

Chapter 6. Recommendations

Recommendations for this study have been developed by the Implementation Advisory Committee and the Steering Committee based on the technical guidance provided by the aquatic and terrestrial technical committees. The IAC reviewed options and developed numerous recommended actions which were then prioritized. The Steering Committee brought forward the IAC's recommendations, built on the IAC work (see Appendix H) and also added a number of recommendations based on their comprehensive review and management of the project.

Recommendation 1: Incentives

Incentives were identified by the IAC as an important means of maintaining and enhancing natural heritage in Oxford County. Incentives are well received by the community and are viewed as being very effective. Incentives are voluntary and they reward operators who want to employ good stewardship. Incentives educate through example, promote community buy-in and allow projects to be completed sooner rather than later. Since environmental protection is a benefit to society as a whole, it is appropriate that society pay at least partially for this benefit through taxes rather than leave the financial burden to individual landowners.

The Clean Water Project (CWP) is partially funded by Oxford County ratepayers and has been very effective and well-received by the Oxford County community. Tax dollars stay in the County through projects completed by landowners and local contractors. Baseline funding is critical to the continuance of the project, but there has been success at leveraging additional funding, which should continue. Information on the CWP is found in Appendix G. The CWP is robust enough to adapt to new directions and targets.

IAC recommendations are as follows:

- 1a. It is recommended that the County expand the current Clean Water Project (CWP) to add categories that target terrestrial and aquatic natural heritage protection and enhancement. The main additions to the program will need to be targeted to terrestrial natural heritage protection (e.g. woodlot management, expanded native species plantings). The results of the ONHS can be used by the CWP Committee to adapt the project to get the best environmental value for the dollars available.
- 1b. It is recommended that opportunities for additional government and non-government funding support of the Clean Water Project continue to be pursued.
- 1c. It is recommended that the County continue to endorse other incentive programs provided by other agencies as a means of protecting and enhancing the natural heritage resources of Oxford County.
- 1d. It is recommended that the County investigate options for providing tax relief to the owners of designated patches.

The Steering Committee concurs with the IAC recommendations related to incentives and offers the following additional recommendations:

- 1e. It is recommended that the County contribution to the Clean Water Project (CWP) be increased from \$70,000 per annum to \$200,000 to support the expanded eligible categories (see Recommendation 1b).

Recommendation 2: Ongoing Support for Natural Heritage Activities

The IAC recommended the creation of a County Natural Heritage Advisory Committee to oversee the ongoing implementation of the ONHS and to monitor and report on success. It was suggested that the Natural Heritage Committee should report to County Council and be made up of a cross section of stakeholders somewhat similar to the make up of the IAC.

- 2a. It is recommended that the County establish a Natural Heritage Advisory Committee that would report to County Council and oversee the ongoing implementation of the ONHS.

The Steering Committee supports the recommendation to establish a Natural Heritage Advisory Committee. The Steering Committee also discussed the need for ongoing staff support of natural heritage planning and implementation initiatives.

- 2b. It is recommended the County hire a permanent staff person to take the lead on natural heritage planning and implementation activities. This person would support the Natural Heritage Advisory Committee, coordinate other County efforts on natural heritage planning and implementation and assist the local municipalities with their natural heritage activities.

Recommendation 3: Education and Communication

The IAC identified Education and Communication as a high priority for action. Landowners need to be aware of the state of their local environment and what they can do to improve conditions. People will not be motivated to change or continue with good practices unless they are well informed.

There are a number of existing activities that can be built upon to increase the community's awareness of natural heritage issues and opportunities. It was noted that the rural non-farm audience should be specifically targeted in addition to the traditional target audiences (e.g. farmers, landowners).

- 3a. It is recommended that the County of Oxford develop a communications strategy on natural heritage that builds on, and links to, existing communications programs targeted to landowners.

The Steering Committee supported the IAC's recommendation on Education and Communications and offers the following additional recommendations:

- 3b. It is recommended that part of the communications strategy entail presentations to Oxford's local municipalities to raise awareness at this level.
- 3c. It is recommended that the County work with other agencies involved in communications regarding natural heritage issues.

Recommendation 4: Recognition of Landowners

Recognition of the owners of natural heritage was identified as a priority action by the IAC. The recognition may include formal acknowledgement of the contribution that their land makes to the areas natural heritage system.

- 4a. It is recommended that the County support the development of a recognition program for landowners who own and have conserved significant natural heritage areas.

Recommendation 5: Regulatory Measures

The use of regulatory measures, such as the Planning Act, to protect natural heritage was discussed by the IAC. There was agreement that the County must fulfill certain regulatory obligations but that the process should be considerate of landowner rights and the negative perception of regulation. While the IAC did conclude that designation of significant natural heritage areas in the official plan was acceptable, it was noted that this measure must be accompanied by incentive measures as outlined in Recommendation 1.

- 5a. It is recommended that the County of Oxford proceed to designate significant natural heritage areas (i.e. sites that meet one or more ONHS terrestrial criteria).
- 5b. It is recommended that the County directly advise affected landowners of the designation and provide an explanation of why their land is significant, outline permitted uses, identify incentives that are available and provide information on beneficial management practices that can be undertaken to further enhance natural features. This is part of the communications strategy that is referenced in recommendation 3a and needs to be provided prior to the Official Plan Amendment public meetings.

The Steering Committee supports the IAC's recommendations regarding Regulatory Measures. The Steering Committee also recommends that management activities that do not compromise natural heritage protection should be explicitly permitted (e.g. sustainable tree harvesting, maple syrup production, recreation trails, hunting, trapping and fishing in accordance with applicable legislation). It was also suggested that the impact of land designation which limits use should be offset by the development of new incentive opportunities for landowners. For example, the County could explore opportunities for tax exemptions for designated land or subsidize natural heritage management advice. The County is obligated to inform landowners about any designations and should take the extra step and provide additional information on services and incentives.

The Steering Committee also agrees with the IAC discussion that incentives for BMPs (Beneficial Management Practices) continue to operate on a voluntary basis when no change in land use is taking place (e.g. ongoing farm management). However, it is recognized that much of the pressure on natural heritage features occurs in urban areas where the pressure to clear and develop land is greatest. In this regard, the Steering Committee is recommending that BMPs should be mandated when there is a change of land use, primarily from rural to urban. Before the land is urbanized, natural heritage features (e.g. woodlands and watercourses) should be protected and buffered. For example, as part of the development approval process, vegetated buffers should be created on both sides of a watercourse to protect the aquatic habitat. It is recommended that additional work be carried out to develop such a policy framework.

- 5c. It is recommended that the policy for the natural heritage designation in the County Official Plan explicitly permit uses such as sustainable tree harvesting, maple syrup production, recreational trails, hunting, fishing and trapping.
- 5d. It is recommended that designated properties receive first priority for incentives and tax relief. Cross reference recommendation 1e.
- 5e. It is recommended that official plan policy be developed to protect and enhance natural heritage features, such as existing watercourses, as urbanization occurs.

Recommendation 6: Public ownership

Public ownership of certain natural heritage resources was discussed by the IAC. It was agreed that public ownership continues to be an appropriate measure to protect natural heritage and to allow for public access recognizing that this is an expensive measure and that it may only be applicable to limited situations (e.g. very sensitive or significant properties or parts of properties). It was noted that the County already owns a number of County Forests which represent large tracts of natural heritage land. If situations arise where landowners face a loss of management control because of the unique environmental sensitivity of their land, the County should consider options for some form of public ownership or other compensation. It is noted that options can include outright ownership by various public bodies or restrictive covenants or easements with the land holding staying in private hands.

- 6a. It is recommended that opportunities for public ownership of significant natural heritage continue to be supported by the County of Oxford.

The role of the County as the owner of nine County Forest sites was discussed by the Steering Committee. It was agreed that an integrated plan for the County Forests should be developed. This plan should include consideration of the role of the County in owning County Forests, public access, risk management and natural resource management activities and opportunities.

- 6b. It is recommended that the County develop master plans for the County Forests and that as part of the process, the County determine its role in the protection of natural heritage as a landowner.

Recommendation 7: Urban Natural Heritage

The different challenges of identifying and protecting natural heritage in urban settings versus rural settings were discussed by the Steering Committee. The ONHS identifies significant natural areas on a County-wide, landscape scale, not a site-specific scale. Smaller patches in urban areas often do not meet the County-scale criteria and therefore, it is necessary to look at urban areas separately and at a finer scale.

The Woodstock Natural Heritage Inventory (2006) was discussed as an example of a detailed inventory that provides information about the natural heritage resources of an urban growth centre. It was acknowledged that there is public demand and expectation that the municipality will include natural areas in the City open space inventory but that there is limited planning in place about how these areas will be managed for natural heritage values, access, liability, etc.

It was also noted that while significant natural heritage patches need to be protected to be consistent with Provincial Policy, there is an expectation that areas of local and neighbourhood importance should also be protected from development. The expectation is that these areas should be protected for their natural heritage value, their visual amenity and community wellness value and for public access purposes. It is acknowledged that the desire or ability of the municipality to take on ownership of these areas and to manage them for these potentially conflicting goals is a complex issue.

- 7a. It is recommended that the local municipalities complete inventories of the remaining natural heritage areas within their urban growth centres.
- 7b. It is recommended that the local municipalities develop management strategies for the overall identification, ownership and management of significant and non-significant (locally important) natural heritage areas within their urban growth centres.
- 7c. It is recommended that local municipalities, at a minimum, have generic master plans for the ongoing management of publicly owned natural heritage areas, particularly in urban growth areas and that specific master plans be developed for each site as resources permit.

Recommendation 8: Woodland Conservation By-Law

The IAC and the Steering Committee discussed the role of sustainable forest harvesting practices in terms of maintaining quality woodlands in Oxford County. It is recommended that the County's Woodland Conservation Bylaw be reviewed within five years to incorporate current knowledge about the science of managing woodlands.

- 8a. It is recommended that the County review its Woodland Conservation Bylaw within five years.

Recommendation 9: Monitoring

The importance of monitoring data was discussed by the Steering Committee. It was agreed that monitoring data is very important for establishing benchmarks and measuring change over time. It was also agreed that regular reporting on the monitoring results is critical. Success depends on knowledge and this is gained through monitoring.

- 9a. It is recommended that the County of Oxford lobby the provincial government to continue to support the Provincial Water Quality Monitoring Network and Provincial Groundwater Monitoring Network programs.
- 9b. It is recommended that the County of Oxford request that the Conservation Authorities identify their specific monitoring services as a budget item and that the County continue to support the monitoring programs of the Conservation Authorities.
- 9c. It is recommended that the County of Oxford work with the Conservation Authorities to enhance the existing monitoring programs by adding new sites as appropriate and improving consistency of monitoring techniques between the Conservation Authorities.
- 9d. It is recommended that the Conservation Authorities provide a coordinated comprehensive report on monitoring for the County area on a regular basis.

Recommendation 10: Tourism

The high quality habitats within Oxford lend themselves to ecotourism and hunting/fishing opportunities. Woodlands, wetlands, meadows, streams and rivers have the potential to support sustainable economic ventures such as eco-tourism (hiking, birding, cross-country skiing) as well as fishing, hunting and trapping. Oxford does possess many excellent quality habitats that could be promoted to bring in tourist dollars that could in turn, assist landowners with maintaining their resources. This idea was explored by both the IAC and Steering Committee. The market needs to be examined.

- 10a. It is recommended that the County explore tourism opportunities related to natural heritage, such as hunting and fishing outfitting, examining models from other parts of North America.