



Possibility grows here.

Greenbelt Foundation

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GREENBELT FOUNDATION BACKGROUNDER

Southern Ontario Nature Coalition

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Overview

The importance of nature and biodiversity to our communities and future was made clear in the Government of Canada's historic announcements to protect 30 per cent of Canada's lands and waters by 2030 and to plant two billion trees in the same timeframe. Ontario and all provinces and territories recognize the importance of retaining landscape connectivity and conserving resilient habitats and ecosystems, while ensuring our growing populations have healthy access to greenspace and the many ecosystem services that nature provides.

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 our local economies. Our near-urban natural areas are both at-risk from climate change and necessary for protecting our communities from its impacts. In order to adapt, we must find new strategies that specifically target the protection of near-urban natural areas.

That is why Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), as well as the Government of Ontario, have supported the Greenbelt Foundation in convening partners in the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition (SONC) to identify practical solutions to protect near-urban nature in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH). These solutions can also be applied across the country. Meeting this challenge begins with awareness of nature's benefits. Indigenous histories and Knowledge Systems can inform strategies and advance management of the lands, water, and wildlife in the region.

Why is Near-Urban Nature So Important?

The Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is Canada's most urbanized and rapidly developing region. According to projections, the region is set to be home to 15 million residents by 2051. These residents require accessible greenspace and healthy ecosystems to sustain them. Access to greenspace is proven to have positive impacts on physical and mental health, while healthy ecosystems provide resilience to climate change for nearby communities. At present, near-urban nature in the GGH provides an estimated \$3.2 billion worth of "ecosystem services," such as preventing flooding and keeping residents and property safe, moderating hot summer temperatures, protecting freshwater resources, and more.

Nature in the GGH is some of Canada's most biodiverse, with the region's Carolinian Ecozone containing plants and animals otherwise rare in Canada. This region also contains more species-at-risk than anywhere else in Ontario. Protecting nature in the GGH and in similar near-urban regions across southern Canada is a challenge, given multiple jurisdictions, competing visions for the use of lands, and

highly fragmented ownership. Doing so requires a coordinated, multi-jurisdictional approach that convenes multiple municipal governments, conservation authorities, private and public landowners, Indigenous Communities and Peoples, and other important stakeholders. While challenging, this effort is imperative to ensuring near-urban nature can continue to sustain life in Canada's most developed regions.

Southern Ontario Nature Coalition

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. Convened by the Greenbelt Foundation and with support from the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario, 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 the Canadian communities of tomorrow. The Coalition is committed to engaging First Nations Peoples and communities in accordance with community protocols and the development of ethical space for all to contribute meaningfully.

Near-Urban Nature Network

With the dual crises of biodiversity and climate change looming, the cost of inaction is too great. Canada's support for the *Near-Urban Nature Network* is a crucial step forward in protecting near-urban nature across the country, conserving biodiversity, supporting Indigenous communities in caring for the land and waters, and creating greater climate resilience for our urban communities.

In general, SONC's Near-Urban Nature Network will:

- Build on the Greenbelt model to achieve greater landscape connectivity in southern Ontario.
- Enable greater action by municipal governments and private landowners, including agricultural landowners.
- Address threats to biodiversity in southern Ontario.
- Identify solutions to protect near-urban ecological cores and corridors at an increased rate.
- Help realize nature's full contributions to community health, prosperity, and climate resilience.
- Respect Indigenous Communities as land-rights holders, and amplify Indigenous Knowledge Systems and leadership.
- Promote voluntary, innovative community action.
- Initiate a pan-Canadian conversation about protecting near-urban biodiversity.

Please find a link to our summary report—*A Solution to Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss*—[HERE](#).

SONC Partners

Ontario Farmland Trust

A vision for the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) first emerged at a forum hosted by the University of Guelph's Farmland Preservation Research Project in 2002. Here, farmers, land conservationists, planners



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and academics worked together to lay the foundation for OFT—an organization with the unique ability to support grassroots, farmer-led and community-driven action on farmland protection.

“Farmland provides important connections between natural spaces like forests and wetlands. Farmland can also act as a sponge to protect urban areas from flooding. Protecting farmland not only ensures a resilient local food system, it also provides important ecosystem services to our communities.”

—Kathryn Enders, Executive Director, Ontario Farmland Trust

Ontario Land Trust Alliance

Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA) is a registered charity focused on providing community, knowledge sharing and support to land trusts and other groups committed to land conservation across Ontario. By strategically protecting land, we contribute essential solutions to biodiversity loss and climate change. OLTA’s member organizations collectively own and steward over 108,000 acres across Ontario, engaging the support of tens of thousands of local community volunteers and participants annually.

“Engaging private landowners in regional conservation efforts is critically important, particularly in Southern Ontario, where over 80% of land is privately owned. OLTA’s network of land trust organizations collaborate with local communities and landowners to foster strong stewardship of the lands and waterways on private lands, providing crucial benefits to the health of Ontario’s wildlife and ecosystems. There is strength in numbers, and working with SONC brings together the conservation community, increases our collective impact and helps us all work towards a connected network of natural areas in Southern Ontario.”

—Alison Howson, Executive Director, Ontario Land Trust Alliance

Ontario Nature

Ontario Nature is a conservation organization that protects wild species and spaces through conservation, education and public engagement. A registered charity, Ontario Nature represents more than 30,000 members and supporters, and more than 150 member groups from across Ontario.

“There are many opportunities to advance the protection of near-urban nature through the designation of new protected areas, in the spirit and practice of Reconciliation and with the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples. Ontario Nature has identified many candidate sites of ecological and cultural significance that would help conserve biodiversity and enhance landscape resilience to climate change across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. What a legacy that would be!”

—Anne Bell, Director of Conservation and Education at Ontario Nature

Cambium Indigenous Professional Service

Cambium Indigenous Professional Service (CIPS) is an Indigenous owned, operated and uniquely all Indigenous staffed Environmental Consulting organization. Led by experienced, Indigenous consultants, we provide both Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients with professional and technical consulting services in a wide range of service areas ranging from Indigenous Engagement to Community Energy

Planning. All our projects are approached with a traditional as well as western science perspective to ensure the betterment of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

“CIPS is pleased to be a SONC partner, assisting with ensuring meaningful inclusion and participation of the Williams Treaties First Nations, as well as the creation of Respectful, Reciprocal Relationships that can be built upon for the betterment of All Beings and our next seven generations.”

—Kerry-Ann Charles, Environmental Partnership Coordinator, Cambium Indigenous Professional Services

Wildlands League

Wildlands League is one of Canada’s pre-eminent conservation organizations. We protect wilderness. We collaborate with communities, governments, First Nations, scientists and progressive industry to protect nature and find solutions that work for the planet and for all. We are a not-for-profit charity that has been working in the public interest since 1968, beginning with a campaign to protect Algonquin Park from development.

“Wildlands League has been excited to be part of the SONC Near-Urban Nature Project from the beginning. We have focused on the contributions of voluntary conservation measures to Near-Urban Nature conservation and protection, particularly Forest Stewardship Council certification for managed forests. We have highlighted the importance of Ecological Corridors in connecting a conservation area network of protected areas, natural areas, farmland, and managed forests. Having a broad exposure to other near-urban nature initiatives across the country, we have brought in those experiences to inform the SONC work in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Conservation initiatives in Windsor (Ojibway Prairie), Halifax (Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Lakes), and our experience in the creation of Rouge National Urban Park in particular have been instructive.”

—Dave Pearce, Forest Manager, Wildlands League

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a unique collaboration of partner agencies, landowners, stakeholders, and the community working together to conserve, protect, and support nearly 2,200 ha of natural lands linking Cootes Paradise with the Niagara Escarpment. Since 2007, the EcoPark System 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 through land securement, ecological restoration, recovery and remediation, education, research, and outreach with the public and landowners. This collaboration of government and not-for-profit agencies is successfully and voluntarily addressing threats to local natural areas such as habitat fragmentation, invasive species, climate change, water quality impairment, along with other anthropogenic effects within Hamilton and Burlington, Ontario.

“The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System acknowledges and values the support of our neighbouring landowners and the many municipal, regional, provincial and federal policies, programs, and initiatives that help conserve, protect, and restore our important natural lands. Collaborative efforts like the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition are vital opportunities to further such collaborative efforts on near urban natural areas across the region.”

—Tomasz Wiercioch, Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Coordinator, Royal Botanical Gardens



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Carolinian Canada

Carolinian Canada is a network of leaders growing healthy landscapes for a green future in the Carolinian Zone, Canada's extraordinary far south, in the spirit and practice of reconciliation. We connect science, community and business for healthy ecosystems and climate-smart neighbourhoods from Toronto to Windsor, Ontario. Our cross-sector platforms connect 300 groups, 5,000 volunteers and 37,000 hectares to save local wildlife, water and our way of life; and support 14 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Carolinian Canada Coalition is a Canadian Registered Charity.

"People who want to support parks, especially in peri-urban areas, have an important role to play in making space for native (locally wild) plants in the greater park ecosystem. From pollinator gardens and ecotrails, to climate-smart 'green infrastructure', native plants are the building blocks of healthy landscapes and a green economy. By choosing the right plant, a homeowner can literally grow "natural capital" and healthy ecosystems in their yard. The good news is that local ethical native plants are now available through a network of nurseries using voluntary ethical standards and practices, and some of the most exciting advancements are being led by Indigenous Communities who have a long history relationship with native plants."

—Michelle Kanter, Executive Director, Carolinian Canada

Greenbelt Foundation

Greenbelt Foundation is a charitable organization, solely dedicated to ensuring the Greenbelt remains permanent, protected and prosperous. We make the right investments in its interconnected natural, agricultural and economic systems, to ensure a working, thriving Greenbelt for all. Ontario's Greenbelt is the world's largest, with over two million acres of farmland, forests, wetlands and rivers working together to provide clean air, fresh water, and a reliable local food source.

"In rapidly urbanizing regions, like the Greater Golden Horseshoe, near-urban nature is at imminent risk from pollution, habitat fragmentation, invasive species, and climate change. Protecting nature in these geographies is a challenge, given multiple jurisdictions, competing visions for the use of land, and fragmented ownership. Building on Greenbelt Foundation knowledge and expertise, SONC is poised to support all levels of government in balancing growth needs with protection of near-urban natural areas in order to sustain a healthy population and environment. Solutions we develop in southern Ontario will support work being done all across the country."

—Edward McDonnell, CEO, Greenbelt Foundation

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