

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System

by Peter Kelly

Consensus is difficult to achieve. Individuals often disagree and groups of people disagree even more. That said, what are the chances that nine organizations, each with a different agenda, could reach consensus on anything?



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE DEJONG

Smokey Hollow's Great Falls is located in the vast Cootes to Escarpment Eco-Park System.

Welcome to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, a network of natural lands nestled within Ontario's Greenbelt at the western end of Lake Ontario and created by a partnership of nine land-owning agencies and organizations. The EcoPark System is framed by the Niagara Escarpment to the north and a wetland complex known as Cootes Paradise to the west and south. The partnership that created it includes three municipalities (City of Hamilton, City of Burlington and Halton Region), two conservation authorities (Conservation Halton and

Hamilton Conservation Authority), one university (McMaster University) and three non-profit organizations (Royal Botanical Gardens, Hamilton Naturalists' Club and the Bruce Trail Conservancy).

The EcoPark System is located in one of Canada's biological hotspots, home to almost 1,600 species of flora and fauna, including over 50 Species at Risk such as red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), eastern flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) and American columbo (*Frasera caroliniensis*). Yet it is surrounded by urban development including four cities and towns with a combined population of over 700,000 (not including rural areas). The threat of urban encroachment on these significant natural lands was the impetus behind devising a plan of action that could provide permanent protection for them, create natural corridors and offer opportunities for recreation and education.

Conversations between the stakeholders began in 2006, but the vision of these early meetings did not become a reality until 2013 when the nine partners signed the memorandum of understanding to formally establish the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. Its mission is to "collaboratively continue preserving and enhancing the natural

lands using a sustainable approach that balances natural ecosystem health with responsible human appreciation and activities."

How do these partners with differing goals and agendas work together to fulfill the mission?

First, they created a working governance model. Each partner contributed funds to the operation of the EcoPark System secretariat, which includes a coordinator who ensures that everything runs smoothly. A management committee (consisting of one representative from each partner organization or agency) meets monthly to make ground-level decisions while a governing council (consisting of one senior administrator from each partner) meets twice annually for higher level decision-making. Funding dollars that support project staff and project implementation come from granting agencies like the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Province of Ontario.

Involvement in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is voluntary. Inclusion of natural lands in the system is also voluntary. Partners may leave at any time (although this has yet to happen) and partners may add or remove lands at any time. It is important to recognize that individual partners still manage their properties outright and that the

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existence of the partnership doesn't impose any restrictions on the management of the lands by the individual partners.

The next important step in the process was to produce high-level management plans. Regardless of partner ownership, all natural lands have been partitioned into six groups of "heritage lands" and holistic overarching plans are being prepared for each. Partner staff, regional stakeholders and the public (through meetings and open houses) provide input and feedback.

How do the partners "preserve" natural lands? How are the natural lands "enhanced"?

Permanent protection of natural lands comes through land purchase, land donation or conservation easements held by one of the partner agencies. Land acquisition is facilitated by a part-time land securement coordinator. Since 2013, 89 hectares (219 acres) have been acquired by the partners, including the purchase of a 17-hectare (43-acre) property in December, 2015 that established a continuous corridor of natural lands

between Cootes Paradise and the Niagara Escarpment. At the same time another 22 hectares (54 acres) were acquired, including a spectacular freshwater ravine and the adjacent pioneer cemetery. In 2013, a 15-hectare (37-acre) property, that became the Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary, was donated outright for inclusion in the EcoPark System by a local business owner in memory of his wife.

It's obvious to the stakeholders that much of the land within the EcoPark System will never be protected through acquisition. Some of the lands have already been developed and development has been approved on others. A significant proportion of the lands will remain private; there will always be a strong human presence.

But lands in private hands can also contribute to the vision. In the fall of 2014, the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System was launched with landowner outreach as a significant component. The Eco-Park stewardship technician is working to foster ecological stewardship and conservation within the community of private EcoPark System landowners, providing them with advice about

initiatives that can maintain the natural features of their properties. Some of this work can be initiated or completed by staff and volunteers.

Landowners can learn about invasive species and their control, protection and enhancement of stream banks to improve water quality and reduce erosion, protection and enhancement of forest environments and habitat creation projects like pollinator gardens or stormwater management. Sometimes, landowners learn about the native plants and animals with whom they share the land and gain an understanding of how their property fits into the local landscape. The idea behind the stewardship program is that small actions or projects on multiple properties can make a difference over the landscape as a whole.

The next step is a community stewardship program that promotes a sense of community responsibility. In this model, landowners and business owners will work together as local stewards on properties within the EcoPark System, not necessarily because they own the lands in question but simply because these projects will enhance their local



environment and provide a collective benefit.

Spring and fall workshops and events run by the stewardship program, such as selecting and planting native seeds, invasive species identification, pollinator garden design and insect hotel building have been well-attended. Restoration projects such as tree and shrub planting, pollinator habitat creation, invasive species removal and live staking of stream banks have been held on partner lands using volunteers and other environmental and stewardship groups. One overarching theme for 2015 restoration projects was the creation of Mottled Dusky Wing butterfly habitat. This butterfly is Endangered in Ontario. It deposits its eggs almost exclusively on New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) and restoration efforts have included planting many of these shrubs.

The partnership isn't just focused on the preservation and enhancement of natural lands. Recreation is important too. So much so, that the

Hamilton Burlington Trails Council, an early working group of the EcoPark System, evolved into an independent organization to consolidate and build a well-connected trail network within the protected lands for recreational trail users while conserving natural ecosystems. The trail network will be community supported, community accessible and a model of progressive recreation and sustainable tourism.

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is unique in eastern North America. Enthusiastic support has come from multiple partners,



Volunteers planting a meadow at Clappison Woods.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER KELLY

communities inside and outside the network and politicians at every level of government. A lot has happened, but it's only the beginning. The conservation and recreational benefits of this unprecedented partnership will be felt for generations to come.

Peter Kelly is the coordinator of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. He was formerly the executive director of the North American Native Plant Society.

Continued from page 1 – **Prairie Nymph**

Recent genetic studies relayed by iris expert Peter Goldblatt in his book *The Iris Family* suggest that the gulf coastal *Herbertia lahue* subsp. *caerulea* represents a rather odd case in the annals of plant geography. Prairie nymph is virtually indistinguishable from its very close relative *H. lahue* subsp. *lahue* endemic to central Chile. Goldblatt hypothesizes that the gulf coastal plants may have been introduced after Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola in 1492.

Whatever its provenance, prairie nymph is quite rare. It only occurs in seven parishes in southwestern Louisiana. We found the largest grouping of about 30 plants at Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Texas in 1996. A friend from Lafayette, Louisiana sent us several bulbs six years ago. He told us the

plant was becoming increasingly difficult to find.

In our experience, prairie nymph adapts fairly well to container culture. In Iowa, the plants usually initiate the flowering process in mid- to late February. We place them outdoors when night-time temperatures stay above 40°F (four degrees Celsius). Outdoors the plants occasionally produce new floral scapes and flower again in May. Pot culture outdoors has its drawbacks: The plant bulbs are too often unearthed by squirrels searching for nuts. Green aphids that attack grasses also favour *Herbertia* where they are adept at hiding in the unassailable pleats of the leaves.

The species is commonly known as early flowering and short-statured, but can still offer some surprises. Ordinarily in late summer in south Louisiana, prairie nymph exists in

basal leaf form or, more likely, is dormant. One time, with a friend, we found a small population of a dozen plants, 85 to 92 centimetres (33 to 36 inches) tall, alongside big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) plants. One prairie nymph had finished flowering a day or two before we found it. This indicates that *H. lahue* subsp. *caerulea* is capable of flowering in August and early September and can be much taller than the typical form. This suggests it is still adapting to the coastal prairie where it may carry the message of autumn's arrival as well as spring's.

Stephen Johnson enjoys the thrill of discovering plants. Mary Stark shares that thrill and enjoys finding connections between plants, mythology and literature.