



CHAPTER 2: PLANNING PRACTICE

According to the Royal Commission's publication number 12, *Planning for Sustainability* (Doering et al. 1991):

As the work of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront has progressed, it has become abundantly clear — both from the evidence of deputants and from the Commission's own studies — that the present processes of land-use planning and environmental management do not offer even minimal environmental protection, let alone the “ecosystem approach to restoring and regenerating the Greater Toronto region” advocated in *Watershed* (RCFTW 1991).

The previous chapter describes some of the changes in decision-making processes that are needed to implement the ecosystem approach in the Greater Toronto region. Many involve some form of planning: for land uses in municipalities, for watershed management, for shoreline regeneration, for development, etc.

The ecosystem concept is so all-embracing, so multi-faceted, and so dependant on things only partially within any one politician's, planner's, designer's or developer's control, that there is a tendency to pay

lip service and agree with the principle, but to avoid defining appropriate day-to-day practice. So, although the ecosystem approach to planning could and should be a revolution in planning practice, there is a real danger that it may become instead a descriptive veneer shallowly applied to doing things in the old way, just as such terms as “environmentally friendly” and “green” are sometimes used in advertising.

Because we want to focus on action rather than just on ideas or rhetoric, we offer in this chapter some thoughts on “ecosystem planning practice”. For the sake of convenience, “ecosystem-based planning” has been shortened to “ecosystem planning”, while “practice” is used to remind readers that performance is the ultimate test of our commitment to a healthy, sustained ecosystem. And it would be presumptuous to suggest that we can actually “plan” ecosystems: they are too complex, interconnected, dynamic, and often unpredictable. What we *can* do is undertake planning with an ecosystem perspective.

CONTEXT

Suggestions for practising ecosystem planning are offered in the context of a

The structure of our metropolitan areas has long since been set by nature and man, by the rivers and the hills, and the railroads and the highways. Many options remain, and the great task of planning is not to come up with another structure but to work with the strengths of the structure we have — and to discern this structure as people experience it in their everyday life. . . . Grappling with these gritty realities, however, provides a far greater and more exciting challenge than the search for perfection somewhere else.

Whyte, W. H. 1968. *The last landscape*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company.

number of recent and ongoing initiatives in Ontario; these have been established in response to the need to change planning processes so that we can cope with increasing and conflicting pressures on land, water, and natural systems. They include:

- the Commission on Planning and Development Reform in Ontario, chaired by John Sewell;
- the Ministry of Municipal Affairs' work on greening the planning process, a green guide to planning practice, streamlining the planning process, and identifying ways to develop provincial policies and plans;
- preparation of, and revisions to, many regional and local municipal Official Plans in the Greater Toronto region;
- co-ordination by the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Oak Ridges Moraine interim guidelines and planning study;
- the work of the Office of the Greater Toronto Area, including its *Urban*

Structure Concepts Study (Ontario 1990), and its vision statement for the Greater Toronto Area in 2021;

- former MPP Ron Kanter's (1990) study, *Space for All*, which describes options for a GTA Greenlands Strategy;
- the five-year review of the Niagara Escarpment Plan (Ontario 1985);
- investigations by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food regarding innovative ways to protect agricultural lands;
- the Ministry of the Environment's Environmental Assessment Program Improvement Project (EAPIP);
- work by the ministries of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Municipal Affairs on guidelines for integrating water resource management objectives into municipal plans;
- the Ministry of Natural Resources' review of the role, mandate, funding, and composition of conservation authorities; and
- the Metropolitan Toronto Remedial Action Plan.

For several reasons, these initiatives have tremendous potential to influence planning processes at a crucial time. First, as described earlier, the Greater Toronto bioregion is at a pivotal stage of growth. If future changes are not planned carefully, environmental quality will continue to be degraded and quality of life will suffer.

Second, many municipal Official Plans are currently being reviewed or prepared. Two regions, Peel and York, are still preparing their *first* Official Plans, while Halton and Durham are revising theirs and Metro Toronto is preparing its second Official Plan. At the same time, most local

municipalities are undertaking Official Plan reviews, and many waterfront municipalities are preparing waterfront plans.

Plans now being prepared will have significant effects on patterns of development, environmental health, community life, and the economic vitality of this region for a long time to come. There are encouraging signs that some municipalities are shifting to more ecosystem-based planning; the challenge is to encourage this approach everywhere, so that these opportunities are used to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for the region.

In recognition of these needs, *Watershed* proposed a review of

... the ways in which the philosophy and principles of the ecosystem approach could best be integrated into the Planning Act and other relevant provincial legislation, as it affects the greater Toronto bioregion.

The Royal Commission subsequently convened an interdisciplinary work group on environment and planning; it was asked to prepare a background paper on issues related to integration of environmental considerations into the land-use planning process and to suggest opportunities for better integration. The resulting report, *Planning for Sustainability* (Doering et al.), was published in June 1991, and is the basis for much of this chapter.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Planning for Sustainability concluded that there is widespread agreement on the

inadequacy of current provincial land-use planning processes to protect the environment, but there are many different views of the nature of the problem:

Environmentalists are concerned about the deterioration of the natural environment: loss of valuable natural areas such as wetlands, woodlands, and river valleys; disappearance of prime farmlands and rural landscapes; pollution of rivers; depletion of aquifers; and so on. Provincial and municipal governments are subject to conflicting demands

for the use and protection of land, air, and water, but lack adequate resources to respond. Developers are concerned that environmental requirements are not clearly specified and that the processes being used to seek environmental protection create delays, increased development costs, and reduced options.

Clearly, the problems are many and complex. Following are some that have been highlighted during the Royal Commission's work.

PLANNING OR REGULATION?

Ecosystem planning practice has deep roots but its form is still emerging. Its roots can be traced to Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and some of the naturalists who came before and after them. The first views of Earth from space, during the 1960s, supported an ecological vision of Earth: when our planet was seen in its entirety — not as some kind of huge mechanical ball or geographic globe, but as a living, moving

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Cooksville Creek, Mississauga: damaged by development practices, this channel is now under restoration by the Credit Valley Conservation Authority and the City of Mississauga

orb, beautiful and fragile — people's perceptions changed. In 1969, one of the key works in bringing the ecosystem into land-use planning was published: Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*. It showed how human needs could be met within the framework of natural systems, rather than being imposed over them, with beneficial results for both people and nature.

During this century, most responses to growing awareness of ecosystem stress have tended to be more narrow and regulatory, rather than the proactive, ecosystem-based planning advocated by McHarg and others. According to that way of thinking, parks and reserves are created in response to habitat losses, to protect fragments of green. Regulations are applied to control development in hazard lands, as a reaction to flooding and erosion. If air and water are polluted, regulations are developed to control emissions. Instead of developing a clear vision for communities, using the Official

Plan process, growth proceeds on an incremental basis, with Official Plan amendments being made to accommodate individual development applications.

Consequently, a great deal of work and money have gone into devising appropriate regulatory structures, writing regulations, administering them, and responding to them — generally in an adversarial atmosphere, in which the *proponents* and *regulators* of development see themselves as being on opposite sides.

In such an atmosphere, developers, whether public or private, spend more time, energy, and money on manoeuvring a plan through the regulatory process than in designing it creatively. Similarly, environmental agencies spend more time on essentially negative regulations than on positive planning, and nonetheless feel they are protecting the public interest, because they are stopping others from doing harm. And many land-use planners — trained to conceive

and propose plans in response to functional, ecological, and human issues — find that, when they enter public service, their jobs involve negotiating and administering regulations.

It is clear that, while regulations are an essential part of any environmental management system, they should not be seen as an alternative to good, ecosystem-based planning. We need to redress the balance, to spend more energy on developing practical, integrated techniques of planning and design, and use regulations to ensure that things happen as planned.

PROVINCIAL ROLE

In theory, the Planning Act provides opportunities for integrating environmental considerations into land-use planning and development control. In practice, however, its provisions are not being used effectively for this purpose.

The Province can comment on environmental matters when an Official Plan is being prepared, when it is being reviewed or amended, and when plans are being created for subdivisions and condominiums. However, the effectiveness of these review processes is hampered by limitations in the mandates of different provincial agencies, their general inability to reach consensus, the fact that they have inadequate resources, and the lack of enforceable and consistent standards.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the absence of clear provincial guidelines on environmental priorities and ecosystem approaches to planning. As a result, different

municipalities take very different approaches to environmental matters, depending on political will, community priorities, resources, and expertise. Some municipalities only pay lip service to the environment, while others do what they can, with varying degrees of success. Such piecemeal

and inconsistent approaches provide extremely patchy protection for ecosystems, and make it hard for developers to understand the rules of the game.

For example, Section 3 of the Planning Act allows the Province to issue policy statements to guide municipal planning on matters of provincial interest. So far, however, issuing policy statements has been a painfully slow, contentious process. The only ones currently in effect are for floodplains, aggregates, and housing. As *Planning for Sustainability* concluded:

Inter-ministerial and inter-departmental turf wars over control and priorities make it difficult for governments to reach agreement on the substance of policy statements. Lack of political will, and the attitude that it is sometimes safer and easier to simply do nothing, impede provincial leadership. In the meantime, however, land-use decisions continue to be made without a clear statement of provincial priorities regarding the environment.

A case in point is the proposed provincial Wetlands Policy Statement. After ten years of discussions and paperwork, in September 1991 the ministers of Municipal Affairs and Natural Resources released yet another draft of the policy. The Province

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I am convinced that these swamps, bogs and marshes were ordained from the beginning in the divine order of things to be left as natural reservoirs, and much heart-searching and thought should be exercised before they are discarded for some other use.

Attributed to a fictitious character named Samuel Woodstock who wrote for *Our Valley*, a conservation authorities newsletter, quoted in Richardson, A. H. 1974. *Conservation by the people: the history of the conservation movement in Ontario to 1970*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

classifies wetlands according to the degree of provincial significance — based on their biological, social and hydrological values — and has seven such categories. The Royal Commission is pleased to note that the latest draft policy includes classes I to III in its definition of provincially significant wetlands to which the policy applies.

However, in many other respects the draft wetlands policy is disappointing. It

does not have an ecosystem perspective and, if adopted in its present form, would provide very limited protection for wetlands in Ontario.

Like any policy statement under Section 3 of the Planning Act, the wetlands policy can only require municipalities to “have regard to” its provisions. This means that the policy statement must be seriously considered, and an explanation provided if it is disregarded — but it does not have to be used as the basis for decisions. Among other weaknesses of the draft policy statement, it:

- fails to emphasize the ecological relationships in wetland complexes, between wetlands and surrounding lands, or upstream influences;
- makes no provision for buffer zones around wetlands;
- has no clear definitions of compatible land uses, development, and wetland functions;



Carruther's Creek Marsh, Ajax