

# **Brief to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development**

## **for a study on Urban Conservation**

Provided by the **Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS)**

*La Société pour la nature et les parcs (SNAP)*

Oliver Kent, National President

October 29th, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to present our thoughts on urban conservation issues to members of the committee.

As an organization, CPAWS has spent almost 50 years working in the field of conservation. We focus largely on wilderness conservation and have a goal of seeing at least 50% of Canada's public land and water protected forever. We are involved in campaigns to create national and provincial parks, and marine protected areas in all regions of the country. We also work on ensuring the sustainable use of our natural resources on the rest of the land and seascape, and on ensuring existing protected areas are managed in ways that will protect nature in the long term. Some of our work focuses on near-urban and urban protected areas and we are happy to provide our thoughts as you consider this question.

Our comments today will be related to the creation and management of urban and near-urban conservation areas, as well as the importance of connecting people to nature through these areas.

### **Healthy Ecosystems provide high value**

It is well established that healthy ecosystems provide people with significant services that are essential for our well-being. They provide us with clean air and water, food security and human health. We are fundamentally linked to, and a part of the ecosystem. When ecosystems decline, humans suffer. By protecting healthy ecosystems we not only protect nature, we protect ourselves.

The economic value of the services ecosystems provide to us (for example, clean air and water) are enormous, particularly in proximity to urban areas. For example, a 2012 study on the Toronto Greenbelt found that the Greenbelt has an economic impact of over \$9 billion per year province-wide, and supports 161,000 jobs. Nature also provides sociological and spiritual benefits that are harder to quantify, including the chance for restorative escapes from the pressures of our busy urban lives. Evidence of the health benefits of connecting with nature is growing dramatically. Urban conservation efforts are important for environmental, economic and health reasons.

### **Canada needs to meet international commitments**

There is no doubt that the Federal Government has a need and an opportunity to create conservation areas in urban and near-urban areas. Perhaps less well known is the fact that urban conservation can help Canada deliver on our international commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, in particular the 2020 Strategic Plan for Biodiversity. This Plan provides a framework for action for countries around the world, as well as specific targets that we have agreed to work

towards to save biodiversity and enhance its benefits for people. At a national scale, urban conservation can contribute to the objectives of a National Conservation Plan for Canada. CPAWS presented to the Committee earlier this year on this topic, and we were pleased to see that the Committee's Report reflected many of our recommendations for scaling up conservation efforts across Canada.

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity Strategic Plan, Canada has committed to protecting at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water and 10% of coastal and marine areas, particularly areas of important to biodiversity and ecosystem services, by 2020. Because urban conservation areas are likely to be small areas, they will only make a small contribution to achieving this numeric target. But they can be enormously important for protecting at-risk biodiversity and for supplying ecosystem services to urban Canadians. And there are other targets under the Strategic Plan that will benefit from urban conservation initiatives. For example, Target 1 commits countries to ensuring that by 2020 people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably. And Target 14 focuses on the need to restore and safeguard ecosystems that provide essential services including those related to water, health, livelihoods and well-being.

### **Urban conservation can't replace wilderness conservation**

We would like to emphasize that any work on urban conservation should not come at the expense of Canada's continued efforts to conserve the vast wilderness areas that are core to our national identity. CPAWS is working to support many national park and marine protected area proposals across the country, and we strongly urge the federal government to continue to work to establish these areas as a priority over the coming years. This work must be accelerated if we are to protect at least 17% of land and inland waters, and 10% of coastal and marine areas by 2020. With our vast wild spaces, CPAWS believes that Canada is in a position to exceed these targets, and demonstrate leadership on the world stage.

I would like to make a few comments on how we see urban protected areas differing from our "wilder" parks and protected areas, in particular national parks.

Canada's National Parks benefit from a law that requires that they be managed to maintain or restore their ecological integrity as a first priority. This requires that parks be managed to ensure all the native species present in healthy populations, and that ecosystem processes, like predator prey relationships, and natural fire regimes are working well. This sets a high bar for ecosystem-based park management that is considered a gold standard around the world. Sometimes achieving this standard requires protecting what is there now, but more often than not, active science-based management is required to restore ecosystems, and in some cases, to bring back species that have been lost. For example in Grasslands National Park in Saskatchewan, bison and black footed ferrets have been reintroduced to the park in recent years. And restoring ecosystems that rely on wildfires to regenerate by prescribed burning is a project that Parks Canada has been implementing in many parks.

As we develop new tools for urban conservation, it is important that we keep this gold standard for our national parks intact.

### **Urban parks need to make ecosystem health top priority**

We recognize that in most cases it won't be possible to manage urban conservation areas to the same gold ecological integrity standard. But these fragments of urban nature can still play a very important role in conserving our natural heritage and biodiversity, and in providing clean water, air and other benefits. And much work can be done to restore their biological and natural values. While it may not be possible to bring back caribou and wolves to urban environments, it is possible to work on restoring rivers and streams, to replant native forests, and to control invasive species. And to engage a broad range of partners to help with this work.

To address the differences between national parks and national urban parks, CPAWS is supporting the concept that national urban parks or conservation areas should be managed to maximize their ecosystem health, rather than to maintain or restore their ecological integrity. Maximizing ecosystem health will still require significant resources for scientific research and monitoring as well as ecological restoration.

To ensure that urban parks like the Rouge are able to protect and restore ecosystem health in the long term, we believe that legislation for urban parks like the Rouge needs to clearly place conservation as the first priority for management. Given the enormous pressures these places will face from urban development and the millions of people that will visit these small, fragile places, it is critically important that the law governing national urban parks include a clear statement that use needs to happen within the limits of maintaining and restoring ecosystem health.

Urban conservation areas cannot be all things to all people. If they are to retain their natural values, a focus on stewardship activities in national urban parks would be an excellent way of connecting people to nature and at the same time restore ecosystem health. Otherwise it is hard to imagine how these special natural gems will be able to maintain their resilience in the long term.

When creating protected areas in urban areas, like in wilder areas, it is essential to consider some overarching principles to maintain ecological health. For example, is the area as big as possible to maximize ecosystem health? Is it connected to other protected areas or natural landscapes so that wildlife can move through the urban area? If not, how fragmented is the landscape and how can the challenges to connectivity be overcome by working in partnership with others?

### **National Urban Parks should connect Canadians to nature**

As the Canadian population becomes more diverse and more urban, the long established traditions of going out into wilderness areas to camp, canoe, cross-country ski or hike are becoming increasingly rare. As a conservation organization, we are concerned that future generations of Canadians may not be as connected to our natural world and as a result will fail to appreciate the immense value that these places provide to our collective health and well-being, and will not actively support their protection. When they are out of sight, they are out of mind.

Many of our nation's spectacular national parks are hours away from our country's biggest population centres. Urban conservation projects are starting to sprout up across Canada, adding to existing near-urban parks like Gatineau Park (near Ottawa), Mont St. Hilaire outside Montreal, and Stanley Park (in Vancouver). For example, the Halifax Regional Municipality is currently exploring the creation of a protected area at Birch Cove Lakes. The Parc de l'archipel de Montreal is another potential project to consider under this banner. Suffice it to say that the Rouge National Urban Park is not unique in its desire to serve environmental and human needs in an urban area.

While places like Gatineau Park are still lacking adequate legislation to assure their protection for future generations, they are already playing a key role in connecting urban populations to nature. The need for these natural oases in the city is urgent to start to combat the ‘nature deficit disorder’ – an alienation of people from their natural environment. Richard Louv, in his now famous book “Last Child in the Woods” explores this concept with deep concern, and organizations like the Child and Nature Alliance and CPAWS are exploring ways to connect young people and new Canadians to our wilderness and natural spaces through programs like “Get Outside”, which is a program CPAWS has currently underway in BC that works to get youth outside and then to share their passion for nature with their peers. We are working to expand this program to other regions of the country.

It is our belief that near-urban parks would create the perfect setting to introduce people to nature. We imagine such places becoming a so-called ‘gateway drug’ to larger wilderness experiences and leading people to a deeper appreciation of the incredible natural places Canada has already conserved (and will conserve in the future), and the important role these places play in sustaining us all.

Thank you for your time and interest in helping to conserve Canada’s natural heritage.