



The Hills are Alive: Spring on the Oak Ridges Moraine

Toronto - April 27, 2015 - The living, breathing Oak Ridges Moraine is a landscape worth celebrating this spring. Born at the end of the last ice age, the moraine is now the scenic hilly backdrop to Canada's most densely populated region. Its rolling sand and gravel ridges act as the Greater Toronto Area's rain barrel and provide essential habitat for increasingly rare wildlife in southern Ontario. Fortunately the moraine's fine natural features are still intact thanks to 13 years of protection under the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

But the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan is under the microscope. Together with its sister plans for the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment and Greater Golden Horseshoe, the government is debating the future of the moraine's almost 500 thousand acres. The very land that will soon be cloaked in trillium blooms and is beginning to ring with bird song. And there will be other voices in the hills. Conservation groups and thousands of citizens are speaking up for a stronger plan that will sustain and enhance the moraine.

The government is legally required to take on this Provincial Review – very timely given changing pressures on the land. Population growth alone has been dramatic. Ontario's population grew from 11.4 million in 2001 to 13.7 million in 2014, with the GTA now accounting for well over six million. If these conservation plans had not been in place, sprawling development would have gobbled up valuable farmlands, damaged water resources, and carved up our natural heritage and green spaces.

The Oak Ridges Moraine is the heart of the Greenbelt. It is an essential water recharge zone that directly supplies 250,000 Ontarians with clean drinking water and feeds the 80 rivers and major creeks that flow north and south from its hills, sustaining over six million Ontarians. It provides essential ecological services by capturing rain turning it into a valuable groundwater resource and by controlling erosion and reducing floods. This habitat-rich land is home to over 900 species of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Its forests – extensive by southern Ontario standards – produce clean air, mitigating the effects of climate change.

Over the past thirteen years the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation has worked to protect the moraine's natural resources by investing more than \$14 million in land securement, stewardship, education and public awareness. This supported the work of many partners who themselves invested close to \$22 million into conservation projects. If the moraine is to have a healthy future, we need to continue to be proactive and look beyond keeping it in its current state. Close to 90 percent of the moraine is privately owned so we should be looking at ways to help the landowners care for the land that provides ecological goods and services for so many.

In March 2015, the Conservation Authorities Moraine Coalition released a report card critically assessing various health indicators of the moraine and adjacent Greenbelt lands. Their analysis shows that surface water quality in close to half of sub-watersheds on the moraine ranks only fair to poor (C Grade), indicating ongoing troubling effects of land use activities in many areas.

The dumping of fill is just one of the ways we're seeing these effects. Dirty soil, contaminated with heavy metals, petroleum and other toxic chemicals, threatens vulnerable aquifers jeopardizing the safety of its groundwater. Because of a legal loophole not addressed by the current plan, we've already seen several cases of contaminated fill being dumped on the moraine, including the 2010 Lake Ridge Road case in Scugog Township.

Protecting the integrity of the moraine supports the Province's commitment to effective water management and acknowledges the need to think strategically about the importance of water availability and supply. It also advances critical planning priorities that include healthy, sustainable communities, smart growth and valuing our natural and cultural heritage.

We need to keep a watchful eye focused on safeguarding the moraine as a distinct entity. For a sustainable future for the Greater Toronto Area and Ontario, an improved Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan must put ecological restoration and enhancement at the forefront of all future planning and support continued land stewardship and securement. We must build on the network of green spaces where nature thrives, water is protected and where the public can freely explore and connect with all of the moraine's special features.

And let's not forget to get out onto the Oak Ridges Moraine this spring to enjoy a few of our favourite things – whether it's hiking, cycling, birdwatching, visiting a farmers' market, or marvelling at the spring wildflowers.

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