Comments and suggestions from the Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) for new Gatineau Park Ecosystem Conservation Plan

July 2025

OVERARCHING COMMENTS

- To be valid and useful the new Ecosystem Conservation Plan must be evidence-based (i.e. including Indigenous Knowledge) and science-informed;
- It is important that the new plan be reviewed by second and third parties. (e.g., ecological consultants, or academics, personnel from Ministère des Ressources naturelles et des Forêts, Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada)
- NCC should have a commitment to respond to feedback
- There is a general lack of transparency on whether goals have been met. For example, the Ecosystem plan (Del Degan, Massê 2010) has five goals including:
    - Minimize the spread of invasive species and prevent new intrusions (some attempts made)
    - Mitigate the effect of overgrazing by White-tailed Deer (no progress?)
    - Monitor and control visitor numbers and use of the park (cameras installed on trails to monitor use – but no control efforts, such as keeping the public away from sensitive wildlife/species at risk)
    - Limit or prohibit certain recreational activities that are detrimental to ecosystem integrity (some have been done such as prohibiting snowmobiling, many others not)
    - Reduce the impacts of human development (uncontrolled new housing continues unabated around Meech Lake, as well as renovation of old ones)
- Have any of these objectives from the previous plan been met?
- There is an (apparent) lack of transparency concerning ecological monitoring and state of the park reporting. What monitoring is the NCC currently doing and for which programs (e.g., species at risk, invasive species, water quality, ecosystem health, etc.)? Where are the data and reports for indicators and monitoring? What indicators are being monitored and are they appropriate and comprehensive? Could other indicators be developed? Possible examples include:
    - Forest bird index from point counts in different vegetation types (revisiting old plots to estimate change, especially given all of the changes in forest composition following ice storms, mini-tornados and tree diseases); Francois Morneau collected bird data using hundreds of point counts during the 1980's and it would be very informative to revisit these stations 40 yrs later to see how species composition and abundance has changed.

    - Aquatic macroinvertebrate and fish sampling to monitor water quality and assessing ecosystem health (eutrophication from human use of lakes)
    - Species at risk - (Continuing) to map the distribution and abundance of species at risk (e.g., American Ginseng, Wild Leek, Rock Elm) – also setting recovery goals and population targets for these species
    - NCC should collaborate with the MELCCFP and CDPNQ to share data on species at risk. NCC should also be a leader on several recovery teams in QC as many species at risk have their range mainly in the park or are more abundant there than elsewhere.
    - NCC should be a leader in research (driven by its own mandate); this could be in collaboration with universities. NCC should also do more of its own monitoring with professional biologists. Currently, this is mostly done by students with very few experienced field biologists to supervise them.
- The NCC's mandate for the Gatineau Park is to "balance conservation with providing recreational and cultural experiences, while ensuring equitable and sustainable access for all." The Master Plan aims to conserve nature, promote recreational activities, ensure equitable access, and foster engagement. However, there is a general lack of emphasis on biodiversity conservation and much more emphasis on recreational use and revenue. For example, NCC does not have funding for park rangers or wildlife biologists on the ground but a $19 million new campground and new visitor facilities are being built at Lac Philippe. This suggests that the priority is not biodiversity conservation and maintaining ecosystem integrity but increasing revenue from visitors.
- Much of the park's vegetation is reverting following human disturbance (including logging). This also includes sites of old residences/structures (old farms that were expropriated by the NCC) including apple orchards, and red pine plantations. Thus, there could be more emphasis on restoration of the park's ecosystems – planting native trees and shrubs (trail restoration) as well as wetlands (e.g., in agricultural fields adjacent to the park). At the same time reforestation efforts (e.g., tree planting in the Meech Creek valley), also need to consider balancing the conservation of open landscapes such as grasslands which provide habitat for grassland bird species at risk and Monarch butterflies (note that woody vegetation encroachment in grassland can increase predation on grassland birds). There needs to be a strategic plan to balance these conservation concerns.

RESTORATION

Issues:

More vegetation restoration projects should be undertaken by NCC on lands that have been degraded for many decades. Examples include planting local and native species along the Meech creek shoreline and creating wetlands in several wet prairies along Cross Loop Road where wetlands were previously present but destroyed historically by farmers. Some of the wet sections of hayfields generally provide poor quality hay due to the presence of sedges.

Actions:

- Restoring the forest at the edges of hayfields by planting trees and shrubs and by protecting natural regeneration from deer browsing. However, this needs to be carefully planned as there are grassland bird species at risk nesting in these areas (above).
- Collaborating with Chelsea municipality to restore vegetation along Cross Loop Road. All of the elm trees along this road have been killed by Dutch elm disease and they should be replaced – not just cut down and discarded. This entire area has strong aesthetic values because of the beautiful vistas – and the cutting that has been done is insensitive and an eyesore.

THREATS TO ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY WITHIN THE PARK

OVERGRAZING BY WHITE-TAILED DEER

Issue:

- The ecosystem conservation mentioned that 'Overpopulation of winter white-tailed deer yards conflicts with the goal of preserving other resources in the Park' but apparently nothing has been done to alleviate this situation;
- While the deer yard close to the Eardley escarpment provides winter food for raptors – including Golden and Bald Eagles, the large population of White-tailed Deer in the park is having a detrimental effect on tree regeneration and forest structure. For example, browsing of white and red oak seedlings by deer is highly visible along the escarpment where there are also many plant species at risk. Browsing by deer is occurring throughout the park.

Actions:

- Estimate populations and density of deer. Quantify ecological damage to vegetation by deer in the park by spatially mapping browsing on woody regeneration, as well as measuring forest age structure, and presence of herbaceous indicator species.
- Deer management is a regional issue and collaboration and negotiation would be needed with jurisdictions outside the park. Are there any efforts underway to collaborate with others? For example, deer are hunted on farmlands at the foot of the Eardley escarpment, and farmers would probably be accommodating to an increase in their quota.
- Management of deer by culling is likely not feasible/acceptable except perhaps through Indigenous harvest. Experimental fenced exclosures could be set up to prevent deer browsing in ecologically sensitive areas (note that deer are hunted all around, and probably sometimes in, the park);

INVASIVE SPECIES

One of the five goals of the Ecosystem Conservation Plan was to minimize the spread of invasive species and prevent new intrusions. Efforts have been made to do this through citizen science – e.g., for Common Periwinkle and a small project targeted toward European Buckthorn.

Issue:

Rapid expansion of many invasive species in the park, including tree diseases. In wetlands and other riparian locations, *Phragmites* is invasive. While not currently widespread, *Phragmites* is present at several locations (e.g., a wetland near Pink Lake, along Cross Loop Road, Lac des Fees). It is important to address the threat from this and other invasive species before they become established and spread further.

One of the main problems is that there is a lack of coordination between the natural resources team and the maintenance team in the effort to reduce the propagation of invasive plants along trails across the park. For example, wild mustard is currently present at varying densities along almost all of the park's trails due to uncleaned machinery used by Demsis. Not removing all plant residues from machinery has led to the species spreading even further into remote areas of the park as the maintenance is ongoing. This species is now found far from trails as wildlife - including deer and bears - transport the seeds from trails to the forest interior.

Actions:

- Mapping the distribution and abundance of invasive species and prioritizing their management and removal. This could be done using citizen science observers to conduct a mapping exercise to obtain comprehensive distribution and abundance information. Spatial mapping is important (using apps such as inaturalist on cell phones or simple GPS locations) and evaluating abundance (single plant = 1, scattered plants 2-10, scattered dense patches 11-100, Dominant cover 101-1000 and >1000 dense monoculture). This would allow areas for control to be prioritized and perhaps statistical modelling to predict future spread of invasives (this could be done under contract or via a Master's student).
- Not all invasive species programs are cost-effective and so a cost-benefit analysis should be done to assess feasibility of control efforts.
- This includes:
    - *Phragmites* and Purple Loosestrife in wetland locations (ECCC has intensive programs to eradicate *Phragmites* in some National Wildlife Areas and there could be benefits to collaborating with the partners in these efforts).
    - European Buckthorn along multi-use trails, as well as Common Periwinkle, Japanese Knotweed;
    - In the case of wild mustard, it would be easy to incentivize members of Friends of Gatineau Park, who frequently patrol the park to remove wild mustard along trails and to report other invasive species.

- Mapping and assessing the impact of tree diseases on tree species and understory composition and abundance; specifically focusing on beech bark disease and emerald ash borer.

FRAGMENTATION OF ECOSYSTEMS IN THE PARK DUE TO ROADS AND TRAILS

Paved roads

The impact of roads is mentioned in the Ecosystem plan but not specifically in relation to fragmentation of cover types.

Issue:

Paved roads should be mentioned as a serious concern for ecosystem fragmentation and wildlife mortality. Two major new roads have been built since the Ecosystem plan was written (highway 5 extension and Boulevard des Allumettières). These are under provincial or municipal jurisdiction and so it is important for the NCC to continue liaisons with these partners.

It is important to consider that traffic volume can lead to high wildlife mortality rates, including on secondary roads. Even small, partially paved roads such as Eardley/Masham result in wildlife mortality (e.g., coywolf, turtles).

Actions:

- The NCC should stipulate in the new plan that no more paved roads will be constructed in the park
- Identify hotspots for mitigation of wildlife mortality because of ongoing wildlife mortality (black bear adults and cubs, beavers, otters on highway 5).
- More mitigation should be carried out on existing roads (Boulevard des Allumettières and especially highway 5), These include:
  - Effective bridges or underpasses along highway 5 to reduce road kills of wildlife such as deer, canids, otters, black bears, beavers, and turtles
  - Fencing for turtles and underpasses at sites close to wetlands/riparian areas (e.g., Meech Creek, Tulip Valley);

New trails

Issues:

In the current Ecosystem Plan suggestions were made to mitigate the impact of trails on fragmentation within the park but these have not been implemented.

- The park already has an extensive network of trails, both official and unofficial, and this can lead to soil erosion, disturbance to wildlife (including habituation due to supplemental food supply), conduits facilitating the spread of invasive species and general degradation of vegetation

(especially at the urban periphery of the park, such as in Alymer). They provide access to many/most areas of the park. Some wildlife species are sensitive to this human disturbance and require seclusion (e.g., Wolf-like canids generally avoid humans, nesting raptors) or can become aggressive when protecting their young (Black Bears);

- Considerable problems exist with building new official trails or making unofficial trails official, despite environmental impact assessments being carried out. This is due to lack of biological knowledge and expertise of the contractor (Dempsis) while trail building. This has led to the accidental felling of old and mature cavity trees, as well as species at risk trees. In addition, installing culverts or building bridges can affect drainage (e.g., for species that require damp soil conditions). There are also issues with increasing mortality of snakes on mountain bike trails as many snake species use trails for basking.

Actions:

- Continue to use environmental impact assessments for new trails but any new trail building or modification to existing trails (i.e., new sections) should be minimized (e.g., to prevent erosion or to avoid disturbance to wildlife/species at risk);
- Any new adopted trails (unofficial becoming official) should be subjected to the same impact assessment process used by NCC at other sites (e.g., Lac Philippe campground or projects at Camp Fortune). Species at risk are often found along non-official trails and complete surveys should be conducted before officialising trails.
- Supervise trail management by on-the-ground knowledgeable local biologists so that species at risk (trees, herbaceous plants) and wildlife trees (e.g., for cavity users) are not impacted;
- Any old and unofficial trails should be closed and restored.
- Supervise building of new bridges or culverts on new trails by on-the-ground knowledgeable biologists.

Existing trails – trail maintenance

Issues:

Current trail maintenance is overzealous and often unnecessary, including cutting of many trees that pose little or no public safety hazard. There have been numerous incidents of contractors unnecessarily cutting all dead trees along trails (and some live ones that they thought were dead). Trees (e.g., White Spruce) with obvious cavities used by woodpeckers have been routinely cut, as well as live trees (Eastern Hemlock, White Spruce). The assumption seems to be that if trees are dead or just close to the trail, they will fall. This includes Trail 53, 52 and 70, among others.

Removing or interfering with canopy cover by felling trees along trails may have a direct impact on species at risk, including American Ginseng, which requires a closed canopy to persist. There are at least two cases where ash trees have been felled and have destroyed plant species at risk (e.g., ginseng, the orchid *Goodyera pubescens*).

Actions:

- Trail maintenance should be supervised on the ground by park biologists/biologists knowledgeable about trees and wildlife/species at risk;
- Surveys should be conducted and the NCC SAR database should be consulted prior to any logging;
- Trees along trails should not be felled simply because they are old, dead or have wildlife cavities.
- More adherence to Parks Canada trail management guidelines (not published) could include:
    - All proposed felling of trees, pruning is supervised by an NCC or local biologist on the ground;
    - Only removing dead trees when they pose an immediate and demonstrated risk to public safety such as next to a lookout, camp site, picnic area or other recreational facility. This should be assessed by a tree specialist and a biologist – not just a general contractor.
    - If pruning branches or and felling trees is considered really necessary for public safety reasons, woody material should not be left next to trails but moved to at least 10 m away. Parks Canada has a regulation like this for National Parks and it is done not only for aesthetic reasons but also to prevent this woody material from posing a fire hazard. Increasingly, maintenance of a large network of trails will require dealing with a large volume of dead fallen trees due to the current massive mortality of ashes, beeches and elms across the park.
    - At the same time, it is important to note that downed woody material should be left as this is important for ecosystem health/nutrient cycling and provides a food source for many organisms.

Issue:

- There is a widespread network of unofficial trails that are being built by persistent trail builders either for mountain bike or hiking access – these cause damage to woody and herbaceous species and may lead to trampling of species at risk such as Ginseng. Unless there is active enforcement by conservation officers and/or signage people will continue to try and use decommissioned trails and unofficial trails

Actions:

- Mapping/Education efforts to objectively understand problems areas, perhaps with citizen patrols and reporting (given inadequate funding).
- Restore decommissioned trails and unofficial trails (e.g., planting native species)
- Increase conservation officer presence and discourage use of decommissioned trails

DEGRADATION OF VEGETATION DUE TO HUMAN OVERUSE

Issue:

The riparian zones along the west shore of Meech Lake are severely degraded due to Meech Lake Road and the many private residences, boathouses, etc.

Action:

There needs to be a specific recognition of this problem, and specific actions to address it.

DECLINE IN FISH SPECIES

Issue:

- The Ecosystem conservation plan mentions that cold water (Stenotherm) fish species have declined perhaps as a result of sport fishing.

Actions:

- Consider setting up a system to monitor fishing in the park

INFLUENCES OUTSIDE THE PARK

ESTABLISHING AND ENFORCING A BUFFER ZONE AROUND THE PARK

Issues:

The Ecosystem plan mentions the desirability of a buffer zone around the park, but there are no concrete actions, and no commitment to work towards establishing a formal buffer zone. A buffer zone is important to prevent further 'nibbling loss' at the park boundaries. In conjunction with ecological corridors a buffer zone could facilitate species movements and provide additional habitat for species of concern, in addition to the obvious aesthetic benefits. It is important to take into account that farmland provides much 'softer' edge effects at the park's boundary compared to urban areas which provide a 'hard' edge with greater impacts.

Developments have occurred/may occur within what should be a buffer zone right at the boundary of the park in:

- A scenic area in Pontiac - Luskville Falls. This site was also on a field where there were Western Chorus Frogs and the site was drained by the developer and so no frogs were present during the environmental impact assessment;
- Styro rail in La Pêche close to the Hundred Acre Wood
- A field for sale (residential/commercial) close to the Eardley entrance of the park

Actions:

- NCC should be more aggressive/proactive in purchasing new land in strategic places.
- Explore the possibility of using land covenants
- Establish a firm buffer zone (1-2km?) around the park prohibiting any further development at the perimeter. For example, the large field for sale next to the Eardley escarpment in Eardley and a known Western Chorus frog population should be purchased.
- Further expansion of the Styro Rail complex or development of the Asticou site or any residential housing developments immediately around the park (Pontiac) should be prohibited.

ECOLOGICAL CORRIDORS AROUND THE PARK

Issues:

The 13 ecological corridors were set up in an *ad hoc* opportunistic way and are not monitored or enforced. Without surveillance, protection or management, they are not functional ecological corridors. The NCC has no real control over these lands but could negotiate and liaise with landowners to make them more effective for biodiversity conservation.

Actions:

- Recommend a new connectivity analysis to determine where best to prioritize corridors around the park. Note, this has already been carried out by ACRE (details forthcoming). Statistical connectivity analyses can be carried out using satellite imagery, connecting corridors with forest, wetland or grasslands;
- Once identified, establish liaisons with landowners (including compensation for limiting land use) to prohibit residential or other development in corridors. For example, the Styro rail development was allowed within an existing corridor.

LACK OF ENFORCEMENT OF ACTIVITIES (E.G., POACHING, DOGS OFF LEASH) WITHIN THE PARK

Issue:

- Wild leek, ginseng are subject to poaching
- There may be illegal hunting/trapping within the park boundaries

Actions:

- Increase enforcement by Park rangers, recruit volunteers from Citizen Science

Issue:

- The NCC has numerous signs (posted fines of up to $100) prohibiting the free roaming of dogs (dogs must be on leash);
- Owners continue to allow their dogs freely within the park and off leash regulations are not enforced; there have been instances of dogs chasing and placing wildlife at risk – including Black Bears
- Regarding grassland birds, NCC should do much more enforcement in the spring to reduce the impact of dog walkers in Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink habitat.

Actions:

- Set up a ‘dogs off leash’ park in Chelsea and Wakefield to divert use of the Gatineau Park for dog walking (unless on leash)
- Increase enforcement of transgressions with more park rangers

LACK OF ENFORCEMENT PREVENTING FURTHER RESIDENTIAL BUILDING IN THE PARK (perhaps more relevant to Master plan)

Issues:

- Houses continue to be built illegally within the park boundaries by people/organizations with power and influence

Actions:

- All further building in the park should cease;
- NCC should exercise its powers of the right of first refusal to purchase land and property within the park; Note that this is in the park *legislation*.
- Further development at the periphery of the park which causes 'nibbling loss' should be prohibited with an action plan to purchase land within the buffer zone (this should be empirically defined and covenants set up with landowners).

For further information:

Please contact John McDonnell,

jmcdonnell@cpaws.org

819-209-5178