



CONSERVATION AREA STRATEGY

DISCUSSION PAPER

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1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Purpose & Regulatory framework	3
3.0 Conservation Area Strategy Framework	4
4.0 Overarching Goals & Objectives	5
5.0 NPCA Programs & Services	6
5.1 Conservation Area Related Programs & Services.....	7
6.0 Conservation Areas Land Use Categories.....	9
7.0 Get Involved!.....	10
8.0 Next Steps	11

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Conservation of greenspace plays a vital role in enhancing environmental conditions, protecting biodiversity, promoting outdoor activities, and supporting mental and physical well-being. Natural heritage and green infrastructure, such as forests, wetlands, shorelines, and floodplains, provide essential ecosystem services, including clean air and water, flood and erosion control, and habitats for wildlife.

The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) manages 41 conservation areas within the Niagara Peninsula watershed, which encompass a diverse range of ecosystems and protect some of the region's most significant natural features. These areas include important shoreline segments along Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, migratory bird habitats, provincially significant wetlands (PSWs), Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs), cultural heritage sites, and extensive sections of the Niagara Escarpment, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Together, these conservation areas form a critical part of the Carolinian Life Zone, the most biodiverse and threatened ecoregion in Canada.

As urbanization, land use changes, and climate pressures intensify, there is a growing demand for access to greenspaces for recreation and health. NPCA's conservation areas are vital outdoor spaces for over half a million residents and visitors, supporting local communities, agriculture, tourism, and natural heritage. The Conservation Area Strategy (CA Strategy) Discussion Paper provides an overview of the strategy development process, regulatory framework, and key objectives to guide public input through engagement activities and an online survey.

2.0 PURPOSE & REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The CA Strategy outlines broad objectives for NPCA's conservation areas and related programs, as mandated by the Conservation Authorities Act and Ontario Regulation 686/21: Mandatory Programs and Services. The strategy will provide comprehensive guidance for the management and operation of NPCA's conservation areas and is to be completed by December 31, 2024, in compliance with regulatory requirements.

Recognizing the importance of conservation areas to the local community, ecosystems, and future generations, the CA Strategy aims to set high-level goals for NPCA lands and services. NPCA is committed to collaborating with the public, partners, and staff, ensuring opportunities for participation through surveys and the [Get Involved NPCA portal](#). This process will keep stakeholders informed of future opportunities to provide feedback on management plans and other conservation strategies.

3.0 CONSERVATION AREA STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

The CA Strategy, as required by Ontario Regulation 686/21, includes the following key components:

- **Objectives:** Establish clear objectives to guide the Conservation Authority’s decision-making regarding the management of lands it owns and controls. This includes setting policies related to the acquisition and disposition of these lands, ensuring that decisions align with broader conservation goals. (See Section 4)
- **Programs and Services:** Identify both mandatory and non-mandatory programs and services provided on lands owned and managed by the Conservation Authority. This includes detailing the sources of funding for each program, ensuring transparency in how services are financed. (See Section 5)
- **Land Assessment:** Where advisable to achieve the established objectives, conduct an assessment of how the Authority’s lands can:
 - Enhance natural heritage features within the Conservation Authority’s jurisdiction.
 - Integrate seamlessly with other publicly accessible lands, including provincially or municipally owned properties and trails within the area.(Details are included in Section 4, with further elaboration to be provided in the final CA Strategy document.)
- **Land Use Categories:** Establish categories for classifying lands within the NPCA’s inventory based on their designated activities and significant characteristics. This classification will guide the appropriate use and management of each parcel of land. (See Section 5)
- **Review and Update Process:** Develop a process for the regular review and updating of the CA Strategy. This process should include specific procedures to ensure that stakeholders and the public are actively consulted during each review and update phase, fostering ongoing engagement and adaptability. (This will be detailed in the CA Strategy document, as it is not included in the current Discussion Paper.)

While the CA Strategy provides overarching guidance, it does not cover specific property-level details, which will be developed through individual management plans tailored to each conservation area or watershed priorities. Examples of items that will **not** be represented in the CA Strategy include:

- Invasive species management plan
- Permitted uses for individual conservation areas
- Programs and services for individual conservation areas
- Access points, gates, parking lots
- Restoration plans

- Climate action plan
- Trail management/standards plan
- Wayfinding/signage plan

4.0 OVERARCHING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The CA Strategy outlines goals and objectives that guide the management of NPCA's conservation areas, aligned with the Conservation Authorities Act, NPCA's Strategic Plan 2021-2031, and the Land Securement Strategy. These goals will inform land acquisition, planning, management, and the delivery of programs and services. More detailed actions will be developed through specific management plans or watershed-based initiatives.

Definitions:

- **Goal:** A long-term, achievable result supported by specific objectives.
- **Objective:** A short-term, defined, and measurable action that supports overall goals.

Goal #1: Protection & Management

- Steward conservation areas to enhance biodiversity, habitat connectivity, and natural cover, ensuring the watershed's long-term health and sustainability.
- Increase protected greenspace through land acquisition and securement.
- Develop management plans that prioritize accountability to the environment and future generations.
- Enforce conservation area rules to safeguard these spaces against non-permitted uses that threaten safety and sustainability.

Goal #2: Greenspace Access & Connectivity

- Improve greenspace access to ensure all individuals can experience the mental, spiritual, and physical benefits of nature.
- Ensure conservation areas are safe, accessible, and welcoming, preserving natural and cultural features.
- Collaborate with partners to enhance connectivity between publicly accessible greenspaces, transportation routes, and trail systems.
- Implement innovative land management approaches to improve access and inclusivity.

Goal #3: Sustainability & Enhancement

- Increase restoration and enhancement projects to boost biodiversity, improve water quality, and support native species.
- Use sustainable technologies, infrastructure design, and practices to ensure the safety and sustainability of conservation areas.
- Enhance visitor safety with wayfinding systems, signage, and accessibility information.
- Lead in demonstrating green infrastructure and sustainable technologies in conservation area planning.

Goal #4: Climate Change Adaptation & Mitigation

- Adapt conservation area programs, services, and asset management to address changing climate conditions.
- Identify and improve climate resilience and adaptation measures in conservation areas.
- Seek opportunities to mitigate climate change impacts through strategic land acquisition, restoration, and planning.

Goal #5: Engagement & Collaboration

- Collaborate with community groups on outreach and environmental initiatives to foster stewardship and create conservation champions.
- Deliver experiential education programs that connect future conservation leaders to nature and promote responsible engagement.
- Expand Indigenous programming, place-making, and recognition of Indigenous heritage.

5.0 NPCA PROGRAMS & SERVICES

In 2022, NPCA prepared an Inventory of Programs and Services, identifying:

- **Category 1: Mandatory Programs and Services**, including natural hazard management.
- **Category 2: Municipal Programs and Services** requested by municipalities, such as tree planting and technical research.
- **Category 3: Other Programs and Services** that further conservation goals, including restoration and stewardship.

NPCA's programs and services are organized into five Key Service Areas:

1. **Natural Hazard Management:** Protects people and properties from flood, erosion, and other natural hazards.
2. **Watershed Resource Management and Climate Change:** Manages watershed conditions, risks, and restoration strategies.
3. **Other Watershed-related Programs:** Includes source water protection and projects funded by external sources.
4. **Conservation Authority Lands and Conservation Areas:** Oversees 2,982 hectares of land, including recreation, heritage, and environmental protection.
5. **Enabling Services:** Provides support to ensure NPCA's operations are accountable, transparent, and effective.

5.1 Conservation Area Related Programs & Services

Conservation area-related programs and services are primarily categorized as mandatory (Category 1 services), with some activities, such as education and recreation programs, classified under Category 2 or 3 services. These programs are integral to NPCA's operations and align with its strategic goals. The following sections provide additional details on the three key program areas related to the CA Strategy.

Conservation Area Operations and Programming

The NPCA manages 41 conservation areas, with active recreation services currently offered at four sites: Ball's Falls, Binbrook, Chippawa Creek, and Long Beach. Active recreation services vary by location and include:

- Camping - Both seasonal and transient camping options.
- Weddings, Facility Rentals, and Special Events - Available at pavilions, picnic areas, and indoor spaces.
- Education Programs - Field trips and overnight programs designed to engage students and visitors.
- Heritage Programs - Featuring field trips, special events, and demonstration days that celebrate cultural heritage.
- Nature School - A BSID-designated part-time school program focusing on outdoor education.

- Day Camps - Outdoor adventure camps tailored for youth.

All conservation areas are maintained by the NPCA's Land Care Program, which focuses on preserving, enhancing, and sustaining the natural beauty, recreational opportunities, and overall usability of these sites. Maintenance activities include:

- Horticulture, forestry, and grass cutting.
- Trail maintenance and hazard removal.
- Inspection and repair of park amenities.
- Signage installation and maintenance of washroom facilities and heritage buildings.

In addition to ongoing maintenance, NPCA enforces regulations under Section 29 of the Conservation Authorities Act to ensure environmental protection and visitor safety. Key regulations include:

- Enforcement of open fire rules.
- Regulation of access times.
- Prohibition of non-permitted uses, such as ATV activities.
- Enforcement against littering and improper waste disposal.

Land Acquisition & Securement

NPCA plays a crucial role in land acquisition and securement to protect and restore natural areas and greenspaces. Since the late 1950s, NPCA has acquired 41 properties totaling approximately 3,000 hectares. These lands contribute to natural heritage conservation and provide essential services, such as greenspace access, clean air and water, and protection from natural hazards like flooding and erosion. Collaborating with landowners is vital for the long-term protection of these unique natural features, many of which are found on private property.

Land Planning & Management

The NPCA's 41 conservation areas encompass diverse land types, including forests, provincially significant wetlands (PSWs), Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs), recreational lands, cultural sites, and areas designated for flood and erosion control. Each property requires a tailored management plan to guide permitted uses, access levels, enhancements, programs, services, and risk management to ensure visitor safety.

Land planning directs the overall design of each conservation area, while land management focuses on the sustainable use and enjoyment of these areas by the public. These plans are guided by the CA

Strategy, which establishes goals and objectives that align with NPCA’s vision, mission, and priorities for the conservation area system. Consistent with NPCA’s Strategic Plan, these management plans aim to increase access to greenspace, connect people to nature, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the watershed.

Additionally, the NPCA’s land planning program collaborates with other NPCA programs, including planning and development, land care, restoration, and capital projects, through coordinated internal working groups and teams, enhancing overall program effectiveness and alignment.

6.0 CONSERVATION AREAS LAND USE CATEGORIES

NPCA’s conservation areas encompass a diverse range of ecosystem types and protect some of the most critical ecological features within the Niagara Peninsula watershed. These areas include important shoreline properties along Lake Erie and Lake Ontario (e.g., Morgan’s Point, Long Beach, Lakewood), migratory bird habitats (e.g., Point Abino, Jordan Harbour, Beamer), Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSWs) such as Willoughby Marsh, Wainfleet Bog, and Humberstone Marsh, and Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs) like Jordan Harbour. NPCA also manages sites of significant cultural heritage (e.g., Ball’s Falls, St. John’s Centre) and large parcels of the Niagara Escarpment (e.g., Rockway, Woodend, Louth, Cave Springs, Mountainview).

Together, these conservation areas capture the unique natural treasures and ecosystems characteristic of the Carolinian Life Zone found in the Niagara Peninsula. They play a vital role in supporting local communities, agriculture, recreation, health, tourism, and natural heritage. For over half a million residents and visitors in the watershed, these areas provide crucial opportunities to connect with nature.

To guide the management and use of these lands, NPCA has proposed four land use categories for the Conservation Area Strategy, developed with guidance from Conservation Ontario and the Conservation Authorities Act. Each conservation area is assigned a primary land use category, though individual management plans may include multiple categories reflecting different uses within various portions of a single area (e.g., areas designated for active recreation versus natural heritage preservation).

LAND USE CATEGORY	# OWNED	EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS OR PERMITTED ACTIVITIES	NPCA CONSERVATION AREAS IN THIS CATEGORY
Conservation Area - Active Recreation	4	Education programs Camping	Ball’s Falls Binbrook

<i>These conservation areas may contain facilities, infrastructure, specialized equipment and staff support for activities and programs available to the public.</i>		Tree-top Trekking	Long Beach Chippawa Creek
Conservation Area - Passive Recreation <i>These conservation areas may contain facilities and infrastructure that support passive recreation activities for an individual or group that only require minimal equipment and don't require staff support.</i>	8	Hiking Birdwatching Nature observation Walking	Beamer Morgan's Point Rockway St. John's
Natural Heritage <i>The primary land use is natural heritage protection or natural hazard conservation. These are conservation areas with limited facilities and access but may have hiking trails and small parking lots.</i>	27	Hiking Birdwatching Nature observation Walking	Mud Lake Jordan Harbour Stevensville Louth
Administration Area <i>These conservation areas contain administration buildings for NPCA staff for land management, programs, and services but are not generally accessible or used by the public.</i>	2	Land Care team headquarters Education programs	Gainsborough St. Johns Centre

7.0 GET INVOLVED!

This Discussion Paper serves as an introduction to the CA Strategy and seeks public input. A survey is available on the [Get Involved NPCA portal](#), and a hybrid Public Information Centre (PIC) will be held on September 24, 2024, at NPCA's corporate head office. Visit the website for more information and to stay updated on engagement opportunities.

8.0 NEXT STEPS

Feedback from the survey and PIC will inform the draft CA Strategy, to be released in October 2024. A three-week commenting period will follow, allowing further input before the final strategy is presented to the NPCA Board of Directors in December to meet the December 31, 2024 deadline.

For more information and to stay updated on this project, please visit the [Get Involved NPCA portal](#).