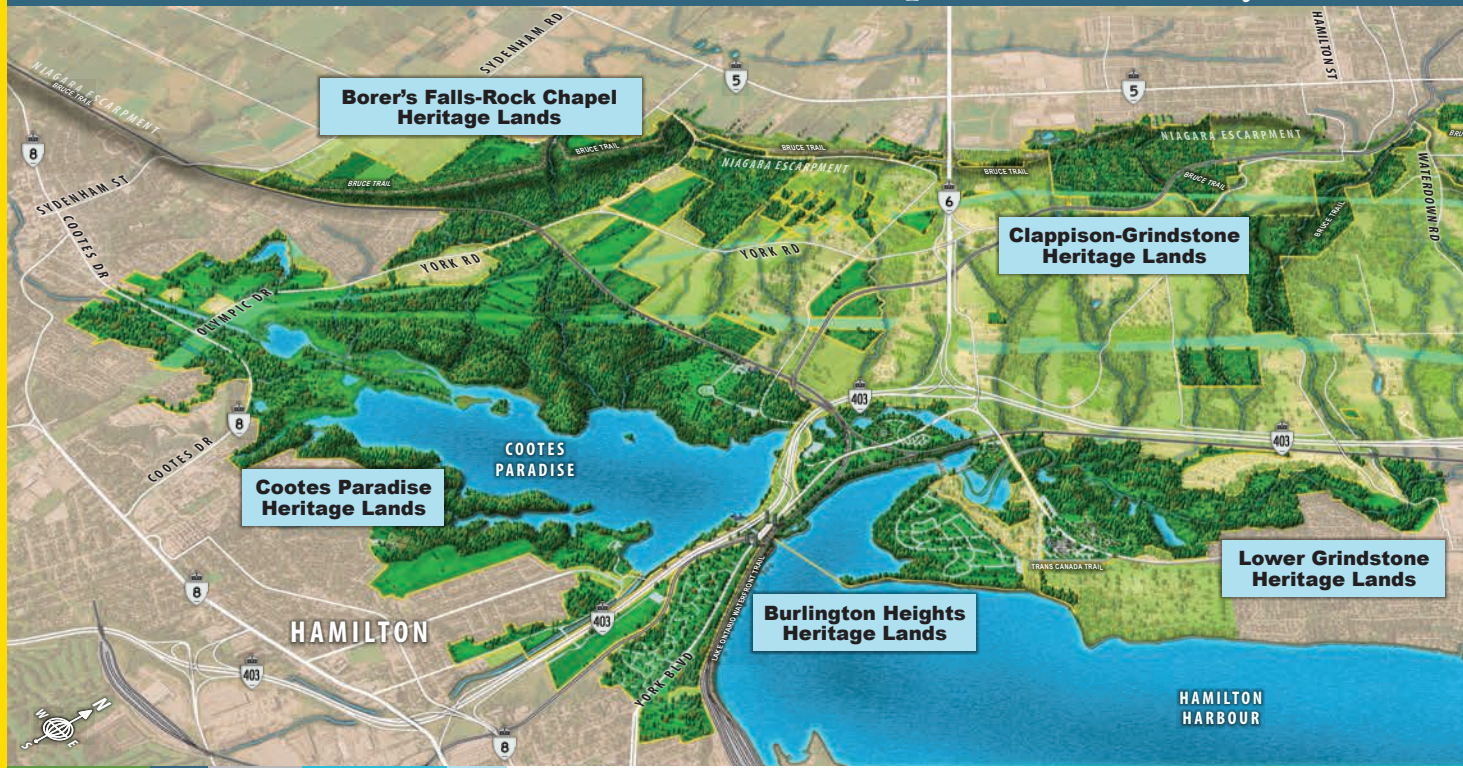


Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Vision



- Legend:**
- EcoPark Land Boundaries
 - Stewardship Lands
 - Hydro Corridors
 - Water Bodies
 - Roads
 - Rail Lines
 - Hiking Trails



Vision

Our vision for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is to create a known internationally as a protected, permanent and connected sanctuary from the Harbour to the Escarpment that promotes environmental and human health within Ontario's Greenbelt.

◀ The EcoPark System stretches from the Niagara Escarpment to the western end of Lake Ontario in one of the most densely populated areas in Ontario. COURTESY COOTES TO ESCARPMENT ECOPARK SYSTEM.

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System: **UNIQUE IN EASTERN NORTH AMERICA**

WRITTEN BY PETER KELLY

on Map



Waterdown-Sassafras Woods Heritage Lands

BURLINGTON

Produced by Michael Karpavage of MapInformation.com. July, 2015

What it will be
natural lands
ecosystem

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System naturally connected

cootestoescarpment.ca

WHEN WORD GOT OUT that two prime pieces of private real estate near the Niagara Escarpment in the Pleasant View area of Dundas were up for sale recently, it triggered a cascade of communications between local conservation authorities, municipalities and non-profit organizations dedicated to conservation and restoration in the area.

This was a unique opportunity to establish an unrestricted corridor of natural lands between Cootes Paradise and the Niagara Escarpment, something that hadn't existed in over 150 years. By December 2015, the deal was done. Nine governments and organizations made the announcement, using moneys secured by the partners themselves. Who are these nine different agencies and organizations? How did they accomplish this and why?

◀ Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System consists of six areas called "Heritage Lands." COURTESY COOTES TO ESCARPMENT ECOPARK SYSTEM.



▲ Smokey Hollow Falls or Great Falls in Waterdown is where Grindstone Creek flows over the Niagara Escarpment and is part of the EcoPark System. PHOTO BY PETER KELLY.

The threat of urban encroachment on these significant natural lands was the impetus behind devising a plan of action that could provide permanent protection, create natural corridors and offer opportunities for sustainable recreation and education.

WELCOME TO the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, a collection of lands owned by three municipalities, two conservation authorities and three non-profit organizations. McMaster University is also a member and support is provided by the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan. Formally hatched in 2013 after seven years of planning, the EcoPark System partnership's mission is to collaboratively preserve and enhance natural lands using a sustainable approach that balances natural ecosystem health with responsible human activities.

Framed by the Niagara Escarpment to the north, stretching between the eastern edge of Dundas to the west and Brant street in Burlington to the east, and the wetland complex known as Cootes Paradise to the south, the EcoPark System is located in one of Canada's biological hotspots and is nestled within the Greenbelt at the western end of Lake Ontario.

The area is home to almost 1,600 species of flora and fauna, including over

50 species at risk. Yet it is surrounded by urban development including two cities with a combined population of over 700,000: Hamilton, including Dundas and Waterdown, and Burlington. The threat of urban encroachment on these significant natural lands was the impetus behind devising a plan of action that could provide permanent protection, create natural corridors and offer opportunities for sustainable recreation and education.

Overarching management plans for all natural lands within the EcoPark System are currently being prepared. Regardless of partner ownership, all natural lands have been partitioned into six groups of "Heritage Lands." Partner staff, regional stakeholders and the general public through meetings and open houses, provide input on these plans.

EcoPark System partners are able to preserve natural lands by land purchase, land donation or conservation easements held by one of the partner agencies. Land acquisition is facilitated by a land securement coordinator. Since

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Landowners

Municipalities:

- City of Burlington
- City of Hamilton
- Halton Region

Conservation Authorities:

- Conservation Halton
- Hamilton Conservation Authority

Non-profit Organizations:

- Bruce Trail Conservancy
- Hamilton Naturalists' Club
- Royal Botanical Gardens

2013, 89 hectares (219 acres) have been acquired by the EcoPark System partners including a 15-hectare (37-acre) property that includes two spectacular ravines



▲ The boardwalk in Kernciff Park, Burlington, is a popular part of the EcoPark System. PHOTO BY PETER KELLY.

Some Plant Species at Risk Found in EcoPark System Lands

- Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra L.*)
- Eastern Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida L.*)
- Butternut (*Juglans cinerea L.*)
- Hoary Mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum incanum*) (L.) Michx.
- American Columbo (*Frasera caroliniensis Walter*)

Six Heritage Lands

- Borer's Falls-Rock Chapel
- Burlington Heights
- Clappison-Grindstone
- Cootes Paradise
- Lower Grindstone
- Waterdown-Sassafras Woods



formed by headwater tributaries of the Grindstone Creek watershed. This property was donated outright when landowner John Holland heard about the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System.

“This is a unique and beautiful property,” John said, “one I am proud to share with the people of Burlington on behalf of my family.” The Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary was dedicated in 2014 in memory of his late wife.

Much of the land within the EcoPark System will never be protected through acquisition. Some of the lands have already

been developed and development has been approved on others. A significant proportion of the lands will always remain private; there will always be a strong human presence in the ecopark.

Private Lands

But lands in private hands can also contribute to the vision. In the fall of 2014, an EcoPark System stewardship program involving landowner outreach was begun. Through contributions from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation and The Province of Ontario, stewardship

technician Kestrel Wraggett is working to foster ecological stewardship and conservation within the community of private EcoPark System landowners. She provides landowners with advice about stewardship initiatives that can maintain the natural features of their properties.

Landowners can learn about invasive species and their control, protection and enhancement of stream banks to improve water quality and reduce erosion, protection and enhancement of forest environments, and habitat-creation projects like pollinator gardens.



▲ Valley slopes in The Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary in Burlington. PHOTO BY PETER KELLY.



▲ Northern Map Turtle in Cootes Paradise. PHOTO BY PETER KELLY.



▲ Burlington Mayor Rick Goldring recognizes John Holland for his donation of land to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. COURTESY CITY OF BURLINGTON.

Sometimes, landowners learn about the native plants and animals with whom they share the land and gain an understanding of how their property fits into the local landscape. The idea behind the stewardship program is that small actions or projects on multiple properties can make a difference over the landscape as a whole.

Efforts have been made to identify areas that may improve habitat for the Mottled Duskywing butterfly. This endangered species lays its eggs almost exclusively on the foliage of New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*).

A new project in 2016, with seed funding from the RBC Foundation, will engage rural, urban and corporate communities within the EcoPark System to work together on stream improvements, stormwater runoff reduction and

the enhancement of pollinator habitat.

“I’m excited to move forward with our community restoration projects this year,” says Kestrel. “Not only will we have the opportunity to conduct ecological restoration over a larger geographical area, we will also be engaging neighbours and co-workers to work together and take ownership of projects within their own communities.”

Public Trails

Sustainable recreation within the EcoPark System is also important. Hamilton Burlington Trails Council, an early working group of the ecopark, evolved into an independent organization to consolidate and build a well-connected trail network within the protected lands for recreational trail users while at the same time conserving natural ecosystems.



◀ The Mottled Dusky Wing butterfly is endangered in Ontario but its habitat is being created in the EcoPark System. PHOTO BY BRENDA VAN RYSWYK.

This trail network will be community supported, community accessible and a model of progressive recreation and sustainable tourism. An interactive trails map has recently been launched on their website, hamiltonburlingtontrails.ca.

The EcoPark System is unique in eastern North America. There is no other region where this level of collaboration and consensus-based decision-making is supported by such a broad suite of partners. It isn't the norm for local governments and organizations to make decisions with regional perspectives that go beyond the limits of their borders. Furthermore, enthusiastic support has come from multiple partners, communities inside and outside the EcoPark System and politicians at every level of government. With the continued commitment of the partnership to the vision, the future looks bright for natural heritage protection and restoration along the Escarpment at the western end of Lake Ontario. **NEV**

Peter Kelly works out of the Royal Botanical Gardens as coordinator of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. He has worked in the environmental sector his entire life and is co-author of three books including The Last Stand: a Journey through the Ancient Cliff-Face Forest of the Niagara Escarpment.



◀ Stewardship technician Kestrel Wraggett. PHOTO SUBMITTED.



▲ The striking American Columbo is a plant species at risk but survives in the EcoPark System. PHOTO BY NIGEL FINNEY.



▲ At risk but found in the EcoPark System: Eastern Flowering Dogwood. PHOTO BY NIGEL FINNEY.