at the development of more effective performance indicators and targets for measuring the effectiveness of the ORMCP.

Such initiatives would be carried through the capacity building and education programs of the Foundation.

Stream Health

The Foundation's *Measuring Success* project confirmed the suspicions of many that the health of streams and associated aquatic ecosystems on the Oak Ridges Moraine are not as healthy as should be expected in an area designated as one of Southern Ontario's most important natural areas. Many water quality stations in streams across the Oak Ridges Moraine show water quality levels below recommended provincial or federal standards. Fish community stations and benthic macro-invertebrate stations show that the health of many aquatic habitats is below what would be expected in healthy stream conditions. And finally an examination of the amount of naturally vegetated riparian lands along most Oak Ridges Moraine streams showed them to be well below levels recommended by Environment Canada.

These findings point to an urgent need for focused efforts protecting and, wherever possible, improving the health of streams across the Oak Ridges Moraine. This is critical not only for the health of the Oak Ridges Moraine but for the health of the receiving streams flowing north and south of it that depend on headwaters for clean, abundant water.

The Foundation over the past nine years has made significant contributions to the improved health of the streams on the Oak Ridges Moraine through its stewardship and education programs.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue its operations it would focus major effort in the area of stream improvement including:

- The development of a specific strategy for focusing restoration and public education efforts on stream systems in the Oak Ridges Moraine that are most in need of stream health improvement; and
- Undertaking land securement efforts that focus sections of streams most in need of restoration and/or long term protection.

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Forest Interior

The Foundation's *Measuring Success* project showed that forest interior habitat existed in sufficient amounts in many of the natural core designations of the ORMCP. However for some natural core designations and most natural linkage areas identified in the ORMCP forest cover was below the 10 % coverage level recommended by Environment Canada.

Forest interior refers to forest cover within a forested area that is located more than 100 metres from the edge of the forest. Since many bird species on the Oak Ridges Moraine depend on these forest interiors for their survival it is imperative that such habitat be protected or enhanced wherever possible.

In the past, the Foundation has supported forest restoration in general. The role forest cover has been playing in actually improving habitat that targeted the needs of animal and plant species that were of special concern may have been underestimated prior to the research completed through the *Measuring Success* project. In the future, forest restoration priorities would be those that demonstrate that they support habitat for the most vulnerable biota on the Oak Ridges Moraine. In this regard, forest restoration that increases or improves forest interior should be given a higher priority, especially in areas of the natural core and natural linkage designations, where it is below levels recommended by Environment Canada.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue its operations it would focus major effort in:

- Focusing forest stewardship and education efforts on the protection or expansion of forest interior habitat; and
- Undertaking land securement efforts in sections of forest that are able to provide interior habitat.

Prairie, Prairie Savannah and Old Field Habitat

The Foundation's *Measuring Success* project showed that the most dramatic losses of natural habitat were found with prairie and prairie savannah habitats located at the eastern end of the Oak Ridges Moraine. In Northumberland County, for example, up to 20% of the Moraine was covered by prairie or prairie savannah habitat prior to European settlement. Today this level is a little less than 1%.

This low level of coverage is a concern when one considers that many plant and animal species living in these habitats are rare or absent in other parts of the Oak Ridges Moraine. The protection and enhancement of these habitats is therefore essential to maintaining biodiversity.

The Foundation has and will continue to assign a high priority to its stewardship and education programs that protect and expand prairie and prairie savannah habitat.

Another significant revelation accrued from the *Measuring Success* project was the identification of declining trends in the number of breeding birds that depend on grassland habitat for their survival. The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas speculated that this loss was in part due to the decrease in the amount of open and old field habitat being lost to urban development and conversion to forest cover on marginal farmland.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue its operations it will support continued research to more closely examine the implications of declining grassland species and will, through its stewardship, land securement and education programs, give greater consideration and support to projects that protect or enhance early succession habitats.

Land Securement

In a survey conducted as part of the *Measuring Success* project, stakeholders identified that they felt that land securement should be the number one priority for the Foundation in the event that additional funding was awarded to them.

Currently only about 10% of the Oak Ridges Moraine is protected as conservation land. This is in marked contrast to the Niagara Escarpment that has well over 20% of its lands in the hands of conservation-oriented groups.

The Foundation believes based on feedback from stakeholders that there is strong support for maintaining land securement efforts to:

- Protect sensitive or significant lands that cannot be adequately protected and managed through the ORMCP;
- Provide increased public access to the lands on the Oak Ridges Moraine; and
- Increase the amount of off road trails as a component of the Oak Ridges Moraine Trail.

If the Foundation receives funding to continue its operations it would maintain its land securement program and it would enhance the effectiveness of this program by:

- Revisiting its securement priorities to ensure they reflect the stewardship and protection priorities identified in the findings of the *Measuring Success* project; and
- Establish a parks, open space and trail coalition with conservation land holders on the Oak Ridges Moraine to seek opportunities to co-ordinate land acquisition and management efforts to promote an Oak Ridges Moraine Parks identity.