



Overview

Natural Heritage Study

From an ecological perspective, the Town of The Blue Mountains is rich in natural heritage with supporting a high diversity of flora and fauna owing to the unique landforms, including the shorelines of Georgian Bay, the Niagara Escarpment, and the Beaver Valley, that together comprise a landscape matrix of woodlands, wetlands, and watercourses. The natural heritage features and areas contribute to the beauty of the Town and make it a popular destination to visit. Recognizing the value of the natural environment to the Town, the Official Plan places a high priority on the protection and preservation of natural heritage features and areas.

In order to achieve the Town's Vision, Goals and Objectives for the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, a Natural Heritage Study is being prepared.

What is a Natural Heritage Study?

There is a broader recognition that more needs to be done to identify and protect natural heritage features and areas, and to ensure the natural environment remains resilient and is enhanced to both resist impacts from climate change as well as to mitigate impacts from climate change. The purpose of the Natural Heritage Study is to provide recommendations to update policies, practices, tools and guidance documents that support the Town with achieving the Vision, Goals and Objectives related to the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

Scope of the Natural Heritage Study

This work supports the Community Sustainability Plan 'Bold Actions'. The Natural Heritage Study will also be informed by the Natural Asset Inventory (NAI). The scope of the Natural Heritage Study will include a review of:

- best practices, provincial policies and legislation, recognizing there have been changes in provincial policies and a higher value placed on the natural environment since the Official Plan was last prepared.
- municipal Official Plan policies
- implementation tools (e.g., by-laws, guidance documents and Town standards)

The intent of the review is to identify gaps in policy and implementation tools related to natural heritage. From the review and gap analysis, a series of recommendations will be provided that better support the Town with achieving the Vision, Goals and Objectives related to the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

The Natural Heritage Study will also recommend natural heritage targets to achieve goals and objectives related to the preservation and protection of natural heritage features and areas. Targets are informed by ecological principles, existing conditions (e.g., natural cover and assets), and best practices. Setting natural heritage targets provides a basis for classifying natural heritage features (e.g., significance) and informs policy recommendations for management of these features and assets through land use planning. (e.g., level of protection, requirements for compensation, etc.).

Project Phases

- 1 Policy, Legislation and Best Practices Review
- 2 Current Practice Assessment and Gap Analysis
- 3 Public Engagement #1 - Present initial findings from review undertaken in Phase 1 & 2
- 4 Natural Heritage Target and Criteria Development
- 5 Natural Heritage Policy, Standards and Practices Recommendations
- 6 Public Engagement #2 - Present Preliminary Findings and Recommendations
- 7 Natural Heritage Study Report
- 8 Presentation to Council



Natural Heritage Study



Review of Best Practices, Trends, & Policy

Best Practices & Trends in Natural Heritage Planning

The identification and protection of the natural environment features and systems has evolved in Ontario, in part in response to the recognition of the ecosystem services the natural features provide, the costs of not protecting the natural environment, as well as the recognition that the remaining features and ecological functions are continually being threatened and degraded. Policies protecting the natural environment have continued to strengthen, and initiatives to restore and enhance remaining natural areas are being undertaken by all levels of government and at the grass roots level; these include tree planting initiatives, invasive species management efforts, and requiring re-creation of natural areas to off-set for impacts or removals permitted as part of the planning process.

Provincial Planning & Legislation

Natural heritage planning at a municipal level needs to maintain consistency with provincial plans and conform with legislation that direct how the natural environment will be protected and enhanced when making land use planning decisions. Since the 2016 Official Plan was prepared, the following relevant provincial plans and legislation have been updated:

- Provincial Policy Statement (2020) (note: a draft Provincial Planning Statement was released in 2023, but the natural heritage policies remain effectively unchanged)
- Niagara Escarpment Plan (2017)
- Endangered Species Act (2007; last consolidated October 19, 2021)
- Conservation Authorities Act (1990; last consolidated July 1, 2023)

Requirement to Identify a Natural Heritage System

According to the Provincial Policy Statement, municipalities are required to identify a natural heritage system, recognizing they will vary in size and form in settlement areas, rural areas, and prime agricultural areas.

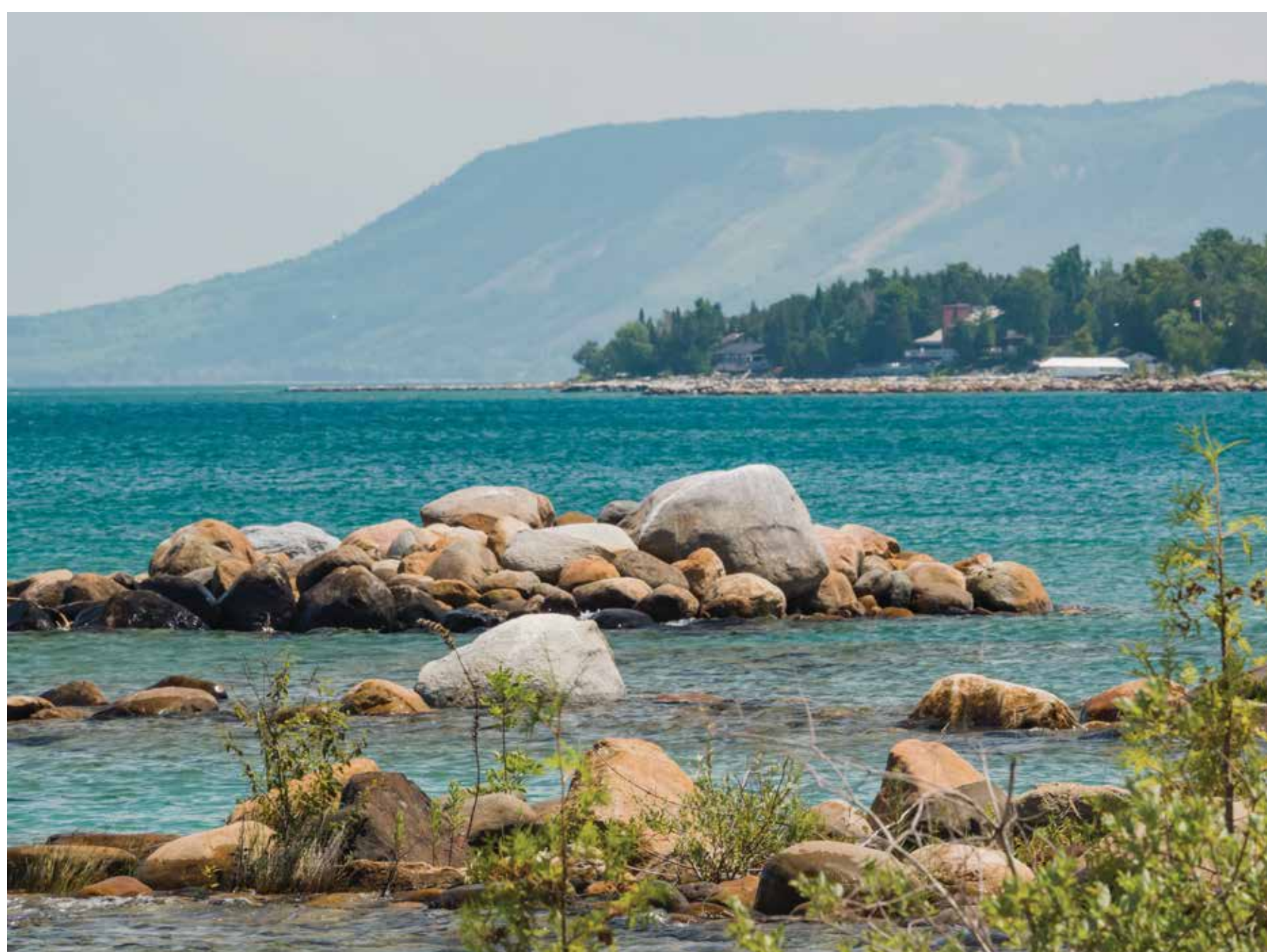
A natural heritage system is “made up of natural heritage features and areas, and linkages intended to provide connectivity (at the regional or site level) and support natural processes which are necessary to maintain biological and geological diversity, natural functions, viable populations of indigenous species, and ecosystems. These systems can include natural heritage features and areas, federal and provincial parks and conservation reserves, other natural heritage features, lands that have been restored or have the potential to be restored to a natural state, areas that support hydrologic functions, and working landscapes that enable ecological functions to continue. The Province has a recommended approach for identifying natural heritage systems, but municipal approaches that achieve or exceed the same objective may also be used.”

The Town has identified in the Official Plan that it will identify a natural heritage system in accordance with the County of Grey’s Natural Heritage Systems Study (Green in Grey).

Community Input Regarding Natural Heritage

It is important that recommendations for natural heritage policies, tools and guidelines consider community input. What we’ve hear so far:

- Generally, there is a desire to be more progressive towards protection of the natural environment
- Protect natural heritage while maintaining a healthy agricultural sector and permitting compatible development
- Natural heritage protection is critical to mitigate impacts from climate change
- Concerns regarding tree removals and protection for the woodland canopy - a need for stronger tree by-laws
- Improve guidelines and policies to ensure quality of ecological studies is consistently high
- There is a need for off-setting guidelines to ensure no loss of natural cover to provide further clarity to implementing existing policies and standards
- Standards and guidance for landscaping and restoration are needed



Natural Heritage Study



Review of Town Policies & Implementation Tools

Natural Heritage Policy in the Town's Official Plan

The natural heritage policies in the Town's Official Plan were reviewed with consideration of the Town's Vision, Goals and Objectives for the protection and enhancement of natural heritage, as well as best practices and trends in natural environment planning.

The Town's Official Plan provides policies for the Environmental and Open Space land use designations that include natural heritage features and areas. In summary:

- The policies meet the minimum standards of the Provincial Policy Statement
- Criteria for Significant Woodlands should be revisited following an analysis of current woodland cover datasets, best practices and targets for woodland cover in the Town
- The Town should develop criteria for Significant Valleylands or policies should simply refer to "Provincial Guidance Documents"
- Definitions, with criteria where appropriate, should be provided for all natural heritage features and areas (e.g., streams, buffers, linkages, etc.)
- Additional policies should be developed that provide for the following:
 - Goals and objectives, and related policies to the identification and protection of the natural heritage system
 - Set targets for woodland and wetland cover, vegetation cover along watercourses, naturally vegetated shoreline cover, and urban tree canopy cover
 - More prescriptive policies related to the identification and protection of ecologically appropriate linkages, buffers and enhancement areas
 - Criteria for the identification and refinement of linkages and enhancement areas
 - Policies related to the protection of headwater drainage features and intermittent streams
 - Directive policies to maintain or enhance woodland and wetland cover, urban tree canopy cover, vegetation along watercourses, and naturally vegetated shorelines
 - Requirements for off-setting or compensation related to tree removal (individual trees or part of a woodland) and wetland removal
 - Policies related to unauthorized removal of natural features and areas (e.g., woodlands and wetlands)
 - Land stewardship policies that recognize the important role the community (particularly the agriculture) plays in maintaining and enhancing the natural environment

The Town's Official Plan provides direction for the completion of an Environmental Impact Study (EIS). In summary, the following is recommended:

- Include more guidance related to scoping an EIS
- Provide direction for appropriate screening tools (e.g., Significant Wildlife Habitat, Species at Risk, etc.)
- Provide guidance for identifying ecologically appropriate buffers, or guidance for refining buffers should policy include prescriptive buffer widths
- Consider incorporating guidance for other environmental studies identified in Official Plan, such as:
 - Endangered and Threatened Species Habitat Studies / Other Wildlife habitat Studies
 - Fish Habitat/Impact Study
 - Wetland Evaluation Studies



Review of Implementation Tools to Support Natural Heritage Protection

One of the tools used to support protection of natural heritage includes the Tree Preservation By-law (2010). The following general recommendations are provided:

- The Tree Preservation By-law should be updated to align with the Goals and Objectives related to protection and enhancement of woodlands.
- The By-law should include requirements for tree compensation and woodland restoration, whether tree removal was permitted as per the By-law or approved planning applications, or unauthorized removal of trees occurred
- Penalties for non-compliance should be revisited to ensure deterrence of infractions
- Provide guidance for the preparation of a Tree Inventory and Preservation Plan, and a Woodland Restoration Plan in the event of authorized or unauthorized tree removal

Additional tools that may be considered by the Town as part of supporting policy goals and objectives include:

- Standards/Guidelines for Landscaping, Rehabilitation and Restoration
 - Include guidance for use of native vegetation or appropriate non-invasive plants in landscaping plans, buffer plantings, reforestation, etc.
- Ecological Offsetting Guidelines
 - Adopt or modify guidelines prepared by conservation authorities
- Community Greening Strategy
 - Identification of areas throughout the Town where off-setting and restoration activities can enhance the Natural Heritage System
- Tree Preservation and Replacement Policy
 - Currently being considered as part of the 'Town Tree Inventory Project'

