



BRINGING BACK THE DON RIVER: NATURE NEEDS MORE GOOD FRIENDS

CANADA-ONTARIO AGREEMENT RESPECTING
THE GREAT LAKES BASIN ECOSYSTEM



THE DON RIVER RUNS THROUGH THE HEART OF TORONTO. Most of the river's watershed has been paved over by tract housing and malls, its feeder streams lined with concrete, and its wetlands filled with rubble. For much of the 20th century, the muddy Don River has been little more than an open sewer cutting straight through the heart of Toronto.

Yet, after an absence of more than 100 years, fish are making their annual run up the Don River. Deer, muskrat and even beaver can be found in its reaches. Herons, ducks and geese are nesting in re-established marshlands along its course. And families are picnicking by its banks. Although much work still needs to be done, a coalition of government and community groups are working together to 'bring back the Don'.

Step by step, project by project the council is making steady progress. The 27-member council is based on the twin principles of community input and community ownership of the ecosystem regeneration process. Formed back in 1995 as an advisory committee to the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), it currently consists of residents, municipal councillors, and representatives from various public interest groups. *(cont'd)*



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Cover: Don Valley Brick Works
Cover inset: volunteers planting

- 1. the Don River at Lawrence Avenue
- 2. purple loosestrife, an invasive species
- 3. yellow spotted salamander

Transcending arbitrary political boundaries, the council is able to facilitate the transformation of local passion into action across an entire watershed.

Forty steps to a new Don

The council developed a planning document to bring back the Don, involving extensive research, mapping, consultation and community participation. The council is committed to implementing the various stream rehabilitation projects – replanting natural vegetation, recreating marshes and wetlands, removing barriers to fish – outlined in the planning document ‘Forty Steps to a New Don’.

The council undertakes monitoring programs, assesses the progress made in meeting target dates specified in the plan, facilitates information exchanges, and contributes to regional planning processes. The council also supports the efforts of those engaged in activities to regenerate the Don, groups such as Toronto’s very active Task Force to Bring Back the Don.

The council is not a formal regulatory body. As a result, it is completely dependent on cooperative partnerships to get things accomplished. “The council brings both local expertise and local sensitivities to the planning table,” says council chair, Mark Wilson. “When it’s time to get a project off the ground, they help raise funds and attract resources. And when the dirty work finally starts, they mobilize hundreds of local volunteers for clean-up parties, tree-planting days, whatever is needed.”

So far, restoring habitat has been the first priority. From boy scouts to senior citizens, volunteers have planted tens of thousands of trees and bushes, reseeded meadows with native wildflowers, and rooted bulrushes and other aquatic plants around restored ponds and shallow wetlands. Volunteers are also removing invasive non-native plants, such as the purple loosestrife that has been taking over Ontario’s wetlands, the garlic mustard which can quickly carpet a forest floor, and the dog-strangling vine that is choking meadow lands.

The impressive results of volunteers’ labours are scattered throughout the 360 square kilometres of the Don River basin. There is the hugely successful Harding Park regeneration project, and the restoration of the concrete lined Terraview/Willowfield watercourse, and the transformation of the industrial wasteland around the Don Valley Brick Works, and many more.

The Don Valley Brick Works project addresses the Lower Don River from the Forks of the Don, where the East and West Don and Taylor Creek meet, down to Lake Ontario. The Lower Don has held an important role in the Region’s history as a place of settlement, agriculture and later, industry. Here the river passes through some of Toronto’s most developed and densely populated neighbourhoods.

Present day efforts to renaturalize the watershed and restore its health are reviving the Lower Don’s role as a natural green-space and corridor for wildlife. Groups such as the Evergreen Foundation and the Boy Scouts of Canada work on landscape and wetland restoration. Many other groups have planted wildflowers and shrubs.

Still much left to do

Despite the very significant gains already made, there is still much to do. Most of the watershed’s former forest cover and valley wetlands have been lost to development. What is left is being fragmented into smaller and smaller chunks, and threatened by aggressive non-native plants and animals.



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4. the Don River watershed

The water quality through the watershed is still poor. Stormwater, which pours into the river from more than a 1000 sewer outfalls and discharge pipes, accounts for more than 70 percent of its total flow. It is also the primary source of the high levels of phosphorous, fecal coliform, and heavy metals that can be measured in the Don River. Instead of percolating slowly through the soil to reach the river cool and clean, rain water gushes directly from lawn and gutter, parking lot and roadway to the sewers and into the Don.

Almost every time it rains, the combined storm and sanitary sewers that serve many of the city's older neighbourhoods overflow and dump untreated sewage and contaminated wastewaters into the river. Polluted runoff carries oil, gasoline and other pollutants directly into the Don from the six-lane Don Valley Parkway that snakes through the valley.

Many of the habitat projects are helping to improve water quality. Natural landscapes absorb, collect, filter and release stormwater gradually. Collection ponds hold back runoff, reducing erosion and allowing solids to settle out. Marshes and wetlands remove excess nutrients from the flow. But further improvement is going to hinge on sewer upgrades, stormwater management and runoff diversion projects.

A Wet Weather Flow Management Master Plan is being drafted by the City of Toronto's Works Department, a major player in the Toronto and Region Area of Concern (AOC), in an attempt to control the runoff to drainage and sewer systems during heavy rainfalls, spring thaws and other major precipitation events. The municipality is taking a progressive approach and consolidating all the various watershed and pollution control plans developed in the past 15 years, with the final objective of reducing wet weather-related water pollution.

Improving water quality is going to be a big job. The aquatic ecosystem will not recover until we can stem the overflows from the old combined sewers and find some way to divert the heavily polluted runoff. "No single volunteer group, no matter how dedicated or how well organized, could tackle this on its own," says Wilson. "We have to have all three levels of government – municipal, provincial and federal – working together to bring the needed resources to bear on an environmental problem of this magnitude and complexity."

Some of that support has and will continue to come from the Great Lakes Cleanup Fund and its successor, the Government of Canada's Great Lakes Sustainability Fund. Since 1990, the

Great Lakes Cleanup Fund has provided technical expertise and more than \$8.5 million toward restoring beneficial uses in the Toronto and Region AOC.

The Government of Ontario's support to the TRCA in the 1990s and establishment of funding for the Waterfront Regeneration Trust have contributed to improvements being enjoyed in the area. Ontario is doing large volume "Tributary Toxics" sampling in the Humber and Don Rivers as part of its commitment to the Toronto and Region Remedial Action Plan.

Under the new Canada-Ontario Agreement Respecting the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem, the governments of Canada and Ontario will continue to work together to help local municipalities.

Turning passion into action

The greatest strength of the Don Watershed Regeneration Council will continue to be its unique ability to unite and coordinate local and regional interests. The council views the watershed as a collection of communities, each one fired by an emotional attachment to its own stretch of river and inspired by the possibility for environmental renewal.

Transcending arbitrary political boundaries, the council is able to facilitate the transformation of local passion into action across an entire watershed. The council has also opened the channels of communication. Local groups are providing input on basin-wide problems, while decision makers are getting community feedback about the impact of regional, provincial and federal action plans.

The council is an excellent example of the kind of place-based, shared environmental responsibility that the governments of Canada and Ontario will be working to foster in AOCs around the Great Lakes, under the new COA. The council has really shown the exceptional value of forging the strongest kinds of partnerships at the local level. "The council doesn't have any regulatory clout, and it doesn't have vast financial resources," says Wilson. "All the things we've accomplished are due to the insight, the sweat and the stamina of our many dedicated and committed partners."

Under the new COA, it is anticipated that a number of AOCs will be fully restored and that significant progress will be made in meeting the objectives of the other RAPs in the remaining AOCs. The remediation of Collingwood Harbour was completed in 1994.

5. grey tree frog
6. Don Valley Brick Works



Looking at the bigger picture

The rehabilitation of the Don River watershed is just one component of the Toronto and Region Remedial Action Plan (RAP), and the Don Watershed Regeneration Council is just one of more than 20 watershed groups involved in RAP-related activities in the Toronto and Region Area of Concern (AOC). A four party agreement for RAP coordination has been signed by the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Environment Canada, and Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

The agreement enables the support of the Don Watershed Regeneration Council and many other watershed groups.



7. historic Don River watershed

Great Lakes acronyms

The purpose of the Canada-U.S. Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA), is to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem.

The Canada-Ontario Agreement Respecting the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem (COA) promotes cooperative action between the governments of Canada and Ontario and enlists partners to restore and sustain the environmental quality of the Great Lakes. COA helps Canada meet its obligations under the GLWQA.

Under the GLWQA, Canada and the United States have designated 42 Areas of Concern (AOCs), 16 of which are in Canada. In AOCs, environmental degradation is particularly pronounced causing impaired beneficial uses such as restrictions on swimming, fishing and drinking water consumption, and/or contributing to the overall degradation of the Great Lakes.

For each of the AOCs individually tailored Remedial Action Plans (RAPs) have been developed and are being implemented. Restoring the beneficial uses in the AOCs through the RAPs is a key priority for the governments of Canada and Ontario under COA.

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Canada-Ontario Agreement
Respecting the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem

To learn more about COA and the efforts to bring back the Don River, contact:

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