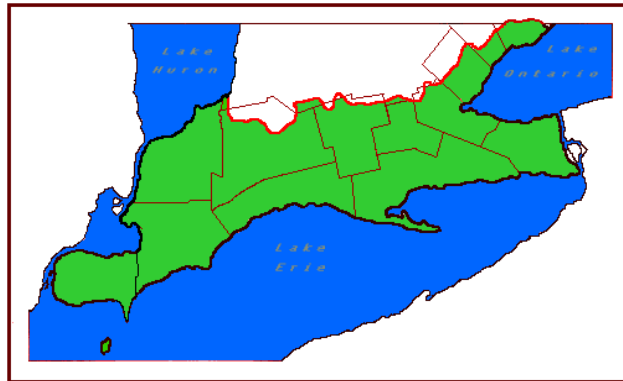

Practical Options for the Greening of Carolinian Canada

Summary



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SUMMARY

Carolinian Canada comprises one-quarter of one percent of the country's land mass, but is home to nearly one-quarter of Canada's population. Agricultural land occupies 73% of the region, and expanding urban centers and rural residential development covers much of the remainder.

The result has been a severe decline in the extent and integrity of natural landscapes, with greatly reduced forest cover, wetlands, and other vegetation, and the highest concentration of endangered species in the country. Overall, less than 15% of Carolinian Canada still has natural vegetation cover, with less than 5% in many urban or agricultural areas.

Some of the best remaining natural areas have been retained through public ownership, public policy or private stewardship, but in total, less than 5% of the landscape is currently protected by ownership or provincial policy. In the 1980s and 90s, the Carolinian Canada program carried out extensive landowner contact and land acquisition within 38 significant natural areas. However, habitats and species continue to be lost at an alarming rate.

In large part, these losses are related to the increasing fragmentation and isolation of remnant habitats, causing loss of species requiring large blocks of habitat. Carolinian Canada provides a textbook example of the effects of fragmentation on wildlife, with 14 animals and 25 plants already extirpated from the region, and many others on the brink.

The *Big Picture* project provides a framework to extend conservation planning beyond existing "islands of green," to highlight the importance of relatively large core habitats and of natural corridors linking together these cores. This interconnected landscape should be better able to maintain viable wildlife populations and perhaps even restore some species now missing. Many of Ontario's top conservation scientists were involved in the GIS-based analysis that produced the *Big Picture* mapping, which provides a scientific context and rationale for local conservation initiatives, and a source of information to coordinate future activities across jurisdictions.

To achieve the *Big Picture* vision, new incentives, new approaches, and new resources will be needed. This paper examines a broad spectrum of possible new tools, drawing from programs currently in place in Ontario and in other jurisdictions. None of these tools has any official sanction at this point, but they are presented to stimulate thinking and discussion about

the best bets for future progress. Potential tools are presented within five broad categories.

A. Sharing the Vision

To be successful, the *Big Picture* vision needs to be broadly accepted by government agencies, landowners, and residents as a road map to ecological health. Embedding the vision into a range of plans, strategies, and actions will hasten that acceptance.

- **Recognize the distinctive nature and needs of Carolinian Canada in government policies and programs.** The Province with other partners could develop a major regional conservation strategy including land use policies, education, private land stewardship, incentives and land securement for all or parts of Carolinian Canada. Special recognition could be given through the Province's Smart Growth initiative. Alternatively, natural heritage policies under the *Planning Act* could be modified to provide different and stronger rules for this region. The Ministry of Natural Resources could also address the special needs of this region within its Natural Heritage Strategy for Southcentral Region.
- **Broaden the focus of protection and recovery activities from species at risk to restoration of landscapes supporting multiple rare species.** Some progress in this area is already evident in recovery plans underway for Pelee Island and the Sydenham River, as well as in such organizations as Tallgrass Ontario. The agencies involved in species conservation and recovery could identify other habitat themes, such as forest interiors, wetlands or coldwater streams, for recovery strategies involving multiple species.
- **Encourage the use of planning tools that address landscape- and watershed-level issues,** building on existing programs such as watershed planning, natural heritage strategies, and the Biosphere Reserve designations for the Niagara Escarpment and Long Point areas. For example, municipalities and conservation authorities have the mandate to develop watershed plans and comprehensive natural heritage strategies within their jurisdictions, which can do much to protect and restore habitat. Parks Canada and other agencies could further promote and implement greater ecosystem planning

concepts to provide links to existing protected areas, as well as develop a marine conservation area for Lake Erie. Programs to restore the Great Lakes, including the Lake Erie LaMP process and six Remedial Action Plans within Carolinian Canada, offer opportunities to restore habitats and biodiversity.

B. Strengthening Incentives for Conservation

Most of Carolinian Canada is in private hands, and sharing responsibility for the environment through economic incentives is a concept increasingly being adopted, both in Ontario and in other jurisdictions.

- **Broaden the application of water quality incentives, and link these more strongly to biodiversity restoration**, particularly through renewal and expansion of rural water quality programs which also restore vegetated corridors along streams.
- **Expand financial incentives to encourage retirement of targeted rural lands to conservation**, for example by establishing a conservation reserve program for private lands modeled after successful American programs. A Ducks Unlimited Canada proposal for a national Conservation Cover Incentive Program, which is currently under consideration, could be a major step forward. Increased provincial incentives to encourage tree planting and to promote sustainable forestry as an income source could also influence the management of private lands.
- **Make property tax incentive programs more effective**, by broadening the Conservation Lands Tax Incentive Program to include other categories of natural lands, and by modifying the Managed Forests Tax Incentive Program to encourage forest creation and greater landowner participation and to better incorporate conservation objectives. The Farm Land Taxation Program could be revised to offer a further incentive to farmers to retain natural habitats. A comprehensive review to improve how the Conservation Lands, Managed Forests, and Farmland tax incentive programs interact is also needed.
- **Provide incentives to support First Nations in their protection of conservation lands**, through discussions about potential voluntary

partnerships and ways to support compatible economic activities such as ecotourism.

C. Informing and Educating for Conservation and Restoration

To build a broad consensus about conservation priorities, it is necessary to inform rural landowners, urban residents, adults and children.

- **Upgrade, simplify and expand educational materials and technical advice for rural landowners**, through renewed private land stewardship programs provided by Stewardship Councils, conservation authorities and others, and by improving conservation information and financial support in programs of farm organizations, particularly the Environmental Farm Plan program.
- **Raise awareness of urban residents of the need for conservation and restoration of Carolinian ecosystems**, through distribution of educational materials for schools and through community-based naturalization and conservation projects.

D. Funding Land Securement and Restoration

Achieving the *Big Picture* vision requires a long-term investment in securing and restoring key parts of the landscape.

- **Expand the existing protected areas system** by using the Big Picture strategy to help establish land securement priorities and by acting on opportunities such as St. Williams Forest.

Establish financial commitments by public agencies to support land securement and restoration, similar to the extensive federal and state funding programs currently in place in the United States. For example, the Canadian and Ontario governments could dedicate selected revenue sources to future land securement, either through special allocations similar to the Great Lakes Sustainability Fund or the Ontario Living Legacy Trust, or through dedication of a particular revenue source, such as a portion of the Land Transfer Tax. A charitable Carolinian Recovery Trust could also be created to develop funding resources for recovery and restoration projects.

- **Use the power of public-private partnerships to fuel land securement and restoration projects**, matching government programs and funding with volunteer involvement and private donations to complete cooperative projects.
- **Improve tax incentives to encourage full or partial donations of environmentally significant lands**, building on recent progress in the federal Ecogifts program to consider provisions to allow bargain sales or to reduce capital gains taxes for land sold to conservation organizations.

E. The Role of Land Use Planning and Management

Most of the planning controls affecting private land are implemented through the Official Plans and zoning bylaws of municipalities, but within overall policy direction provided by the Provincial Policy Statement and related guidelines.

- **Strengthen the Provincial Policy Statement and implementation to require protection of key natural features, encourage restoration and promote sound water management.** This could include changes to broaden application of “no development” policies to the full range of natural heritage features, adding a requirement for natural heritage system concepts and restoration policies, providing better guidance on water resource protection and strengthening the wording to ensure consistency in Official Plans. Limits could be placed on issues going to Ontario Municipal Board hearings and on OMB changes to municipal decisions.
- **Promote naturalization and increase tree cover in urban areas** by developing town and city forestry programs and enhancing urban naturalization partnerships.
- **Encourage municipalities to make better use of existing planning and regulatory tools**, particularly by going beyond Provincial policy to incorporate natural heritage systems based on the *Big Picture* concept within their Official Plans. More effective controls on tree cutting could also be implemented through improved tree bylaws or regulation of forestry contractors.

- **Update the regulatory role of conservation authorities**, through enactment of a proposed generic regulation approach for new flood, fill and alteration to waterways regulations.

What Next?

No single tool is going to ensure the *Big Picture* vision becomes a reality over the next several generations. Rather, a package of “carrots and sticks” is needed, drawing from the possibilities outlined in this report and involving all levels of government and non-government organizations.

At the national level, particular emphasis in the short term should be given to:

- Improvements in tax policy on full and partial land donations;
- Renewed financial support for Environmental Farm Plans and their implementation;
- A new conservation cover incentive program;
- A marine conservation area for Lake Erie;
- Progress on Lakewide Management Plans;
- A multi-species approach to species at risk.

At the provincial level, short term priorities include:

- Improvements to property tax incentive programs;
- Renewed support for rural water quality incentives and tree-planting programs;
- Improvements to the Provincial Policy Statement and its implementation;
- Strengthened conservation authority regulations and watershed planning;
- Coordination through a revised Southcentral Natural Heritage Strategy;
- Long-term investment in protection and restoration of natural areas.

At the local level, communities can:

- Develop natural heritage strategies, watershed plans and municipal policies
- Develop rural water quality programs
- Naturalize parkland, school yards and back yards in cities and towns
- Enact tree-cutting by-laws and / or forestry contractor regulation by-laws
- Secure and restore local Carolinian habitats

At the Carolinian Canada ecoregion level, the most promising option is the development of a regional conservation strategy for Carolinian Canada, perhaps through an advisory panel appointed by the Province using a similar process as the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Carolinian Canada "Big Picture"
Core Natural Areas & Corridor System

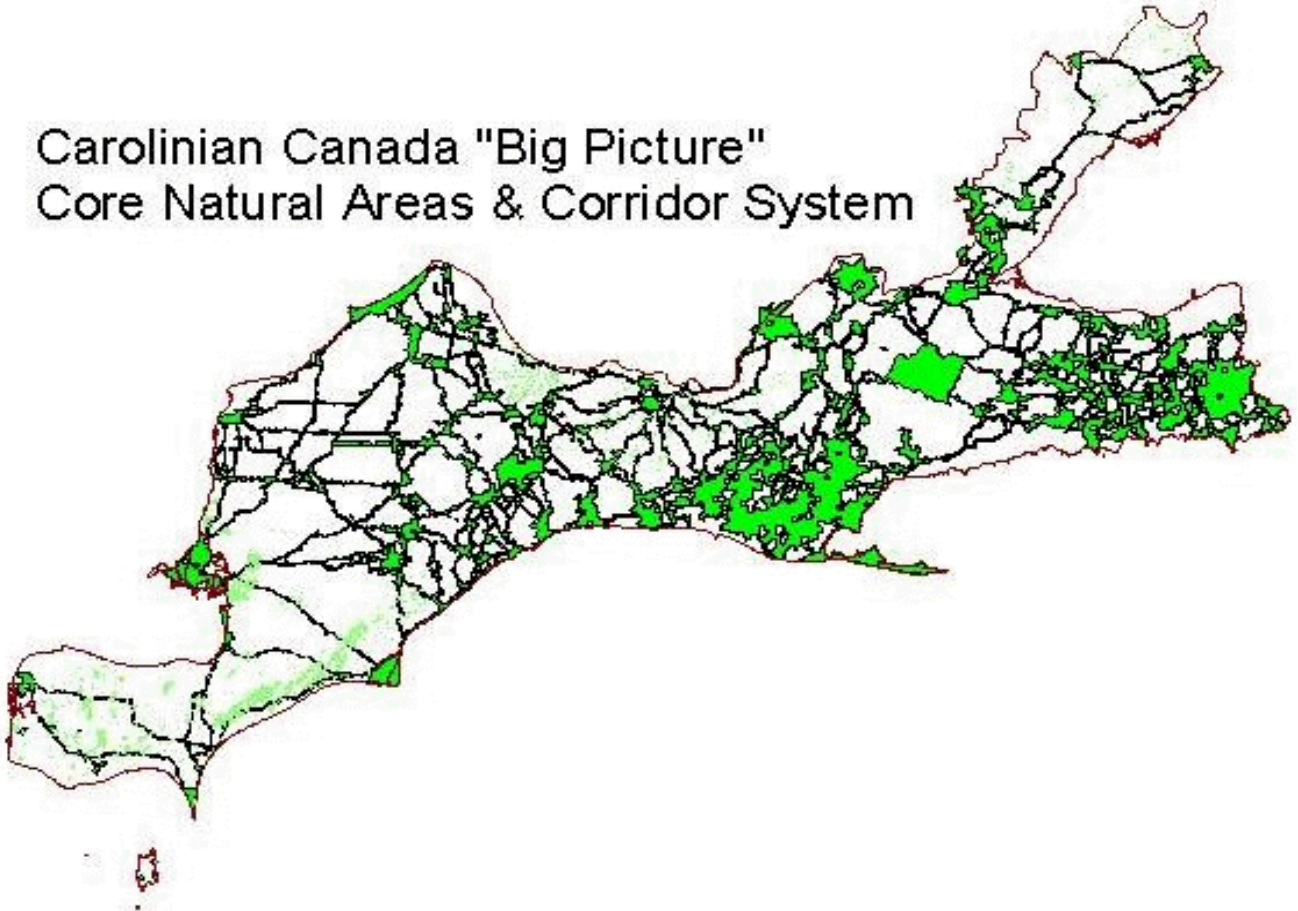


Figure 1. "Big Picture" Core Natural Areas and Corridors