

CORMORANT ADVISORY GROUP MEETING #1

Thursday, January 24, 2008

4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Mennonite New Life Centre, 1774 Queen Street East, Toronto

MEETING NOTES

Present:

Adele Freeman, TRCA
Nick Saccone, TRCA
Gord MacPherson, TRCA
Ralph Toninger, TRCA
Karen McDonald, TRCA
Casey Little, TRCA
Suzanne Barrett, Facilitator, Barrett Consulting
Councillor Paula Fletcher, City of Toronto
Wayne Reeves, City of Toronto
Leslie Coates, City of Toronto
John Almond, Ministry of Natural Resources
Chip Weseloh Canadian Wildlife Services
John Carley, Friends of the Spit
Catherine MacFarlane, APSC
Mike Robbins, APSC
Caroline Underwood, Toronto Islands Resident
Liz White, Animal Alliance of Canada*
Ainsley Willock, Canadians for Snow Geese*
Julie Woodyer, Zoocheck Canada*
Glenn Coady, Toronto Ornithological Club
Lynn Freeman, Toronto Ornithological Club
Ken Lundy, Toronto Port Authority
Keith Riley, Transport Canada
Gail Fraser, York University
Mart Gross, University of Toronto
Eric Davies, University of Toronto
Michelle Thomas, University of Toronto

(* denotes member of Cormorant Defenders International)

These notes reflect the general nature of the meeting discussion. If there are errors or omissions, please contact C. Little at clittle@trca.on.ca or 416-661-6600, ext. 5753.

Comments contained herein reflect the opinion of the individual and do not necessarily reflect the position of the organization they represent.

1. Welcome

Councillor Fletcher welcomed the Advisory Group members and said she was very pleased that they have agreed to help with this important topic. She said that the City of Toronto was delighted to see the successful return of cormorants and proud to have the largest colony in the Great Lakes right here in our own “urban wilderness”. But she recognized that this success has come with some issues and stressed that the best way to resolve these issues is with the help of such dedicated and expert people.

A. Freeman welcomed the group on behalf of TRCA, noting that TTP is a very significant feature in TRCA’s jurisdiction. She said that it is very important to TRCA to get the best possible advice, and to conduct an open, transparent and consultative process. She emphasized that TRCA is committed to listening carefully to the Advisory Group, considering all the input, and coming up with a sound response based on best available science as well as the full range of stakeholder and public opinion.

2. Overview of Workplan

S. Barrett presented an overview of the workplan including the objectives of the process and the mandate of the Advisory Group. She emphasized that TRCA wants to break new ground in addressing cormorant management with a consultative process. The following timeline was proposed:

- 1st Advisory Group Meeting – January 24, 2008
- 2nd AG Meeting – February 19, 2008
- Public Meeting – April 1 or 13, 2008
- 3rd AG Meeting – April 15, 2008
- TRCA Watershed Management Advisory Board – TBD
- 4th AG Meeting – TBD

L. White suggested TRCA should contact the OSPCA and invite a representative (Hugh Coghill) to join the Cormorant Advisory Group. L. White also suggested holding the public meeting later than suggested so that it could be accompanied by a tour of Tommy Thompson Park for educational purposes, once the cormorants have returned.

3. Values Associated with Tommy Thompson Park

The group was asked to write down three values they associated with Tommy Thompson Park. Everyone shared their values and they were compiled in a list which is provided below (organized into categories by S. Barrett after the meeting). Asterisks denote that other group members mentioned the same value.

<p>WILD IN THE CITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wildness in Urban Setting ***** • Urban Natural Park**** • A wild place that developed despite obstacles • Humans are part of biodiversity • Hidden gem • Out of city experience in the city 	<p>CITY ENVIRONMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe environment for planes • Symbol of hope and regeneration • Demonstrates re-use of waste material • Place that won't be developed • Identity for city
<p>ECOLOGICAL VALUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for North American biodiversity**** • Space for natural processes** • Sanctuary for all wildlife** • Ecological center of organization* • Intrinsic value of nature • Nature preservation • Corridor • Rich ecosystem taken over by nature • Important Bird Area (IBA) • Place where DCCO are not harassed • Provincial biodiversity 	<p>RECREATION & TOURISM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation opportunity** • Views of City* • Protection for Outer Harbour recreation activities* • Share the love of wilderness • Green • Open • Solutions to creating a green space model • Exploration of evolving nature • Part of chain of waterfront parks • One of the largest natural parks in Toronto • Exercise and health • We should be 'lake people' • A place to meet neighbors • Public accessibility • Solitude and quiet • Tourism opportunity
<p>RESEARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laboratory for ecological studies* • Colonization laboratory • Ecological research • Train next generation of biologists • Intellectual challenge • Data on DCCO colony 	<p>EDUCATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education**** • Experience natural processes • Turn on kids to career interests • International case study

Following the listing of values associated with TTP, there was a brief discussion about the human role in biodiversity and how to find a balance with nature.

4. Existing conditions and concerns

G. MacPherson gave a presentation on the history, goals, ownership and management of TTP. R. Toningier continued the presentation specifically on the colonial waterbirds of TTP. Some highlights of the presentation included:

- The TTP colony of Double-crested Cormorants (DCCO) in relation to Great Lakes/Lake Ontario population;
- Current monitoring protocols;
- Past management techniques used at TTP for cormorants and Ring-billed Gulls;
- Effects of DCCO colonies on the park's forest canopy;
- Implications for the Black-crowned Night-Heron (BCNH) colony at TTP;
- Research by York University on raccoon predation in the colony;
- University of Toronto study on colony nest trees.

R. Toningier concluded the presentation with an overview of potential objectives for cormorant management: to maintain the park's biodiversity, reduce shoreline erosion, limit loss of forest canopy, increase public awareness and prevent DCCO from colonizing Peninsula D.

5. Discussion of concerns

There was discussion about the research on raccoon predation. G. Fraser, who conducted the raccoon study, noted that the BCNH nests were located where the forest canopy is denser than where DCCO nest, providing more cover for raccoons. Further, the results should be used with caution since the sample sizes were small. R. Toningier pointed out how BCNHs tend to build their nests in the crotch of trees which may make them more readily available to raccoons. DCCO nests tend to be higher and on the outer branches of the trees.

L. White asked if it was possible to divert people to other areas of the park, further away from the waterbird colonies? R. Toningier replied that the Toronto Port Authority will manage the southern section of the park until 2013 and there would need to be further discussions regarding this possibility. R. Toningier said the TTP Trails Master Plan is designed to accommodate the flow of park visitors and is flexible to allow for minor modifications and the re-direction of people away from sensitive areas when needed. G. Coady inquired how long the TRCA will continue to manage its share of the park, given new waterfront developments such as Lake Ontario Park being planned by Waterfront Toronto. R. Toningier reiterated that TRCA will always be responsible for the management at the park as stated in the TTP Master Plan and EA.

L. White asked what human activities occur on Peninsula D? R. Toningier replied that Peninsula D is a focus of human activity, including the Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station, Aquatic Park Sailing Club, and the new Primary Pedestrian loop trail.

M. Gross inquired about the causes of erosion and the influence of lake currents, which may be more important than wave action. He noted that TTP has changed local lake currents and altered the supply of material from the Scarborough Bluffs to the Toronto Islands beach/dune communities. G. MacPherson agreed, noting that shoreline processes are being studied and the City of Toronto has installed "current meters" to collect data. He also mentioned that the coastal processes of the lake are very complex and TRCA's approach is to work with, not against, these processes.

TRCA was complimented by members of the Advisory Group for providing detailed data and information on the colonies. G. Fraser noted gaps in the data presented and said that this creates challenges in developing any management strategies.

L. White asked if TRCA had any plans to regenerate vegetation in areas where DCCO colonies have killed the forest cover? G. Coady pointed out that the death of trees in these colonies is a natural process that occurs in all tree nesting colonial waterbird habitats and is part of the ecology. E. Davies suggested that studies on the soils where the colonies are should be undertaken to gather information on what tree species might survive in the DCCO colonies, for example the Siberian elm that continues to live on Peninsula A, whereas the cottonwood forest has died. A discussion followed on the carrying capacity of the peninsulas, concluding that a distinction needs to be made regarding the “social carrying capacity” versus the “natural/biological carrying capacity”.

L. White asked about the effects of cormorant management in the eastern and central basins of Lake Ontario on the western basin. C. Weseloh noted that the western Lake Ontario basin cormorant population is growing at the same rate as before management was undertaken in the eastern and central basins. Therefore it does not appear that displaced DCCO are moving to the western basin. L. White inquired about whether DCCO management in other locations (including inland) is affecting the overall Lake Ontario DCCO population. C. Weseloh responded that there are a number of factors involved, including declines in some fish populations, so it is difficult to conclude exactly what effects management has had on the overall DCCO population.

6. Discussion of Objectives

Limit loss of forest canopy: Forest canopy statistics were discussed; in particular how much forest loss is acceptable. G. MacPherson replied that TRCA does not want to see forest damage or loss on Peninsula D. W. Reeves noted that no loss of forest is acceptable to the City because the actual forest cover for Toronto is approximately 17 per cent and the target is 35-40 per cent.

Questions were raised about the stopover use of TTP by migratory birds. Some data suggest that migratory bird fall-out is related to the amount of canopy cover. R. Toningier noted that one of the objectives for preserving Peninsula D is the significance of the forest cover as it relates to migratory birds. The research done by the Tommy Thompson Bird Research Station will provide more information about migratory bird use in future. G. Coady said that the Toronto Islands are more significant for migratory birds than TTP.

Keep DCCO off Peninsula D: M. Gross noted that if TRCA decides to actively keep cormorants off Peninsula D, then it would be difficult to defend the integrity of an intent to put natural processes and biodiversity first (because the message would actually be that a destructive species isn't wanted in a certain location). J. Woodyer noted that Cormorant Defenders International would not be able to agree to this objective without knowing what methods would be used to accomplish it.

Maintain biodiversity: M. Gross suggested that TRCA should look at “functional biodiversity”, not only species diversity, for example how DCCO move energy through the system. L. White noted that the objective of “maintain biodiversity” is flawed as it implies TTP is a museum. She said

that whatever happens is diverse as long as it happens naturally. G. Coady said the TRCA and Advisory Group need to look at TTP as a larger unit of biodiversity and be careful not to isolate TTP. G. Fraser pointed out that an objective should be more than to “maintain” but also allow for increasing diversity. J. Woodyer said that TRCA and Advisory Group should not treat TTP as a garden, but recognize that it is an evolving ecosystem. A. Willock agreed and noted that we should celebrate the dynamics of the park. R. Toninger responded that TRCA’s approach to habitat enhancements at TTP is “conservation design”, which uses natural succession principles to guide restoration efforts.

Increase public awareness: Members agreed that it is important to educate and increase public awareness of colonial waterbirds and to present cormorants in a positive light. G. Fraser mentioned the need to improve the public’s perception of nature and how it is not static. Nature is constantly changing and evolving and TRCA should use this opportunity as a model for education. By celebrating the dynamics of this unique park we should learn to enjoy the changes that come with it. J. Carley reminded the group that the discussion is only focusing on the local aspect of this issue and we need to start thinking on a regional context. L. White stated that this is a very unique opportunity to re-define the cormorant debate in a positive way. It was suggested that TRCA needs to determine exactly what awareness and education regarding cormorants is to be presented to the public.

7. Next Steps

S. Barrett wrapped up the meeting and listed the focus areas for the next meeting. They are:

- More information/data and justification for the concerns
- Revised objectives
- Potential management strategies
- Public meeting – date and approach

The next Cormorant Advisory Group Meeting will be held
Tuesday, February 19, 2008 from 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
at the Mennonite New Life Center, 1774 Queen Street East, Toronto