

A WILDLIFE STRATEGY BASED ON COEXISTENCE

ECO-PASSAGES A KEY INGREDIENT

There is not another city in Ontario, such as Ottawa, that is both surrounded by natural habitat and also has a 20,000 hectare Greenbelt with farmlands, forests and wetlands that is part of the City.

The Greenbelt consists of a number of Core Natural Areas (CNA) with exceptional biodiversity and Natural Link (NL) lands that connect these vital areas.

Ottawa has undergone extensive development over the years, where new roads and other transportation infrastructure has either run alongside or intersected these natural areas, compromising wildlife and resulting in substantial mortality.

You would think, therefore, that wildlife crossings and biodiversity protection would be part of city planning. After all, road ecology is not a new science.

However, wildlife-sensitive planning has not been a priority or, unfortunately, even a consideration by city planners. Where the few eco-passages have been built by the City, they were either a requirement by the National Capital Commission for the Kanata South Link as it cuts through the Greenbelt or as a condition of Federal Government funding for the Terry Fox Extension.

Moodie Drive – A Lost Opportunity: When massive road alterations were planned on Moodie Drive for the LRT, our Centre met with the City project manager to ask about eco-passages considering the exceptional biodiversity noted in the existing conditions report. We were told there was no funding or consideration given for wildlife crossings.

It was hard to believe, given the scope of the project and the negative impact it would have on wildlife in this important area of the Greenbelt.

Federal Governments' Offer Declined: Given the City's lack of responsibility, our Centre, along with several local community association representatives requested Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) to give consideration for eco-passages on Moodie Drive. The request was based on:

- Connectivity between Natural Link (NL) lands and Core Natural Area (CNA) is essential to ensure the protection of biodiversity and the ecological integrity within this part of the Greenbelt;
- The restoration of the Stillwater Creek Wetland will provide important habitat for wildlife, making connectivity even more critical;
- The loss of connectivity will affect local communities by forcing wildlife onto residential properties causing conflicts;
- Public safety will be impacted with the increased incidents of vehicle accidents involving wildlife.

PSPC agreed and provided the funding for a Study to confirm the rationale and best locations for eco-passages. The extensive Study recommended eco-passages on Moodie Drive and Carling Avenue to connect Greenbelt NL lands to the CNA Wetland Complex on Campus.

Incredibly, despite the fact that PSPC had funded the Study and was prepared to support the majority of the cost for the eco-passages, the City's ecologist opposed the project. One could only conclude that he was unprepared to change his position – one that was clearly wrong and easily challenged – *'that there wasn't habitat or wildlife worthy of protection'*.

Tired of the pointless obstruction, PSPC was encouraging by the Centre and community members to allocate resources instead to the positive work being done in the wetland restoration on Campus. Unfortunately, the harm to wildlife on Moodie Drive continued with the death, this past April, of a river otter crossing to reach the wetland. The community will also continue to be negatively affected by the lack of safe wildlife passages.

Cities Leading the Way: Edmonton, like Ottawa, has had exceptional population growth, resulting in rapid development in natural and agricultural landscapes.

However, unlike Ottawa, it prompted Edmonton to take action that balanced economic growth with environmental protection. In 2007, the City of Edmonton initiated a wildlife passage program to maintain habitat connectivity while also reducing human-wildlife conflict. After 9 years of implementation, the program had built 27 wildlife passage structures, resulting in a reduction of wildlife collisions by 51% despite additional road infrastructure and increased population.

The program brought together planners, ecologists, environmental professionals, developers, drainage engineers and transportation engineers, resulting in a 250-page document 'Wildlife Engineering Design Guidelines'. The guidelines have influenced Edmonton's engineering and design community to take a leadership role in the development of wildlife passage design within an urban environment. It has facilitated the incorporation of wildlife passages at the start of the planning process rather than a last-minute consideration at the detailed design stage.

Understanding that biodiversity conservation requires on-going public awareness and support, Edmonton has made public engagement and education priorities within their planning efforts.

A Critical Test for Ottawa: Using best practices such as Edmonton's and applying them to a project that is well underway in Ottawa will be a critical test.

Over the past two plus years in West Carleton-March, along March Valley Road, there has been a major alteration to natural habitat with hundreds of trees removed and massive amounts of earth excavated to create stormwater retention capacity for a new development.

The area connects to key habitat for Blanding's turtles, a species at risk. A 25-year old Blanding's was rescued crossing the road at this site last Fall. Along with a wide variety of other species that will be drawn to this stormwater pond and given the increase in commuter traffic, there must be a City commitment to installing eco-passages, fencing and flow device(s) to support wildlife. It would be unconscionable to do otherwise but time is running out to incorporate these changes in a cost-efficient manner, perhaps with support from the federal government given its land holdings that are connected to the City's stormwater pond.

A recent report in the media about another turtle population in Ottawa should send a strong message to the City. The 10-year study of Blanding's turtles in the South March Highlands shows the population is at risk of extinction. What was a relatively healthy population in the early 2010s has dramatically declined given extensive development, with turtle road mortality likely the primary cause of the decline.

The study states that *"if environmental sustainability is to be prioritized, urban development projects in areas occupied by at-risk species must be subject to more stringent oversight during the planning, approval and implementation phases."*

This study demonstrates how essential it is to ensure that the Blanding's turtle population in the Constance Creek Wetland Complex doesn't meet the same fate due to the lack of implementing our recommendations for March Valley Road.

Recommendations:

- 1) Adopt wildlife-sensitive planning measures on March Valley Road in West Carleton to include eco-passages, turtle fencing and flow devices to protect biodiversity.
- 2) Consult with the City of Edmonton on its Wildlife Engineering Design Guidelines and in adopting a Natural Conservation Strategy Plan where conservation is integrated into all the City's decision-making processes.
- 3) If leadership is shown by the City Ottawa, the development industry will get aboard as was very much the case in Edmonton. It will also serve to motivate and encourage city staff that environmental concerns matter.
- 4) Eco-passages must be part of any credible road safety plan for the benefit of the public and wildlife.

Prepared by Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre
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