

# Conservation and Climate Watch

By Don McLean

**C**onservation authorities (CAs) are a crucial part of Ontario's climatic defences because they limit damage from the storms which are becoming more extreme as climate change intensifies. Their extensive natural lands sequester carbon and help keep it out of our atmosphere. They also protect biodiversity and provide public recreational trails, parks and campgrounds.

The province of Alberta came to Ontario for advice in 2013, after Calgary was devastated by the most expensive flooding in Canadian history, which also hit many smaller communities. Eight years later, when climate change caused flooding in British Columbia, their government also turned to Ontario.

Both provinces wanted to know more about conservation authorities, an Ontario innovation with a mandate to minimize extreme storm damage. They oversee the health of watersheds, protect wetlands, river valleys and natural features, and limit the location of human-created structures in flood-exposed locations. As the second largest landholder in the province, CA-owned wetlands, forests and other natural landscapes provide a very significant carbon sink. Losing such features is second only to the burning of fossil fuels in worsening the global climate. That's why volunteer climate activists in Hamilton have started watching CAs closely. Their Conservation Watch program has proven valuable and easy to join or duplicate from any part of Ontario.

## Constraints on CAs

Conservation Watch was launched early in 2021 by the

Hamilton 350 Committee, a long-standing climate action group. It was initially a response to legislation of the Progressive Conservative provincial government that imposed major constraints on Ontario CAs that reduced their environmental protection functions, slashed citizen membership on their oversight boards and narrowed their mandates.

The huge public opposition to those changes in late 2020 led Hamilton 350 to begin monitoring the meetings of five boards of CAs. They wanted to better understand what the legislative and regulatory changes meant for climate and the natural world.

An immediate appreciation was of the critical role that CAs play in preserving conservation lands, constraining new environmental damages and minimizing such climatic impacts as flooding.

The first CAs were established in the 1940s and quickly expanded after Hurricane Hazel killed more than 80 people in the mid 1950s. There are now 36 CAs overseeing nearly all streams in southern Ontario and some in the northern part of the province. Their boundaries are defined by watersheds so the management of each is shared by multiple municipalities.

## PC Disregard for Climate

Climate activists were already appalled by the PC government's disregard for the climate crisis after it tore up the provincial climate plan, cancelled dozens of wind and solar projects, and eliminated Ontario's independent environmental commissioner. They saw Conservation Watch as a way to spot change in the making.

An early example was a development proposal to replace an Ancaster Creek

headwaters marsh with five large warehouses and parking lots for more than 1,000 vehicles. Making this public knowledge generated 200 letters that helped convince the Hamilton CA board to change direction and reject the proposal. It also led hundreds of residents to participate in the subsequent public consultation and convince the CA to keep its policy of not allowing wetlands, forests and other natural features to be "offset" or removed and "re-constructed" in another location.

Conservation Watch monitors have been impressed by the diligent data collection of CA biologists, ecologists, hydrologists and others who track stream flows, drought conditions, invasive species, and many other critical ecosystem features. While CA land holdings are extensive, they are quite variable in size. A late 2022 report to the Niagara Peninsula CA board noted that the Hamilton CA owns 9.6 per cent of its jurisdictional area in comparison to the protected 1.5 per cent of the Niagara watersheds.

In late 2022, the province legislated further changes to CAs, removing some of their

permitting responsibilities and eliminating "pollution and land conservation" from the list of factors they could consider in their permit decisions. In addition, it banned CAs from their long-time practice of reviewing development proposals for municipal governments to evaluate their ecological impacts.

Conservation Watch is entirely volunteer and welcomes others who would like to learn more about these essential managers of our natural world. The work by Zoom is not difficult and new participants are paired with experienced watchers to cover one daytime or evening meeting per month. If you would be interested in learning how your local CA works and have about two to three hours you could spare each month, contact Sue Carson at [d.carson@sympatico.ca](mailto:d.carson@sympatico.ca).

*Don McLean is a retired university lecturer in environmental studies who is a volunteer in Conservation Watch. He is a co-founder of Hamilton 350 and of Environment Hamilton. He has been inducted into Hamilton's Gallery of Distinction and awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws by McMaster University.*



Threatened Ancaster Creek headwaters marsh on Garner Road that was saved from development. PHOTO BY NANCY HURST.