

A Natural Heritage Strategy for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Southcentral Region

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Abstract

Natural Heritage features and areas in the central and southern parts of Ontario provide a unique collection of environmental, economic and social benefits for the people of Ontario. The protection of Natural Heritage features and areas helps to maintain ecosystem health and biodiversity, while contributing significantly to local and regional economies through tourism, recreation, and the protection of groundwater and other vulnerable resources.

The continuing loss of our natural heritage has caused widespread concern, and has generated a new commitment to protect our natural environment for present and future generations. Over the past 100 years, our natural heritage landscapes, features and areas have been greatly affected by human settlement, primarily focusing on economic and social development. Increased urbanization and fragmentation of resources have placed many natural heritage features and areas at risk. This is of special concern in the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) Southcentral Region. The Southcentral region can be generally described as that part of Ontario south of the French River .

Covering approximately 12,618,000 hectares, the Region is home to over 10.8 million people. This area consists of 80% private land, with 7.25% of private land being identified as provincially significant through the Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) and Wetland programs. It is also home to over 750 rare species, many of which have been recognized by both federal and provincial governments as vulnerable (special concern), threatened or endangered.

This strategy proposes a framework for the MNR to work with government, non-government organizations, resource industries, municipalities, Aboriginal peoples, scientists, educators and conservation organizations (e.g., conservation authorities) to protect the shared natural heritage resources on both public and private lands in the Southcentral Region.

Preamble

Natural Heritage is an effective integrating concept for the Ministry of Natural Resources Southcentral Region's land-use planning and resource management activities. This unifying theme provides an effective framework for focussing and

integrating efforts to maintain *biodiversity*, to restore *ecosystem health* and to enhance the quality of life in Southcentral Region.

This Strategy provides overall direction to the Southcentral Region (The Region, Figure 1) with respect to Natural Heritage activities and their integration into all program areas. The Strategy recognizes that in order to protect the shared Natural Heritage resources on both public and private lands, the Region must work in cooperation with private landowners, aboriginal peoples, stewardship councils, conservation authorities, non-government organizations, academic institutions, municipalities, other government agencies and corporations.

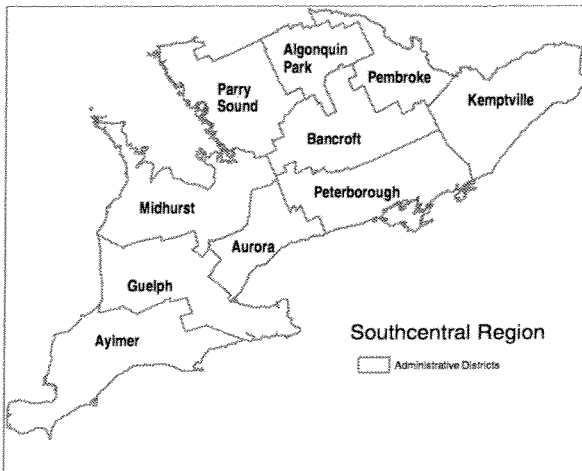


Figure 1. Southcentral Ontario Region

The Region can be generally described as that part of Ontario south of the French River. Covering approximately 12,618,000 hectares, the Region is home to over 10.8 million people. This area consists of 80% private land, with 7.25% of private land being identified as provincially significant through the Wetland and the Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) programs. It is also home to over 750 Species at Risk (SAR), many of which have been recognized by both federal and provincial governments as vulnerable (special concern), threatened or endangered.

In this area, increased urbanization and fragmentation of resources over the past 100 years have placed many Natural Heritage species and spaces at risk. This fragmentation has caused widespread concern and has reaffirmed the need to protect our natural environment for present and future generations.

Greater awareness of the need to effectively manage our natural resources on Crown lands and settled landscapes has led to the *Ontario's Living Legacy* (www.ontarioslivinglegacy.com) and *Smart Growth* (www.smartgrowth.gov.on.ca) initiatives. The Southcentral Region Natural Heritage Strategy is complementary to

these initiatives, and will continue to evolve in response to them.

What do we mean by natural heritage?

Natural Heritage is a widely used and accepted term that recognises the dynamic nature of the environment. The term “heritage” acknowledges its historical, present and future values within our culture. This concept goes beyond the traditional definition of an ecosystem to also include social and economic components.

A DEFINITION OF NATURAL HERITAGE

Natural – means to exist or be caused by nature.

Heritage - is a valuable thing worthy of protection to be passed on from generation to generation.

Southcentral Region is responsible for the implementation of a number of provincial programs related to natural heritage. Together, all activities that contribute to Natural Heritage protection and management make up the Natural Heritage Program in the Region.

This Program is implemented through a number of tools. On crown land, key mechanisms are protected areas (e.g. provincial parks, conservation reserves) and forest management planning. The Provincial Policy Statement under the Planning Act is one of the key mechanisms in guiding the Region’s efforts on private land (see <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/business/policye/table.asp>). In addition, through programs such as Fish & Wildlife, a substantial amount of resource management activity (e.g. fisheries management planning) occurs throughout the Region. A stewardship approach is adopted on all lands, whether Crown Land or privately owned.

Purpose of the Strategy

This strategy provides overall direction to MNR’s Southcentral Region with respect to Natural Heritage activities and their integration into all program areas. It promotes consistent and efficient Regional programs and activities that advance the identification, protection and management of significant Natural Heritage resources, and encourages appropriate policies, information systems and partnerships.

It is based on the following mission statement:

To identify, evaluate and protect significant Natural Heritage species and spaces; retain and restore Natural Heritage systems; and effectively work with others in order to conserve our Natural Heritage on a sustainable basis and as a result, contribute to the quality of life in Southcentral Region.

The Strategy identifies the key components of a shared vision and proposes a series of actions that will lead to a comprehensive Natural Heritage Program. It focuses on the steps necessary to identify and establish a *Natural Heritage System* and provides a unifying theme to integrate the individual components. It recognizes that there are many other partners interested in Natural Heritage and that shared success will be dependent upon listening to, learning from, and sharing with our partners.

Context

In order to address the continuing loss of Natural Heritage resources, the Region, in concert with its partners, has recognized the need to re-evaluate traditional conservation approaches. Table 1. shows the transition from a more traditional to a more strategic approach to Natural Heritage conservation.

Table 1. Traditional to a more strategic approach to Natural Heritage conservation

Traditional Approaches	⇒⇒	Strategic Approach to Natural Heritage conservation.
Site and species specific identification, protection and management.		Landscape level approach (e.g., Oak Ridges Moraine, watersheds, site districts).
Focus on protected areas.		Focus on Natural Heritage system planning including stewardship and restoration.
Program-specific delivery.		Integrated approach to Natural Heritage delivery on public and private lands.
Focus on maintaining ecological health.		Focus on maintaining ecological and human health.
Focus on establishing protected areas through Ontario's Living Legacy.		Focus on implementing Ontario's Living Legacy in Southern Ontario.
Internally-focused program development and implementation.		Community engagement/ empowerment in program development and implementation (e.g., working with Stewardship Councils).
Distinct provincial role in development and delivery.		Recognition of shared and evolving roles among government, Aboriginal peoples, NGO's and private sector.
Internally-focused information management and technology.		Enhanced sharing and access to information, utilization of advanced technologies (e.g., NRVIS).

Four Components of a Shared Vision

MNR's vision is to complete a Natural Heritage system in Southcentral Region. Achievement of this vision depends upon four inter-related components (Figure 2):

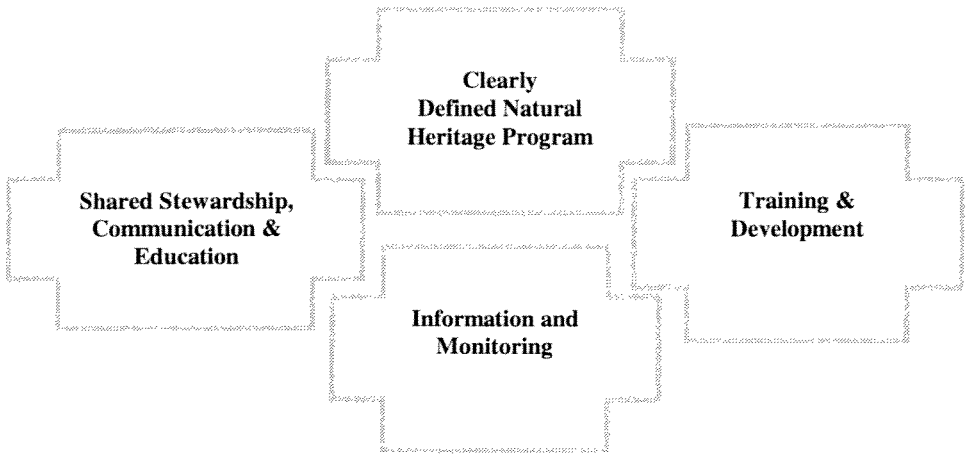


Figure 2. Components of a Shared Vision

1. Clearly Defined Natural Heritage Program :

The Region must support the Natural Heritage Program through clear direction, consistent funding and staffing levels, and by recognizing it as a high priority in the work planning process. Natural Heritage is not an isolated program; rather, Natural Heritage values are integrated into all aspects of resource planning and management. This is highlighted by the significant amount of municipal planning work that is Natural Heritage related.

Guidance for the Natural Heritage Program will be provided through the *MNR Planning Improvement Project (2001)*; which furnishes tools such as *Ecoregional Direction Statements* that will aid in program integration.

One key component of the Natural Heritage Program is the Parks and Protected Areas System, which relies upon the identification and evaluation of natural heritage areas. Within this system, the protection of core conservation lands and waters is essential. Areas outside core conservation lands should support a wide range of land uses — depending upon their significance, environmental sensitivity and ecological functions. Rehabilitation programs should restore corridors and degraded habitats to complete and maintain the natural areas system.

The conservation of Species at Risk (SAR) is another important aspect of an effective Natural Heritage Program. As Southcentral Region contains the highest concentration of SAR in Canada, the Region plays an important role in the development and maintenance of the SAR program. It will ensure that adequate and up-to-date information is available, assist in the regulation of species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and develop and implement recovery plans for all threatened and endangered species occurring in the Region.

2. Shared Stewardship, Communication & Education:

Many partners contribute to the protection and management of Natural Heritage systems. Partners include private landowners, aboriginal peoples, stewardship councils, conservation authorities, non-government organizations, academic institutions, municipalities, other government agencies and corporations. A clearly-defined Natural Heritage program would provide a common context for all partners engaged in stewardship.

The success of the Strategy is dependent on information-sharing and open dialogue among all partners. The Region recognizes that it is one of many participants involved in Natural Heritage activities. Valuing traditional knowledge and the input and experience of partners is essential.

The provision of resources in support of stewardship, communication and education needs is part of the Natural Heritage Program. The Region will continue to work with partners in order to identify their information needs, and to help address those needs wherever possible.

3. Training and Development:

A successful Natural Heritage Program must ensure that Regional staff are well trained and supported in their work to identify and evaluate Natural Heritage areas through specialized training programs, skills exchanges and educational opportunities.

4. Information and Monitoring:

Sound Natural Heritage decisions require sound Natural Heritage information. Natural Heritage information includes traditional ecological reports such as earth and life science inventories, wetland evaluations, Species at Risk status reports; as well as information collected through a variety of innovative technologies such as remote sensing.

An organized approach to information gathering is required for a successful Natural Heritage program. Currently, most information is gathered through traditional field survey techniques by Regional staff and partners.

It is critical that all Natural Heritage information is entered into databases using established data standards. The Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) (see <http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/nhic.html>) plays an essential role in gathering and sharing detailed Natural Heritage information. The Natural Resources Values Information System (NRVIS) is also a key tool for organizing and managing natural resources information.

The standardization of reporting methods, the efficient distribution of relevant Natural Heritage information and the publication of primary research papers are important elements for improved communications among Ministry staff, and with

other Ministries, organizations and the public.

Goals

The Natural Heritage Strategy identifies a nine of goals that support the Four Components of a Shared Vision for the identification and protection of Natural Heritage systems. The goals are:

- Goal A: Plan and Set Goals/Targets for Effectively Delivering the Natural Heritage Program
- Goal B: Integrate Natural Heritage Values into Planning and Management Activities
- Goal C: Restore, Protect and Mitigate the Impacts on Ecosystem Functions and Values
- Goal D: Support and Implement the Species at Risk Program
- Goal E: Encourage Stewardship and Partnerships
- Goal F: Increase/Improve Internal and External Communication and Education
- Goal G: Provide Adequate Training and Support for Staff and Partners
- Goal H: Achieve Integrated Information Management
- Goal I: Use Research, Inventories and Monitoring to Identify, Understand and Manage Ecosystems Sustainably

These goals will be achieved through a number of strategic actions, many of which are currently underway through other program areas and initiatives both internal and external to the Ministry. Some of these actions involve short-term activities that provide an immediate positive response while others support ongoing or future activities. Ongoing activities will provide continued support by fostering partnerships and working towards a longer-term comprehensive approach.

Next Steps

This draft will be revised further to stakeholder review. Particular attention will be directed to the development and review of strategic actions. While the Strategy will always be considered “a work in progress” it will be issued to staff in the MNR Southcentral Region prior to March 31, 2001.

Implementation will be initiated in the 2001/2002 fiscal year, which commences April 1, 2002.