

WILLOW PARK ECOLOGY CENTRE

Success and Sustainability

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROSALEEN EGAN

WILLOW PARK ECOLOGY CENTRE (WPEC) is not your usual urban park. There are no sports fields, swings or slides. This natural park for plants, animals, fish, turtles, birds, insects and people includes a snake hibernaculum, wetland, butterfly garden, meadowland, river and woodland areas including a native tree trail.

Kids getting their feet wet in Silver Creek, Willow Park Ecology Centre, at the close of summer camp.





▲ Entrance to the park is by this boardwalk over Silver Creek, a tributary of the Credit.



◀ On right, Tunde Otto, programs director, and Carolyn Martin, board chair and park manager, offering crafts in the pavilion.

REGENERATED GROUNDS offer a great space for free play, exploration and contemplation in a varied natural environment where Silver Creek meets the Credit River in Norval, part of the town of Halton Hills.

Willow Park is a passive leisure space open to the public. It hosts school and summer programs, special events for all ages, and acts as a tourism attraction for the town. People come to relax, connect with nature, learn, walk, paint, take photos and participate in community events.

First-time visitor Laura Draga says, “My son and I were looking for something to do in the March break. I was pleased to learn about Willow Park which is moments from our house. We had a wonderful time learning about butterflies and making a bird feeder. The grounds are beautiful and we look forward to coming back.”

Visitors enter WPEC from Mary Street at Norval Park, and cross over Silver Creek on a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk. Boxes for butterflies, bats and birds are interspersed through the park. Newer features include a xeriscape garden, which needs little water, a roadside pollinator patch, and a large Native medicine wheel or Sacred Hoop. The park has an interpretive centre, pavilions and a demonstration area.

Natural Education

It all grew from an idea in 1996, after a roundtable on green communities hosted by the Town Environmental Advisory Committee (TEAC), to restore what was a grassy trailer park, subject to flooding, into a natural environment for “the engagement and education of citizens.”

Former Halton Hills resident and visionary, Ruth Kuchinad, was the first coordinator of the centre, setting the groundwork for what is now a successful regeneration that continues to evolve.

“We’ve been on a journey,” says the current WPEC programs director Tunde Otto, of the tension between controlling that evolution and letting nature take its course.

With the butterfly and pollinator garden for instance, she says, “We said ‘manage it, manage it’ and then once established, we let it do its own thing.” It is a little overgrown, and the pathways are cleared a few times of year because as Otto says, “It is fun to go in there and discover things.”

Just as the natural space evolves, so too does the use of that space, the programs it offers and its funding.



► Fearlessly observing nature: a harmless Brown Snake crosses a path.

The Centre occupies 2.1 hectares of regenerated land on the West Branch of the Credit River. The Credit flows through the Niagara Escarpment near Orangeville south to Lake Ontario. In Halton Hills, the Escarpment runs through the north and west. The property is owned by Credit Valley Conservation and is leased to the Town of Halton Hills.

The park is operated by a non-profit organization, its volunteer board of directors and paid programming staff. The Town helps with the large

physical maintenance of the park. Other maintenance and enhancements rely on WPEC, its volunteers and community partners.

“We rely heavily on volunteers,” says Otto.

Fifteen-year-old Christian Jander says, “I volunteer because I want to help out with nature and restore it to how it was before people ruined it.”

High school students help in a variety of ways including data entry and preparing materials for younger students and summer camp days. One

solved the question of how to construct the medicine wheel.

Summer Camps

“Plant a Kids’ Garden,” “Dragonflies and How they Protect Us,” “River Otters, Beavers and Muskrat” are among the themes for summer camp days on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the centre. They offer an opportunity for children four to 12 years of age to explore and to take ownership of the natural world.

Willow Park offers “curriculum-linked educational

opportunities” for students from K-Grade 6 in school, schoolyards, and at the Centre. According to the WPEC website, “programming follows the teaching model of Forest School Canada to foster rich learning experiences, ecological literacy, and healthy living by connecting children to nature.”

These programs are supported by boards of education in the area, and require a nominal fee per student. As programming expands, more staff is



▲ From the viewing platform at the wetland you can discover frogs, turtles, birds, insects and more.

needed, and therefore more monies need to be raised.

To help with funding, WPEC is introducing a membership opportunity, Friends of Willow Park, for “park users and anyone else who wants to see the park continue as a unique nature centre.” The park is free for the public to enjoy and discover from dawn to dusk on most days and says Otto, “It’s a bit tricky transitioning to fees for special events. The fees are giving us at least the base money to run the programs. Almost cost-

recovery. Funding from grants for programming is difficult as it is not tangible, and it makes it hard to sustain and expand.”

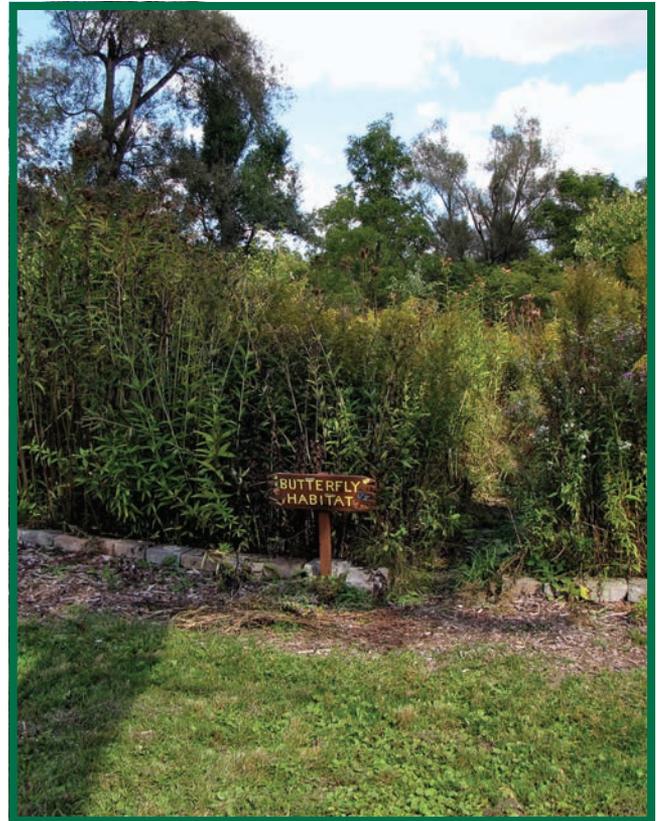
To further enhance and promote events, WPEC is implementing a new model of corporate donation. In the past, community and corporate sponsors have contributed to specific events. In the new model, they will be asked to donate money toward overall event programming, and also to donate people power. Otto suggests corporate sponsors come for a day and provide a



▲ Safe among the water lilies: a turtle is half out of the water in the wetland.



▲ The compost demonstration area was built by volunteers.



▲ Created and maintained by a volunteer for years as a tended butterfly garden, this large area has been allowed to become more natural butterfly habitat. Seeds and stems of native plants are left for over-wintering birds and animals as food and protection.



▲ Seeds of large vegetables planted in the spring through the WPEC school program will be harvested in the fall by another class.



▲ Picking beans from one of the children's gardens.

monetary donation to allow WPEC to facilitate their visit.

From the concept in the 1990s to the present physical park, its outreach to the schools and the community at large, WPEC has faced challenges of funding, flooding, invasive plants and the tension between a natural area and control of its direction.

It is an evolving entity that offers much to be discovered in a quiet setting. As frequent visitor Allan Giles says, "It's a beautiful

place hidden in Norval, surrounded by urban living."

After reaching success in regeneration and programming, WPEC is entering a new phase of sustainability. It welcomes visitors and support. For more see willowparkecology.ca. **NEV**

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