

LAKE ONTARIO: TORONTO, ONTARIO

*The Don River: Reawakening Community
Engagement with the Commons*

GREAT LAKES RESTORATION: ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME



“Basically the city of Toronto was built around the Don River.”

WHEN A MAJOR CITY GROWS AROUND A RIVER, THE RIVER BECOMES A COMMUNITY COMMONS, PART OF ITS DEFINING IDENTITY. BOSTON WOULD NOT BE BOSTON WITHOUT THE CHARLES. NEW YORK CITY WOULD NOT BE NEW YORK CITY WITHOUT THE HUDSON. LONDON WOULD NOT BE LONDON WITHOUT THE THAMES.



And, according to John Wilson, chair of the Bring Back the Don Task Force, Toronto would not be Toronto without the Don.

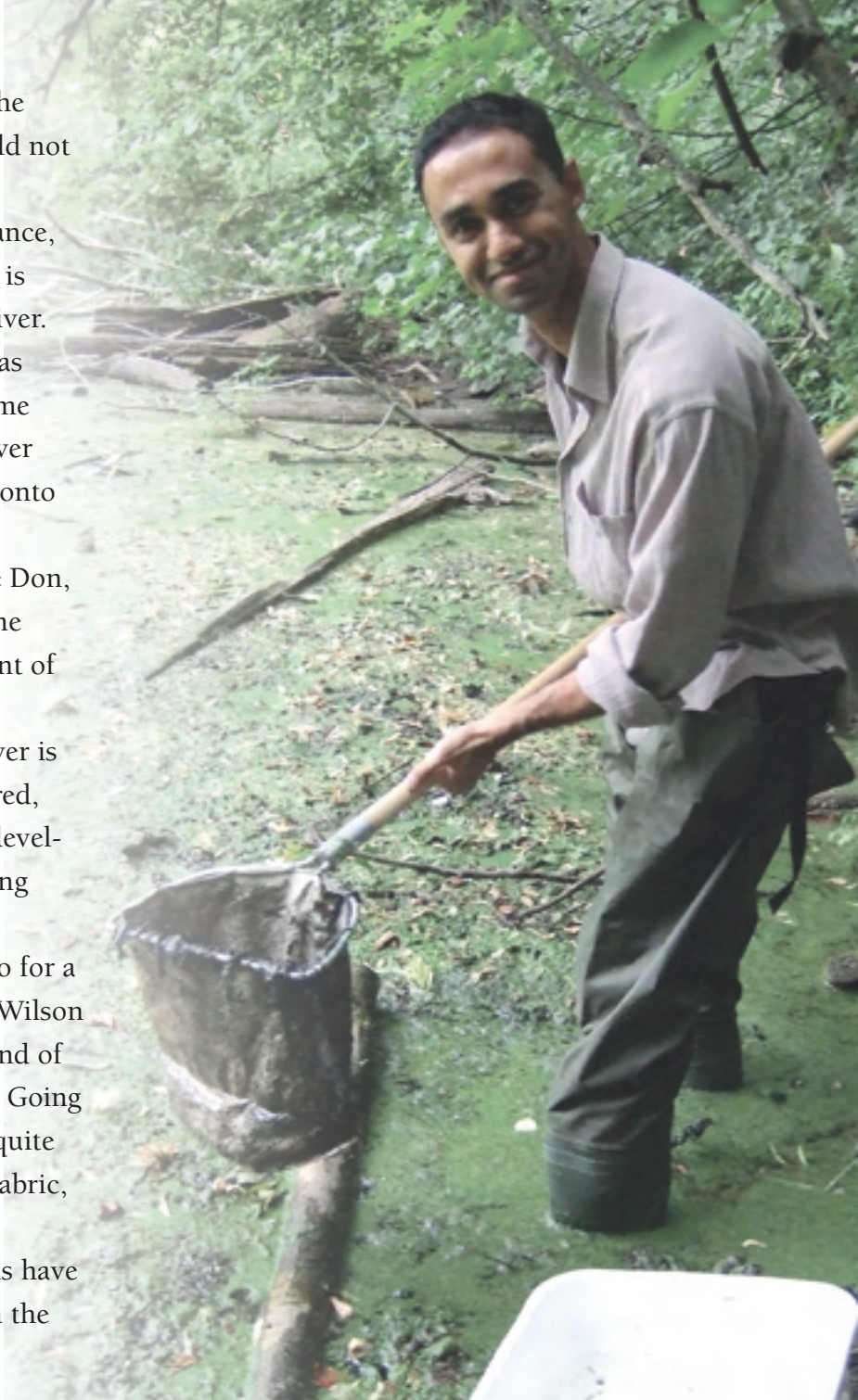
“The Don River actually fits into the romance, I suppose, of the city,” Wilson says. “The city is effectively located at the mouth of the Don River. The downtown was put here because there was actually a little harbor that was created by some of the sediment that was flowing down the river mixing with the lake. Basically the city of Toronto was built around the Don River.”

That birth of Toronto, at the mouth of the Don, led both to an appreciation of the beauty of the place, and to the future industrial development of the city.

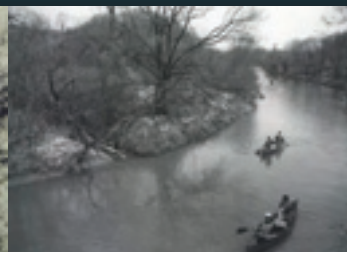
An awareness of the significance of the river is something most citizens of Toronto have shared, from the early governors through industrial developers to everyday people growing up and living here today.

“A lot of people who have lived in Toronto for a long time have stories about the Don River,” Wilson says. “And it’s just been a feature of the city and of city life here. Going fishing. Going swimming. Going skating in the winter. All of these things. It’s quite central to the city. It’s really part of the city’s fabric, of the city’s story.”

So it is not surprising that Toronto citizens have rejuvenated their community-wide interest in the river over the past twenty years.



Industrial uses have historically been shared with recreational uses of the Don River.





An estimated 10,000 Toronto citizens have participated in the Task Force to Bring Back the Don restoration activities.

What is surprising, however, is the level of long-term commitment, energy and funding the citizens and the city government have invested in restoring the watershed to ecologically healthier levels after decades when the Don had become something of a taken-for-granted backdrop for the city. Restoring the Don has helped to reawaken the community's sense of "the commons" and what it can mean in a major urban area.

Restoration of the Don, and the reawakening of community awareness of the common resource the river offers, gathered energy in 1989.

"There were threads of grassroots work before that," Wilson, who was not part of the initial effort to raise community awareness, says. "There were groups—the Toronto Field Naturalists come immediately to mind. I am told that it just sort of sprang [to life]. All of a sudden it was on everyone's lips, and it just seemed the time was right for the Don River to be rediscovered. An article was published in one of the glossy magazines inserted into a weekend newspaper here in Toronto. And then there was a public meeting that was called, and several of the city councilors were involved with organizing the

meeting. The publicity must have been fantastic for it. People just came out in droves, and within a couple of months, all of a sudden, this had sprung into existence as a really major initiative that people really were getting behind, and getting passionate about, and going out to meetings, and talking to their friends and neighbors about."

After this initial meeting, citizen advocates for the river, with the support of several city councilors, convinced the city to create the Task Force to Bring Back the Don. The Task Force first set out to assess the state of the river and its watershed and in 1991 submitted a report, "Bringing Back the Don" to the city council.

According to the Task Force's web site, "The report envisioned a restored Don River that was a showpiece for a new approach to city planning—one that works with rather than against nature. Restoring natural integrity to the Don River became a symbol of the city's need to find sustainable ways to move into a new millennium."

The Task Force has worked relentlessly to renew the community's awareness of the importance of the river as a commons for the community, and as the

Restoring the Don has helped to reawaken the community's sense



center of both Toronto's history and its future. The focus has been on restoring the Don as a community ecological resource—one that is clean, ecologically healthy and accessible. The model the Task Force uses is to work with natural processes, and to be absolutely inclusive when it comes to partnerships with any individual, group or organization that wants to be part of the community efforts on the river.

“Our strategy is just to be very committed to a citizen-driven process,” Wilson says. “Very committed to using nature as a model for how we go about doing our work. And to be very inclusive as far as partnerships are concerned. Any one who's working in the Don Valley, we're working with them and trying as much as possible not to get into rivalries and turf building, and that sort of thing. But rather just to assume everybody is looking to make a net gain, if you will, in the environment, in the Don Valley, in the Don Watershed, until proven otherwise.”

City support has enabled the Task Force to come up with innovative ideas, such as the Community Stewardship Program, that the city can then put into practice in a sustained way.

One of the Task Force's most successful projects

has been the Community Stewardship Program. This program matches community volunteers with restored and naturalized sites where they can contribute to the on-going development of restored habitats by weeding non-native plants, watering plantings of natives, mulching against weeds, maintaining bird boxes, building bundles of brush for animal habitat and monitoring the site. Monitoring activities can include water chemistry, water levels, plant growth, bird counts and/or aquatic invertebrate counts. Individuals or groups can sign up. Orientation, training, and an experienced volunteer team leader is assigned to each site. Community Stewards visit the site at least once a week from spring to late fall.

“They become very invested in that particular site,” Wilson observes.

Some citizens become so connected to the common resource they have taken a role in restoring, that they begin web blogs, on-line journals of photos and observations about the sites they chose to help restore and maintain.

“The Task Force is an official committee of council,” says Susan Bookbinder, a planner for

of “the commons” and what it can mean in a major urban area.



The Community Stewardship Program restoration projects have planted 40,000 trees, created several wetlands, and cleaned up degraded sites.

the City of Toronto, who often takes the lead role among city staff for communication about the work of the Task Force. “It’s called an advisory committee, and it’s fortunate to have support from the clerk’s division. There is a committee secretary who comes to the meetings and takes notes. She also prepares agendas in advance and looks after the mailing of the agendas to the Task Force members. So it’s treated like an official committee. Which is nice.”

Not only is such support nice from an organizational perspective, it has been critical to getting some of the largest restoration project done in the Don River Valley. City staff helped the Task Force tap governmental funding sources for on-the-ground restoration projects that might otherwise be outside the reach of a citizen-led group.

“One of our great successes [in the early days of the Task Force] is that we were adopted, by several city politicians,” says Wilson. “It’s really made our life much easier in many ways as compared to many community-based groups, just in terms of the basic capacity building. They were very effective politicians. So their support was very important to get us going,

at the outset, and to funnel and focus a lot of this outburst of public energy into something that became institutional.”

As community consciousness about the important common resources of the watershed has grown, it has been important to celebrate successes, and build ever larger groups of engaged citizens. In 1999, the Task Force celebrated its tenth anniversary with a “Bring Back the Don Day” to mark successes and invite more citizens to see the value of the river as a commons. The event, which included a guided commuter-train tour of the valley, a boat tour, and visits to many of the successfully restored sites along the Don, drew 1,200 citizens and was covered by the major media of the city. It helped set the ground for future work, including the growth of the Community Stewardship Program.

The Community Stewardship Program empowers citizens to become involved in restoration work.

“This one Task Force member, her concern was that she didn’t like the way that the city was mowing the sides of the urban highways and the controlled access roads within the city,” Bookbinder

The Community Stewardship Program empowers citizens to become involved in restoration work.



The Task Force to Bring Back the Don is an official committee of council for the City of Toronto. Their meeting agendas and notes are available on the City's website.

says. “It used to be that they would be manicured lawns, and she wanted to encourage naturalization along those because a couple of them run through the watershed. So she worked directly with the roads maintenance staff and together they prepared plans. She marked where all the important natural plantings were, and they came to an agreement on what should be mowed and what should be not mowed. And [they planned] how the sites should be encouraged to be naturalized, and that they would focus more on cleanups rather than mowing. So it was sort of like a win-win for both sides. Because she encouraged the naturalization, and the road staff cut down on their costs because they didn’t have to mow the lawns anymore.”

The benefits from such a simple action initiated by a citizen are numerous—the margins of the highways now serve as important reservoirs of native plants and provide linear habitats for native species throughout the Don River watershed.

Restoration work on the Don River has become so highly valued in Toronto that the Task Force

members can no longer keep track of it all. The city and other regional governmental bodies have also seen the success of Task Force originated-initiatives, and have expanded restoration work beyond the original energies of Task Force. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority fostered the Don Watershed Regeneration Council in 1994, which modeled itself after the Task Force, but as a provincial authority has the ability to work throughout the Don River watershed (only about half of the watershed is located within the city limits of Toronto).

Another group, Friends of the Don East (FODE), focuses on only one smaller portion of the river’s watershed.

“We’ve had situations where we’ve picked up on ideas that have really grown or been fostered in one of these smaller groups,” Wilson observes. “We’ve brought them to City Council—maybe we have a little more clout, or maybe we’ve been down the road before so we know who to call to get those things onto the public agenda.”

COVER PHOTO JOHN WILSON

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Things are happening on the Don River. I mean I go down [and see new restoration work] and I think, 'Wow!'

“It’s really very rewarding because it’s such a well-regarded initiative,” Wilson says. “A well-regarded movement, I suppose is the best word for it. No one group is in charge of this any more. Things are happening on the Don River. I mean I go down [and see new restoration work] and I think, ‘Wow!’

Where’d that come from? And isn’t that neat!’ It’s quite nice to have it out of control and things are going on that I have no idea about.”

Which is exactly what you would expect community ownership and management of a “commons” to look like.

Restoring the Great Lakes happens—one community at a time. Every community that undertakes a project to restore the health of the lakes, rivers, wetlands, and shorelines brings great benefits. The benefits of restoration include—economic stimulation, healthier ecosystems, more livable communities, and involved and engaged citizens. In turn, these community by community restorations help improve the overall health of our Great Lakes system as a whole by healing the thousand small cuts that have been inflicted on this global treasure one by one by one.

Additional materials and stories are available at www.freshwaterfuture.org and additional copies of this packet are available by calling (231) 348-8200 or emailing info@freshwaterfuture.org.



P.O. Box 2479
Petoskey, MI 49770
(231) 348-8200
www.freshwaterfuture.org



17 N. State Street
Suite 1390
Chicago, IL 60602
(312) 939-0838
www.greatlakes.org

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PUBLICATION WRITTEN BY **David Syring**

NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF **Maryle Barbé**

FUNDING SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

- The Joyce Foundation
- Healing Our Waters® – Great Lakes Coalition
www.healthylakes.org
- C.S. Mott Foundation
- Prince Charitable Trusts
- Legacy Foundation
- Unity Foundation of LaPorte County

