



CHAPTER 1: THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

THE GREATER TORONTO REGION IS, BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY, AT A WATERSHED. NOT LONG AGO, SOCIETY BELIEVED THAT THE ENVIRONMENT WAS ENDLESSLY ABLE TO ABSORB THE DETRITUS OF A MODERN, INDUSTRIAL-BASED ECONOMY. MORE RECENTLY, THE ASSUMPTION WAS THAT THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY WERE INEVITABLY OPPOSED: OPTING FOR ONE MEANT DAMAGING THE OTHER.

TODAY, HOWEVER, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE TWO, RATHER THAN BEING MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE, ARE MUTUALLY DEPENDENT: A GOOD QUALITY OF LIFE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CANNOT BE SUSTAINED IN AN ECOLOGICALLY DETERIORATING ENVIRONMENT.

THE WAY WE CHOOSE TO TREAT THE GREATER TORONTO WATERFRONT IS CRUCIAL. IF GOVERNMENTS AND INDIVIDUALS RECOGNIZE — AND ACT ON — THE NEED TO RESOLVE PAST ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AND FORGE STRATEGIES TO PROTECT THE WATERFRONT NOW AND IN THE FUTURE, WE WILL, INDEED, HAVE SUCCESSFULLY CROSSED A WATERSHED.

— WATERSHED 1990

A REGION UNDER STRESS

So ended *Watershed*, the second interim report of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront. These conclusions — that the Greater Toronto waterfront is inextricably linked to its watersheds, and that environmental, social, and economic conditions in this region are highly stressed, and are mutually dependent — provide the foundation for this final report.

The waterfront, the place where land and water meet, has always been a key determinant in the location of urban settlements

on the shores of Lake Ontario, starting with small forts and villages like Fort York, Fort Rouillé, and Port Hope. Gradually these grew into larger towns and cities, and are now part of the Greater Toronto region.

For thousands of years, aboriginal people created villages along the waterfront to take advantage of the wildlife of the lake and estuarine wetlands. When Europeans arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were attracted by a safe harbour (now Toronto Harbour), the ready supplies of fresh water in Lake Ontario, and the abundant fish and waterfowl in the waters and wetlands. The major river valleys, like the

Humber and the Don, provided a transportation route into the hinterlands. The forests yielded game and timber, and, once cleared, fertile soils for farming.

Today, the Greater Toronto region is still dependent on the waterfront, although for different reasons.

While water transportation no longer dominates, the lake still provides fresh water for millions of residents, and receives our wastewaters. Many recreational amenities, such as boating, shoreline parks, fishing, swimming, and nature appreciation, depend directly on the waterfront location.

Among other reasons for the waterfront's importance are its neighbourhoods, home to many people. Moreover, the lake

provides abundant cold water to meet the cooling requirements of power stations. And, like waterfronts around the world, the Greater Toronto waterfront is a special *place* that draws people, fascinates them, satisfies their deep human need for contact with

water and wildlife, and provides a constantly changing panorama of views, weather, and moods.

Just as the people of the Greater Toronto region are linked to their waterfront, so the health

and life of the waterfront depend on the region. Ecologically, the waterfront is tied to its watersheds by the many rivers and creeks that flow into it, and the movements of wildlife and flows of stormwater along the valleys. Although there are many distinctive

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neighbourhoods on the waterfront, to a great extent their future depends on regional and local municipal policies on such matters as affordable housing, community services, transit, parks, and the like. Similarly, the decline and renewal of different economic activities on the waterfront are influenced by regional trends in manufacturing, services, and commerce.

Therefore waterfront-related strategies, plans, and programs to improve the quality of the environment, encourage community development or foster appropriate economic activities cannot be implemented in isolation: they must be undertaken in a regional context that recognizes the interdependence of the region and its waterfront, as well as the special qualities and characteristics of the waterfront itself.

It is appropriate therefore to begin this final report on the future of the Toronto waterfront by sketching some of the key environmental, social, and economic issues that must be faced in the Greater Toronto region, and by examining how they relate to the waterfront.

The geographic area considered in this overview is defined on the basis of natural boundaries, rather than political jurisdictions. This biological region, or "bioregion", comprises the major basin formed by the Niagara Escarpment on the west, the Oak Ridges Moraine to the north and east, and the Lake Ontario shoreline to the south. It is described by its natural characteristics: landforms, the lake, and the watersheds.

It should be noted that the Commission's 1990 *Watershed* report included a map

of the Greater Toronto bioregion, based on provincial information about the Greater

Toronto Area (GTA), which is defined as the regions of Halton, Peel, York, Metropolitan Toronto, and Durham. However, that does not cover

the full extent of the bioregion, which extends into Simcoe and Dufferin counties in the northwest, and into Northumberland County as far as the Trent River in the east.

Information about the economic, environmental, and social conditions in the bioregion is currently collected on the basis of politically defined units, such as local municipalities, regions, the Greater Toronto Area or Statistics Canada's Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). Therefore, a great deal of what follows is based on information about the GTA or the CMA, both of which include the region's major urban centres.

Just as the people of the Greater Toronto region are linked to their waterfront, so the health and life of the waterfront depend on the region.

For many people, the shoreline exerts an almost mysterious pull: it still offers a sense of country in our towns and cities. A walk with the dog along the water's edge, skipping stones over the lake's surface, finding a unique piece of driftwood, riding a bicycle on a trail through tall grass, or fishing off some rocks or a pier: these are just some of the ways people use the waterfront.

Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront. Shoreline Regeneration Work Group. 1991. *Shoreline regeneration for the Greater Toronto bioregion*. Toronto: Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront.

Map 1.1 Greater Toronto bioregion

