

A Near-Urban Nature Network for the Greater Golden Horseshoe

What is near-urban nature? And why must we protect it?

Near-urban nature is comprised of the forests, river valleys, wetlands, savannahs, and other ecological features that surround and intersect our communities. This nature is critical to the health and well-being of all life in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, and is one of our greatest resources for adapting to climate change.

While we often look to protect wilderness areas farther afield, southern Ontario is one of the most biodiverse regions in Canada—providing direct and irreplaceable eco-services to the country's largest concentration of communities and people. This proximity puts near-urban nature at high risk of being degraded and lost, making increased conservation critical.

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Rising to Meet the Challenge

Protecting near-urban nature within the Greater Golden Horseshoe is a challenge given multiple jurisdictions, competing visions for the use of lands, and highly fragmented ownership.

Continued urban growth when met with the climate crisis will make more Canadians vulnerable to flooding, heat waves, droughts, and other stresses that affect everything from our infrastructure to our food production systems and local economies.

Meeting this challenge begins with awareness of nature's benefits. Indigenous histories and knowledge systems in preserving nature can inform strategies and advance management of the lands, water, and wildlife in the region.

The Greater Golden Horseshoe is expected to reach a population of 13.5 million people by 2041. Urban growth has considerable influence on biodiversity. From 1992-2000, the planet saw a loss of 16% of biodiversity due to urbanization. Even greater losses are expected by 2030.

Nature's Benefits



While storing carbon, forests also make the air feel up to 11°C cooler.



Urban river valleys provide much-needed greenspace, boosting the mental health of local residents.



Wetlands manage excess stormwater, keeping our communities safe from flooding.



Coldwater Streams support healthy fish populations and the industries dependent on them.

Building a Near-Urban Nature Network in Southern Ontario

The importance of nature and biodiversity to our communities and future is made clear in the federal government's historic announcement to protect 17 per cent of Canada's landscapes and marine areas by 2020 and 25 per cent by 2025. Ontario and all provinces and territories recognize the importance of retaining landscape connectivity within ecological networks to conserve resilient habitats and ecosystem services. However, solutions will need to go beyond traditional protections. Supported by funding from the Government of Canada, the Greenbelt Foundation and its SONC partners are working to identify practical solutions for protecting near-urban nature.

Project Significance

The near-urban nature network will:

- 1 Address threats to biodiversity in southern Ontario.

- 2 Identify solutions to protect near-urban nature at an increased rate.

- 3 Help realize nature's full public contributions to community health, prosperity, and climate resilience.

- 4 Respect Indigenous communities as land-rights holders, and amplify Indigenous knowledge systems and leadership.

- 5 Enable greater action by municipal governments and private landowners, including agricultural landowners.

- 6 Promote voluntary, innovative community action.

- 7 Initiate a pan-Canadian conversation about protecting near-urban biodiversity.

Prosperity is in Our Nature

The **Southern Ontario Nature Coalition (SONC)** is a group of experienced provincial, regional, and community-based conservation organizations, land-based policy experts, and Indigenous engagement specialists. With support from the Government of Canada, SONC is developing a strategy that supports a robust near-urban nature network for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. What we learn in southern Ontario will inform, inspire, and connect urban landscapes across the country. Ultimately, our work today is critical to the resilience and prosperity of Canadian communities tomorrow.

The Coalition is committed to engaging Indigenous communities in accordance with community protocols and the development of ethical space for all to contribute meaningfully.



Join us!

Join us to share and discover effective actions we can take to protect, restore, and manage natural areas and ecological corridors in near-urban landscapes across Canada.

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Possibility grows here.

