

CORMORANT ADVISORY GROUP MEETING #3

Wednesday April 23, 2008

5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Mennonite New Life Centre, 1774 Queen Street East, Toronto

FINAL MEETING NOTES

Present:

Gord MacPherson, TRCA
Ralph Toninger, TRCA
Karen McDonald, TRCA
Ryan Rivet, TRCA
Adele Freeman, TRCA
Suzanne Barrett, Barrett Consulting
Liz White, Animal Alliance of Canada*
Mike Robbins, Aquatic Park Sailing Club
Paul Scott, Aquatic Park Sailing Club
Cathryn MacFarlane, Aquatic Park Sailing Club
Ainslie Willock, Canadians for Snow Geese*
Councillor Fletcher, City of Toronto
Wayne Reeves, City of Toronto
Janette Harvey, City of Toronto
Amber Ellis, Earthroots*
John Carley, Friends of the Spit
Glenn Coady, Local expert
John Almond, Ministry of Natural Resources
Patrick Hubert, Ministry of Natural Resources
Lynne Freeman, Toronto Ornithological Club
Gail Fraser, York University
Eric Davies, University of Toronto
Mart Gross, University of Toronto
Julie Woodyer, Zoocheck Canada*
(* denotes member of Cormorant Defenders International)

Guest

Steven Price, World Wildlife Fund Canada

These notes reflect the general nature of the meeting discussion. If there are errors or omissions, please contact K. McDonald at kmcdonald@trca.on.ca or 416-661-6600, ext. 5248.

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

1. Welcome

S. Barrett welcomed the Advisory Group members and everyone introduced themselves. Councillor Fletcher thanked everyone for the participation in the Advisory Group and noted that this process is a very “Toronto way” of discussing public issues. She felt the public meeting provided a balanced and fair process for informing the public and getting their opinion on the overall approach. She thanked S. Barrett and TRCA for their commitment to this issue and is confident that the cormorant strategy will honour both cormorants and Tommy Thompson Park. She requested an informal vote of confidence for the process thus far and everyone agreed. S. Barrett then presented the evening’s agenda.

2. Review of Public Meeting Report

S. Barrett presented an overview of the attendance and response from the public meeting held on April 3, 2008. Approximately 80 people attended the meeting, comprised mainly of members of stakeholder groups. TRCA received 42 individual comments from public meeting attendees as well as individuals who were not able to attend. S. Barrett noted that there is support for the consultative, transparent process that TRCA is undertaking. Regarding the goal and objectives, there is considerable support for the overall goal, but also some concern that “balance” can be interpreted in different ways. Most people endorsed objectives a) and d), while there was a range of opinions on c) and support for b) if the least intrusive methods are used. Overall considerations regarding the methods were to ensure the humane treatment of cormorants and avoid disturbance of other species. There are some misunderstandings concerning the purpose and effects of some of the methods and it was noted that egg oiling had the least amount of support. Participants suggested applying various combinations of methods. TRCA would like more input from the general public and proposes that a short survey be administered to park users at the Spring Bird Festival on May 10th (see section 5).

M. Gross noted that the scope of the public meeting was qualitative and that a more quantitative approach would allow for the group to get a better understanding of public opinion. S. Barrett responded that the nature of the discussion at the public meeting was qualitative, and quantitative data were not collected. She also noted that TRCA intends to solicit further input from the public at the Spring Bird Festival. M. Gross also noted that the quotations contained in the boxes may influence the reader’s understanding of the meeting report.

S. Barrett asked that any requested changes to the public meeting report should be sent to K. McDonald by the end of the week. A final version of the report will be posted on the cormorant webpage the following week.

3. Potential Management Approach

R. Toningier presented the refined objectives that resulted from the public meeting:

- a) Increase public knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of colonial waterbirds;
- b) Deter cormorant expansion on to Peninsula D;
- c) Limit further loss of tree canopy **beyond existing colonies**¹ on Peninsulas A, B and C; and
- d) Continue research on colonial waterbirds in an urban wilderness context.

Several public comments suggested adding “appreciation” to the objective a). G. Coady suggested changing the wording of objective b) to “deter” rather than “prevent”.

¹ Note- The red text has been added for clarity.

R. Toninger presented the following proposed overall, long-term strategic approach:

Method	Peninsula A	Peninsula B	Peninsula C	Peninsula D
Pre-nesting Deterrents			*	*
Post-Breeding Deterrents	(*)	(*)	*	*
Enhanced Ground Nesting	*	*		
Egg Oiling	(*)	(*)	*	
Restoration	*	*	*	*

Note- The coloured bracketed asterisks indicate methods where concerns have been raised and these methods being reviewed.

R. Toninger said that implicit in this strategy is the use of adaptive management, using all techniques in a progressive fashion (starting with the least intrusive) if needed. J. Woodyer requested clarification on the coloured asterisks, inquiring why these methods appeared in the public meeting when some members of the Advisory Group had voiced concerns at a previous meeting. She was under the impression that they had been removed from the matrix. S. Barrett replied that TRCA wanted to solicit the opinions of the public on the same methods that had been presented to the Advisory Group. R. Toninger explained that the concerns of some of the Advisory Group members were mentioned at the public meeting, and that TRCA wanted the public to have a clear picture of all the methods that are being considered.

G. Fraser requested clarification of the pre-nesting deterrents to be used on Peninsula C. R. Toninger replied that it is not being considered for 2008 due to the lateness of the season and potential impacts on other species. G. Fraser inquired what pre-nesting deterrents are being considered for Peninsula C in the future. R. Toninger replied that human presence would be the first method employed and might later include decoys, inactive nest removal and noise makers if needed.

R. Toninger then presented the following proposed strategic approach for 2008:

Method	Peninsula A	Peninsula B	Peninsula C	Peninsula D
Pre-nesting Deterrents				*
Post-Breeding Deterrents			*	*
Enhanced Ground Nesting	*	*		
<i>Proposed Egg Oiling Study</i>		(*)		
Restoration	*	*	*	*

Note- Recommendations were made to change the wording of the egg oiling method to study.

R. Toninger said that human presence on Peninsula D is having the desired effect of deterring cormorants from using the area, so the relocation of TTPBRS is not being considered at the present time, however using the adaptive management approach the station could be relocated in the future. TTPBRS staff and volunteers are able to further increase their presence without having to relocate the station. Movement of the station would likely have negative impacts to the peninsula's flora and fauna, and is not in the spirit of the Master Plan. He explained that Peninsulas A and B are being considered as Cormorant Conservation Zones where management measures would be limited to ground nest enhancement and restoration.

G. Fraser asked why a 2008 strategic approach is being presented when the purpose of the Advisory Group is long term? S. Barrett replied that TRCA intends to apply adaptive management, beginning with the proposed 2008 approach. This approach is designed to reflect the lateness of the season, as well as the intent to start with the least intrusive measures and evaluate their effectiveness. The goal and objectives provide a long-term framework, and the overall strategic approach will be revisited next fall/winter in light of the 2008 season's experience.

G. Coady inquired what TRCA's approach would be if Black-crowned Night-Herons started nesting on Peninsula D, because cormorants will soon follow. R. Toninger said that public use and TTPBRS activities will likely deter night-herons from the area, but if that was not working TTPBRS may need to be relocated to the tip of the peninsula. The rationale for deterring colonial waterbirds from Peninsula D is based on their incompatibility with the current and proposed activities of the peninsula. Toronto Port Authority activities will likely end within the next five years and the park could be open to the public during the week, which would also increase human presence on the peninsula. G. MacPherson reiterated that we cannot predict exactly what will happen on Peninsula D, but we are confident that human presence will deter colonial waterbirds from nesting there.

L. Freeman requested clarification on the intent of preventing further forest loss on Peninsulas A, B and C. R. Toninger responded that the purpose of that objective is to prevent the future expansion of the colony on those peninsulas, so trees that already are part of the colony will remain in the colony, but nesting would be deterred in "new" trees.

J. Woodyer asked if the deterrents increase to noise makers, would they be used on weekends when the park is open? R. Toninger replied that to achieve each objective we will need to maintain consistent activity, so they may be used seven days a week. J. Woodyer also inquired about the timing of restoration activities and if they would lead to colony disturbance? R. Toninger responded that restoration would occur before (spring 2009) and after (fall 2008) the nesting period so the colony would not be disturbed.

4. Proposed Egg Oiling Study

The orange asterisk under egg oiling for Peninsula B in the matrix indicates that an egg oiling study is being considered by G. Fraser at York University to investigate the behaviours of adult cormorants in response to egg oiling and to help assess possible health effects on adult birds. Given the public concerns surrounding potential effects of egg oiling on adult cormorants and other species, and the lack of documentation on cormorant egg oiling, TRCA would like to have a better understanding of the use of this technique on this species before including or excluding it from the overall strategic approach. For example, TRCA does not want to create a situation where ground nesting birds are being discouraged from the ground into other trees. G. Fraser provided some additional information on the proposed egg oiling study, but noted that the proposal had only come together very recently and that the details still need to be finalized. She

noted that egg oiling would be completed in a systematic fashion at night, as observations elsewhere indicate that there may be less disturbance to the birds than during the day. The proposal suggests studying 100 random nests (50 treatment nests and 50 control nests).

J. Woodyer asked why we are considering egg oiling as a method when the public responses from the meeting showed little support for this method? S. Barrett replied that the comments made by the public indicated some confusion and misconceptions about egg oiling. She also noted that if egg oiling is considered in the future it will be worthwhile to have more information about its effects.

J. Woodyer requested that the egg oiling study be documented on film. R. Toningier replied that the night vision cameras that TRCA uses have a filming distance of about 10 metres, so could be used to document cormorant behaviour pre- and post- oiling and would be a valuable addition to G. Fraser's research. J. Woodyer noted that she would be interested in obtaining a copy of the film and asked who would own the data from the study? G. Fraser replied the study will be part of graduate student research and that the University would own the data and TRCA would have access to it. A. Freeman also noted that TRCA has a formal agreement with York University to access the data. J. Almond noted that a Wildlife Collectors Authorization Permit is required for the egg oiling study.

L. White expressed strong concerns regarding the egg oiling study, stating that egg oiling is contradictory to proposals to enhance ground nesting. She said that if we want to keep cormorants on the ground we should not oil the ground nests. R. Toningier replied that the goal of the study is to address that concern – the compatibility of egg oiling with ground nest enhancement. He also mentioned that the logistics of oiling tree nests are extremely difficult and that ground nesting will facilitate accurate application of the oil. He noted that TRCA has over 20 years of experience egg oiling Ring-billed Gulls and Canada Geese. L. White said that the purpose of oiling Canada Goose eggs has nothing to do with the population or carrying capacity, rather it involves social acceptance and the notion that the public wants something to be done about the high population of geese in the area. W. Reeves noted that Canada Geese are responsible for beach pollution and the need to improve water quality is extremely important to the city. Similarly there are concerns about the effects of cormorants on tree health and survival. He supported the proposed egg oiling study, as well as pre- and post- breeding deterrents.

G. Coady noted that the default assumption is that cormorants at TTP will continue to expand, but it is possible that growth may not continue and that a single disease outbreak could significantly reduce the population. He added that he is not against egg oiling, but he cannot see the purpose of the egg oiling study when we want cormorants to nest on the ground. He suggests choosing a different site for the study. G. Fraser responded that this site is unique with the three sub-colonies and that there may be considerable movement between the peninsulas. She also noted that logistically she cannot conduct the study at a different site. G. MacPherson stated that TRCA is responsible for TTP, and is not involved with the management or study of colonies in other locations, and that this study would be a valuable exercise, leading to better understanding and better management of the TTP colony. G. Coady replied that if TRCA decides to oil ground nests then ground nest enhancement should be removed from the methods as they are diametrically opposed. He went on to say that if cormorants are going to be deterred from Peninsula D then we will lose more tree canopy on Peninsulas B and C. The sooner tree nesting birds can be moved to the ground the better. He said that eventually cormorants will exhaust the trees and the entire population will be nesting on the ground.

L. White asked: if the study shows that cormorant behaviour and health are not affected by egg oiling, and if oiling can be accomplished without disturbance to the colony, will this lead to a mass oiling program? R. Toningier replied that TRCA doesn't know yet what might be proposed for future years, and emphasized that the purpose of oiling, if undertaken as a management measure, would be to prevent expansion of the location of the cormorant colony, not necessarily to reduce the population below current levels. He noted that we need to look at the recruitment rate of cormorants versus the available nesting habitat. L. White responded that she does not see a clear goal of the proposed egg oiling study. She suggested that TRCA has a longer term intent - egg oiling is about population reduction and that although 50 nests will be oiled this year, 1000 could be oiled next year. What are the long term implications of the egg oiling study? She reiterated that oiling ground nests does not make sense if the desire is to get more tree nesters nesting on the ground. G. Coady noted that the proposed egg oiling study appears less than transparent if there are ulterior motives. A. Willock also expressed concerns that TRCA is hiding their intent to undertake widespread egg oiling. C. MacFarlane disagreed and said that TRCA is taking a very cautious approach and acting responsibly to ensure the integrity of the park and the cormorant colonies. She supported the egg oiling study. S. Barrett stated that there is no hidden agenda, no decisions have been made regarding management activities for this year or future years, and the strategic approach will require Authority Board approval where the public can attend and make deputations (see section 7).

G. MacPherson said that he understands that not everyone agrees with all the techniques that will be applied to reach the goal and objectives, but believes that discussion with the Advisory Group is valuable to encourage a sober second thought, get useful input and improve the strategy. A. Freeman said that the intent of the proposed egg oiling study is to achieve a better understanding of the TTP cormorant colony. She stressed that no decisions have been made about future egg oiling as a management technique, and that documentation of any effects of egg oiling is important. She also reiterated that TRCA is committed to a transparent process. G. MacPherson added that if egg oiling is considered as a management technique in the future, the Advisory Group would be convened to discuss it. L. White stated that we have good common ground, but the addition of egg oiling is a concern. This is the first time it is being discussed by the Advisory Group and in her experience, if animals are removed from a population the result is less competition and in the end more animals will return. J. Almond noted that egg oiling is not a new technique that is being proposed, rather it has been on the table since the very beginning. He added that we can talk about the little things or the bigger picture i.e. managing TTP. G. MacPherson also noted the two tenets of resource management are: listen to research and listen to stakeholders - TRCA is doing both.

L. White noted that there is not a great deal of literature on the effects of egg oiling on adult birds and has no issues if the study is purely scientific, but questions what the science will be used for. M. Gross said that the research questions proposed by the study are too site specific and that the sample size is too small to be scientifically defensible. He suggested that the egg oiling study should go further and be undertaken without any management activities on Peninsulas C and D. G. Coady responded that food and nesting sites are not limiting the current TTP cormorant population, but access to nesting sites will limit the future population. He noted that TTP is currently a three dimensional nesting matrix, but is naturally being converted to a two dimensional matrix in terms of nesting availability. G. Coady continued that the oiling of ground nests will at a minimum enforce the tradition of nesting in trees, but will likely stop the tradition of ground nesting. G. MacPherson responded that we need to determine if that will actually happen. He said that there is value in understanding any disturbance and behaviours that result from the use of various management techniques. He hopes that TRCA will become a

leader in responsible management of colonial waterbirds and their habitats and will be able to share best management practices with other managers.

E. Davies said that to entice birds out of trees, we must find a way to oil tree nests. He suggested that the proposed egg oiling study be conducted in trees. G. Fraser replied that behaviour studies of tree nesting birds are very difficult, but should be investigated for 2009. G. Coady stated that a study like that would be futile as the trees will fall anyway, so it would be a waste of money. A. Freeman noted that in previous meetings C. Weseloh mentioned that tree nesting is an unusual behaviour for cormorants. G. Coady clarified that historically cormorants nested on the ground on islands, where there was lower predation. A. Freeman said that if TTP is unique, then the egg oiling study is important for this site. G. Coady said that if the productivity of ground nesting cormorants is limited, then birds will move to trees. R. Toningier stated that TRCA is not aware of any documentation or research regarding the behaviour of ground nesting birds with oiled eggs. G. Fraser clarified that the goal of the study is to determine if ground nests can be oiled without changing the behaviour of the ground nesting birds and without affecting their overall health. L. White noted that she has no problem with the study as explained by G. Fraser.

M. Gross suggested that the TTP Master Plan is outdated and should be updated since cormorants were not an issue during the Master Plan's development. He said that the Natural Area Enhancement Plan is implicitly biased and that cormorants are impeding the implementation of the Master Plan. J. Carley disagreed; he said that the Master Plan is an important tool that has allowed TTP to develop into what it is today and the Plan is still relevant today. He emphasized that Friends of the Spit would be opposed to any review of the Master Plan at this point. J. Carley also noted that Friends of the Spit would like the geographic extent of the cormorant colony to be limited to the existing areas on Peninsulas A, B and C and that Peninsula D should be protected using humane methods. R. Toningier noted that the Master Plan is intended to be strategic; it is not a management plan. The Master Plan continues to provide a good framework for the uses and resources of TTP, including colonial waterbird habitat. During the Master Plan planning process, Ring-billed Gulls and Common and Caspian terns were a focus and now it is cormorants. He added that the IBA Conservation Plan addresses cormorants and the management of other colonial waterbirds at TTP.

J. Woodyer asked that if the proposed egg oiling study proceeds, when would the oiling start? G. Fraser replied that it would likely start the third week of May.

S. Barrett noted that if the study proceeds the findings will be presented and discussed in a future Advisory Group meeting.

5. Public Survey

S. Barrett distributed a rough draft of the public survey and asked the group if they thought the public survey was a good idea. G. Fraser said that the survey should involve all colonial waterbirds, not just cormorants as that may present a negative bias. K. McDonald agreed, adding that education is a critical factor and that in her experience many park users think cormorants are loons or a type of duck. She also stated that the survey must be administered quickly and that may be difficult if we include all seven colonial waterbird species. M. Gross thought the survey needs to have specific questions for example: do you agree with egg oiling? And, do you agree with limiting cormorants to Peninsulas A, B and C? J. Almond recommended that caution be exercised as the public will not have enough background and information to respond to these kinds of questions. R. Toningier noted that the survey would be staff-guided as many visitors will like not have a lot of knowledge about cormorants, so staff will provide an

educational component. A. Willock agreed this is a great opportunity to increase public knowledge about cormorants. G. Coady emphasized that this is an opportunity for TRCA to dispel myths that the public has about cormorants. J. Carley suggested having information sessions at stations at the Spring Bird Festival. A. Freeman suggested that if people would like to learn more about the TTP cormorant colony, a factsheet can be supplied. S.Barrett proposed that instead of a questionnaire, an open-ended comment sheet would be made available to members of the public that wish to express their views, once they have talked to staff and/or read the factsheet. L. Freeman agreed that this is a good idea and is better than asking the uninformed public for opinions on specific questions.

6. Other Business

J. Woodyer requested clarification on S. Barrett's role in the process. S. Barrett confirmed that she is an independent consultant and has been retained by TRCA to facilitate the process. Any references to "we" include the TRCA staff that are working closely with her as a team through this process. She also explained that the intent of TRCA is to ask for the best advice from the Advisory Group and incorporate it into the strategy. M. Gross noted that the workplan states that the Advisory Group is to develop consensus where possible. S. Barrett agreed, but also emphasized that it is only where possible and that dissenting views will be recorded.

L. White inquired when the annual nest counts would occur? K. McDonald replied that nest counts will begin the last week of May. L. White would like to observe the nest counts. G. MacPherson said that will likely be possible in small groups, and that all TRCA safety protocols would be followed. R. Toningner requested that L.White email her request to him.

7. Wrap-Up and Next Meeting

S. Barrett reminded everyone that the TTP Spring Bird Festival will be held on May 10 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and everyone is invited to attend. K. McDonald mentioned that interpretive hikes of the colonial waterbird colonies will occur throughout the day and other hikes including beginner bird hikes are also available.

A communication regarding the proposed 2008 cormorant strategy will be presented at the Authority Board Meeting on May 23, 2008 which starts at 9 a.m. at Black Creek Pioneer Village. TRCA will provide the Advisory Group with the communication prior to the meeting. Any members of the public may attend the Board meeting and make deputations.

The next Advisory Group meeting is proposed for fall 2008 to review the status of the cormorant colony and activities of the 2008 season.