

Collaborative Community Conservation along the South Georgian Bay Escarpment

By Jarvis Strong, Executive Director, Escarpment Corridor Alliance

The Niagara Escarpment has long benefited from the leadership and stewardship of numerous dedicated conservation land trusts, particularly the Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC) and Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC). Now there is a new land trust in the mix. The Escarpment Corridor Alliance (ECA) has become Ontario's newest land trust and the only one focused specifically on the South Georgian Bay (SGB) region of the Escarpment.

The ECA's story began not as a land trust but in advocacy and education. Launched in March 2022, deep community engagement in SGB has always been a focus. Over three years, the team performed extensive geospatial analysis and spoke with hundreds of local landholders across a 2,000-square-km area encompassing six major watershed basins. The research confirmed both a compelling need and a real opportunity: a connected, protected ecological corridor across SGB was achievable. It also revealed something equally important. When a locally

rooted organization was present, one that understood the region's sense of place, the communities, and the landowners personally, individuals who had never before considered donating land or creating a conservation easement came forward. Dozens of them.

As these conversations continued, it became clear that many landholders were open to conservation, but were often unaware of the tools available to support it. For example, landholders were often unfamiliar with the Ecological Gifts Program, which offers enhanced tax benefits through provisions in the Income Tax Act. Donations of Ecologically Sensitive lands may be exempt from capital gains tax and donors can carry forward income tax credits for up to 10 years. While donating land is ultimately about leaving a lasting conservation legacy, it can also serve as a powerful estate and tax planning tool.

Becoming a Land Trust

By late 2024, the case was compelling enough that the ECA made a formal decision to pursue becoming a land

trust. The process with the CRA and other governing bodies began in earnest in 2025, with the final step completed in the late fall. The ECA is now an eligible recipient organization of Canada's Ecological Gifts Program, is a member of the Ontario Land Trust Alliance and is an NEC Approved Conservation Organization.

In December 2025, within weeks of completing the process, the ECA closed on its first nature preserve, Sandy's Summit, near Kolopore. That same month, the BTC announced its acquisition of the former Talisman Mountain Resort lands near Kimberley, permanently protecting more than 120 acres of sensitive land. In its public announcement, the BTC specifically credited the ECA for drawing attention to the property's importance, commissioning ecological and land-use studies, facilitating early conversations with the landowners, and contributing significantly to the appraisal process.

Enter the "collaborative community conservation" philosophy that the ECA and many other conservation

organizations subscribe to. Regional and pan-Escarpment organizations are not competitors, they are collaborative partners, and together, conservation at scale becomes achievable. It's all about getting sensitive lands into the right hands and ensuring long-term land management that improves outcomes for biodiversity.

Farmland Important

The ECA is also conscious that not all land protection looks the same. In addition to the loss of natural lands, Ontario is losing farmland at an alarming rate, and the ECA actively reminds landholders that restoring agricultural land to natural cover is not always the right answer. Farmland feeds people, supports farm families, and delivers a wide range of ecosystem services. The environment and the people of Ontario need to preserve farmland as well as natural lands such as forests, wetlands, and meadows. For some landholders, the right conversation is with the Ontario Farmland Trust rather than a land trust. The emerging ecological corridor of SGB will be a mosaic

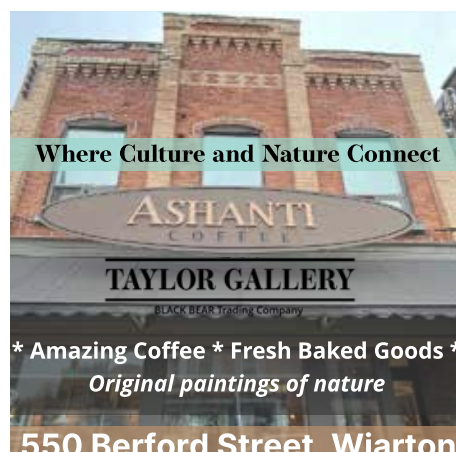


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◀ Sandy's Summit, in the Kolapore area, the ECA's first nature preserve.
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property in the Pine River watershed of the Township of Mulmur. This year the ECA has a goal of securing five new nature preserves or conservation easements.

The ECA's work is also about a better balance between people and nature by connecting natural lands into habitats that support biodiversity, supporting Indigenous conservation and Two-Eyed Seeing approaches, linking nature and the economy, and ensuring that Ontarians have plentiful access to the natural world. Nature-based recreation is not a distraction from

of natural lands and working farms with a variety of land use types.

The public sector has an important role to play as well. The ECA encourages municipalities across the region to reflect conservation priorities in their land-use planning, priorities that complement Ontario Nature's Municipal Protected Areas Project and Canada's international commitment to protect 30 per cent of lands and waters by 2030.

The ECA is currently fundraising to complete its second nature preserve. Black Bank Highlands is a 152-acre

conservation, it is a gateway to it. People who discover nature and fall in love with it, become its strongest advocates.

Creating an extensive ecological corridor across SGB is a massive undertaking. But it is entirely possible. One property, one partnership, and one nature lover at a time. The emerging SGB Ecological Corridor is a legacy in the making, and it will benefit nature and people, forever.

Learn more about the ECA and its land trust program at www.myscarpment.ca or info@myscarpment.ca.



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