

Branching Out & Connecting Our Roots
Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System
Strategic Plan 2021-2030
November 09, 2020

Land Acknowledgement

The participating agencies that make up the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System recognize the long history of First Nations and Metis people in the province of Ontario, and pay respects to the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the treaty and rights holder to these lands, and the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. These lands are the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Huron-Wendat nations.

1. Introduction

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a collaboration among government and not-for-profit agencies that collectively protect nearly 2,200 ha of open space and nature sanctuary between Cootes Paradise Marsh, Hamilton Harbour, and the Niagara Escarpment (Figure 1., location map). Since 2007 the collaboration has evolved as a voluntary park alliance in which the participating agencies own and manage their lands individually but collaborate on areas of mutual interest.

The idea of a partnership around these natural areas was brought forward in 2006 by the Natural Heritage Planning Committee of the Bay Area Restoration Council. Following extensive background research and consultation a first strategic plan, the *Cootes to Escarpment Park System: Conservation Land Management Strategy*, was finalized in 2009 and approved in principle by all participating boards and councils in 2010. The participating agencies agreed to establish the EcoPark System as a voluntary collaboration operating under a three-year Memorandum of Understanding in 2013, which was amended and extended for five years in 2016.

This Strategic Plan, for the years 2021-2030, is an update to the goals and objectives set out in the 2009 plan. Consultations and workshops for this strategic plan began in early 2019 and involved representatives of the participating agencies as well as a diversity of interested individuals from various other organizations and perspectives. This strategic plan sets priorities and objectives for the EcoPark System partner agencies to achieve by 2030 and a framework for tracking and reporting back on each of these objectives.

The goals set out in this strategic plan were identified by the participating partner agencies as crucial for the development of the EcoPark System through 2030. The partner agencies invite participation in achieving these goals by of a wide range of interested persons and groups, other orders of government, NGOs, and the private sector, including those already volunteering as the “Friends of the EcoPark System.”

2. EcoPark System Partners¹ and Values

Participating agencies in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System include government or not-for-profit agencies that own lands in the area and that have agreed to the shared values of the park alliance and to a formal memorandum of understanding for implementation.

We Value:

- conserving, protecting, and restoring the natural lands we own and steward
- collaborating on initiatives that support ecological connectivity, biodiversity, and sustainable recreation to achieving the Vision and Mission of the EcoPark System
- promoting innovation in education, discovery, and research in the EcoPark System.
- securing and protecting additional protected lands in the EcoPark System to better reconnect isolated habitats
- the support of the public for the EcoPark System and its neighbouring property owners
- reciprocal and respectful engagement with Indigenous communities and the bridging of traditional ecological knowledge and western science in our approaches to land management.
- the many municipal, regional, provincial, and federal policies, programs, and initiatives that help achieve our jointly held goals

As of August 2020, the participating agencies are Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Halton Region, Hamilton Naturalists' Club, Bruce Trail Conservancy, and McMaster University.

3. Vision – Naturally Connected

Our Vision for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is that it becomes a permanently protected natural lands sanctuary linking Cootes Paradise Marshlands with Hamilton Harbour and the Niagara Escarpment.

4. Mission

Our Mission as partners is to collaborate to preserve and enhance the natural lands we own and steward by using sustainable approaches to protect biodiversity, highlight ecosystem services, and enable responsible human connection to nature.

5. Objectives

Our five objectives for natural lands management are:

- Natural Heritage: To protect, restore and enhance the ecological system by ensuring the health and diversity of species, habitats and natural processes.
- Recreation: To provide opportunities for appropriate passive recreation that support active living while maintaining the biological and physical integrity of the lands.

¹ The use of the terms “partner” or “partners” throughout this plan indicates only participating agencies which have signed the EcoPark System MOU. The EcoPark System is not a legal partnership.

- **Cultural Heritage:** To identify, protect and preserve cultural heritage features for their valuable reflection of the historical use and occupancy of the area.
- **Interpretation:** To provide educational opportunities that promote knowledge, innovation, and discovery, understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural values, environmental sensitivity and significance, and the need for conservation.
- **Management:** To promote responsible stewardship of the lands and engage community involvement in park planning and management.

6. Strategic Priority Areas

The EcoPark System partner agencies have identified five strategic priorities to advance in a coordinated manner for the years 2021 to 2030. They reflect the collective values and vision of the partners for the purpose of contributing to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. These priorities guide our framework for annually tracking and reporting outcomes in the EcoPark System Report Card. They also direct resource allocation for staff planning and budgeting.

Strategic Priority 1: Healthy Ecosystems

A healthy ecosystem helps ensure that near urban natural areas within Hamilton and Burlington provide society with many benefits.

These benefits include resilience to climate and environmental change, research and educational opportunities, recreational opportunities, and support for biodiversity, among others.

Partner agencies aim to effectively manage this connected and biodiverse landscape through ecological restoration, rehabilitation, protection of additional lands, and naturalization projects that balance nature's needs with human use.

Directions:

- D.1.1 Develop and implement joint strategies for ecosystem restoration, rehabilitation, and naturalization projects [including through research to advance our understanding of the ecology and other aspects of the land
- D.1.2 Improve ecological connectivity and increase natural corridors between partner-owned lands through additional land securement research and joint partner-led initiatives
- D.1.3 Guide stewardship efforts with the co-operation of neighbouring private landowners
- D.1.4 Reduce biodiversity loss throughout EcoPark System properties and adjacent properties
- D.1.5 Explore additional opportunities for partner agencies and the public to extend protection to lands that connect and enhance the EcoPark System through restoration, stewardship, land securement, and research.

Action Items:

- A.1.1 Facilitate opportunities for partner agency staff to engage in stewardship, ecological restoration, learn about emerging EcoPark System research, and create collective goals
- A.1.2 Implement a joint in-depth ecological mapping program to support ecological connectivity, natural corridors, and other initiatives
- A.1.3 Inspire, support and recognize landowners interested in restoration and stewardship efforts on their property
- A.1.4 Prioritize and implement recommendations from the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Heritage Lands Management Plans and the 2019 Land Securement Strategy

Objectives:

Natural Heritage
Management

Strategic Priority 2: Human Experience

Connecting with nature provides community members with enriching experiences that include multiple mental and physical health benefits. The opportunity to be in nature from a young age often leads to lifelong support for protecting and conserving natural areas. By supporting opportunities for people to understand, engage, and celebrate the landscape, EcoPark System partners will ensure its relevance and importance for present and future Burlington and Hamilton residents.

Directions:

- D.2.1 Work with partner agencies and stakeholders to provide events and other opportunities for the public to experience the EcoPark System
- D.2.2 Inspire private landowners in the EcoPark System to share their stewardship efforts and results with the community
- D.2.3 Gather and develop relevant educational and outreach material on the EcoPark System's natural and cultural heritage for partner agencies, stakeholders, decision makers, and the public

Action Items:

- A.2.1 Promote sustainable recreation opportunities for mental and physical well-being within the EcoPark System for the public, and support partner-led recreational trail development by supporting the Hamilton-Burlington Trails Council
- A.2.2 Finalize and implement a private land-owner stewardship outreach and engagement strategy
- A.2.3 Establish a communications committee that identifies partners gaps, priorities, and joint opportunities to connect with various audiences

Objectives:

Recreation
Cultural Heritage
Interpretation
Management

Strategic Priority 3: Innovation and Discovery

The EcoPark System is a collage of ecologically complex landscapes near an intensely urbanized area. Using the lands and resources of partner agencies, the EcoPark System partners and stakeholders will research new approaches in protecting urban natural spaces, supporting human wellbeing through nature, and opportunities for citizen science - improving management of these areas in the face of urban growth and population pressures.

Directions:

- D.3.1 Provide leadership in addressing global climate change and other issues through local solutions
- D.3.2 Inspire citizen science contributions to better understand the EcoPark System on partner-owned lands and surrounding lands
- D.3.3 Identify and explore knowledge gaps and research opportunities on nature connectedness in urban areas.
- D.3.4 Advance novel ecological stewardship, land management, and restoration research and practices

Action Items:

- A.3.1 Establish and nurture research projects with local colleges, universities, and other research bodies to advance our understanding of the ecology and other aspects of the land
- A.3.2. Develop unique educational resources and organize an annual event to engage landowners and the public
- A.3.3 Disseminate and pursue research priorities within each EcoPark System Heritage Lands Management Plans
- A.3.4 Share timely and relevant research findings with EcoPark System partners, stakeholders, and the public

Objectives

Natural Heritage
Recreation
Cultural Heritage
Interpretation
Management

Strategic Priority 4: Thriving Partnerships

The EcoPark System is a unique collaboration of landowners, stakeholders, and the community working together to conserve, protect, and support the natural lands linking Cootes Paradise with the Niagara Escarpment. Strong partnerships are the foundation of a thriving EcoPark System. Thriving partnerships include maintaining existing relationships while pursuing new collaborative opportunities and support.

Directions:

- D.4.1 Maintain existing collaborative relationships with partner agencies
- D.4.2 Promote the uniqueness of the EcoPark System locally, nationally, and internationally
- D.4.3 Secure additional support from the provincial and federal government
- D.4.4 Improve support from local stakeholders, including private landowners, businesses, and relevant environmental and educational institutions

Action Items:

- A.4.1 Engage with partner agencies monthly and as required to maintain existing collaborative relationships
- A.4.2 Present the unique EcoPark System story to relevant local, national, and international audiences
- A.4.3 Explore Provincial, Federal, and / or International recognition of the EcoPark System to align accomplishments with national and global conservation goals
- A.4.4 Explore collaborative opportunities with local stakeholders including landowners, businesses, institutions, youth, and other community sectors

Objectives

Management

Strategic Priority 5: Financial Sustainability

The EcoPark System provides efficient and effective services for its alliance of partners, stakeholders, and the community. Delivering these functions requires funding for programmatic expenses, land securement, and operational coordination. The secretariat and partner agencies will explore diverse sources for multi-year and self-sustainable funding for existing and future essential EcoPark System work.

Directions:

- D.5.1 Maintaining multi-year core operational partner funding commitments while diversifying non-core funding for programmatic expenses
- D.5.2 Investing financial resources in 2021-2030 Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan actions and priorities
- D.5.3 Exploring and pursuing opportunities for land securement fundraising
- D.5.4 Express the present value of ecosystem services provided by protected lands within the EcoPark System and envision the value provided by ecosystem services under alternative management scenarios

Actions Items:

- A.5.1 Establish a fundraising committee and strategy to:
 - a. Identify and undertake a fundraising and financing plan to secure existing, new and primarily sustainable funding opportunities.
 - b. Report on Return on Investment to date and on an ongoing basis
 - c. Plan appropriate investments in the programs and initiatives outlined within the 2021-2030 Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan.
- A.5.2 Implement suggestions from the 2019 Land Securement Strategy
- A.5.3 Investigate the value of ecosystem services provided by protected lands within the EcoPark System and consider alternative management scenarios to increase that value

Objectives

Natural Heritage

Management

7. Evaluation and Implementation Plan

Strategic: Directions -> Action Items -> Report Card

Operational: Strategic Plan -> Committee Planning -> Annual Budget -> Secretariat and Partner Priorities and Measurables

Progress will be monitored by the EcoPark System secretariat and Management Committee. Biannually, progress will be reported to the EcoPark System Governing Council, Management Committee, and posted on the website. An annual report card will be produced to track progress against the priority targets outlined in Section 6 (Strategic Priority Areas).

A model report card is appended to this strategic plan to illustrate the approach that will be taken in this reporting.

8. Background Documents and Resources

- Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy Phase I Background Report - 2008
- The Cootes to Escarpment Park System Conservation and Land Management Strategy Phase II Report - 2009
- Cootes to Escarpment Park System: A Conservation Vision - 2009 (Summary of Phase II report)
- Land Securement Strategy
- Six individual Heritage Lands Management Plans