Protecting Georgian Bay's Coastal Region

Discussion Paper

URBAN STRATEGIES INC.



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Prepared for the Georgian Bay Vision 2050 Project

Executive Summary

This Discussion Paper was commissioned by the Georgian Bay Association (GBA) as part of its Georgian Bay Vision 2050 project. Georgian Bay Vision 2050 is an effort to convene dialogue and invite action to protect and conserve the Coastal Region ecosystem in perpetuity.

The Discussion Paper sets out the evidence and the rationale for stronger environmental protection and conservation across the northern and eastern coastal region of Georgian Bay (the "Coastal Region" or the "region"). Part A sets out the region's unique and globally significant natural assets and covers the increasing threats that it faces. It also identifies critical gaps in existing protection and conservation efforts. Part B sets out a framework for discussion on 1) how to significantly expand and strengthen both protection and conservation, and 2) proposals for action.

Both environmental protection and conservation are essential. Protection safeguards sensitive lands, waters, habitats and ecosystems by restricting or preventing activities that could cause ecological harm or degradation. Conservation is broader and more active, involving the ongoing stewardship, management, maintenance, and restoration of natural systems to sustain their ecological health and biodiversity over the long term.

As defined in this Paper, the Coastal Region extends from Port Severn in the south to the Bay of Islands in the north and encompasses approximately 850,000 hectares of coastal lands and nearshore waters.

This Discussion Paper lays the foundation for advancing critical dialogue among governments, First Nations, conservation organizations, communities, and other interest holders on how best to protect and conserve this remarkable Coastal Region for many generations to come.



Coastal Region Study Area



Whitefish River First Nation

Georgian Bay Vision 2050 Study Area

Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory

Dokis First Nation

Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands

Point Grondine Park

Municipality of Killarney

Henvey Inlet First Nation

Magnetawan First Nation

Shawanaga First Nation

Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory

Shawanaga Island Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area

Shawanaga First Nation

Township of the Archipelago

Town of Parry Sound

Township of Carling

Wasauksing First Nation

Township of the Archipelago

Moose Deer Point First Nation

Wahta Mohawks

Township of Georgian Bay

Beausoleil First Nation

850,000 ha — Total study area

6 Coastal Municipalities

With substantial influxes of seasonal residents

While the total permanent population is only 16,000, there are an estimated 80,000 seasonal residents and 50,000 visitors through the summer months.

10 First Nations Reserves

Georgian Bay has been stewarded by First Nations peoples for thousands of years

The Northern and Eastern Coastal Region now includes 10 First Nations Reserves

Legend

- Provincial conservation reserve
- National park
- Provincial park
- First Nation reserve lands
- First Nation park

N

Note: The extent of the Georgian Bay Vision 2050 study area shown in above is for illustrative and discussion purposes only. A detailed and scientific-based analysis must be conducted by appropriate parties to determine the exact boundaries of any future environmental protection and conservation mechanisms.



The Coastal Region is Unique, Remarkable and Irreplaceable

The Coastal Region contains exceptional geological, physical, biological, and chemical features within the globally significant Great Lakes system (See Section 2.1). It includes the world's largest freshwater archipelago and a remarkable range of terrestrial, coastal, littoral, and aquatic habitats that are exceptionally biodiverse.

International environmental organizations and Canadian government scientists have recognized the Coastal Region's significance, honouring it with designations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Georgian Bay Biosphere Mnidoo Gamii, multiple International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Key Biodiversity Areas, Parks Canada's national priority areas for ecological corridors, and Canadian Wildlife Service's High Value Biodiversity Areas (See Section 2.3). Finally, unlike many parts of the Great Lakes system that have already experienced significant ecological degradation, much of the Coastal Region remains in relatively good ecological health (See Section 2.2).

The Coastal Region's ecological integrity is increasingly rare and irreplaceable.

The Coastal Region is at Risk

Although the Coastal Region ecosystem is more intact compared to elsewhere in the Great Lakes, the area is subject to the same pressures that have degraded those other ecosystems. These include increased development, shoreline hardening, invasive species, climate change, pollution, and habitat fragmentation and destruction. These pressures are cumulative and are being intensified by climate change (See Section 3.1).

Population growth in southern Ontario over the last 30 years has been explosive and will continue to add pressure as people and related development march northwards. In particular, communities surrounding the Coastal Region are projected to continue to grow by approximately 30% between 2026 and 2051. Seasonal populations already exceed permanent populations in many areas, while demand for recreational use and development continues to increase (See Section 3.2).

These impacts are already evident in the south and west parts of Georgian Bay, where growth has driven significant development, infrastructure and servicing pressures. Positioned between intense development to the south and largely intact wilderness to the north, the Coastal Region is at a critical threshold. As Ontario continues to grow rapidly and development and recreation pressures move north, the Coastal Region faces increasing risk.

Without stronger protection and conservation, the ecological integrity and natural beauty that define the Coastal Region are at risk of permanent damage. The opportunity to act before that damage occurs is quickly narrowing.

Critical Gaps Persist in Protection and Conservation Initiatives

The Coastal Region already benefits from federal and provincial monitoring, conservation activities, and many non-governmental organizations (NGO), First Nations, and community initiatives in stewardship, land protection, education, invasive species management, and species-at-risk protection. Further, about 55% of the lands within the Coastal Region are protected[i].

This is a significant foundation, but it is not enough. **Critical gaps remain**.

Current protection and conservation efforts remain fragmented and lack key components of effective environmental protection:

- No Coastal Region-wide ecosystem-based regime exists for protection, monitoring or management.
- No formal collaboration occurs across governments and organizations involved in protection and conservation initiatives.
- Limited to no protection exists for Coastal Region waters, including littoral or aquatic ecosystems.
- Many ecologically important lands remain unprotected.

These gaps must be addressed before irreversible ecological loss is caused by rising development pressure and related threats.

i As per GBA's analysis using information from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database and local knowledge.

A Timely Opportunity to Respond to the Biodiversity Crisis

The mounting global biodiversity crisis is evidenced by unprecedented losses of species, habitat destruction, and population declines. In response, international commitments aim to halt the loss of biodiversity, including a target to protect 30% of the planet by 2030 ("30 by 30"). Canada is a signatory to this target, and Ontario has agreed to collaborate on achieving it. This is a timely opportunity to leverage these priorities through increased protection of the Coastal Region as part of a national solution.

A regional, collaborative, and ecosystem-based conservation framework extending across both lands and waters of the Coastal Region should form part of Canada's and Ontario's response to the biodiversity crisis and efforts to achieve Canada's 30 by 30 target.



The Path Forward

The next step must be to develop a **Coastal Region conservation framework** that clearly defines why stronger protection and conservation are required, what the top priorities for protection and conservation are, who should be involved, and how coordinated action and decision-making will occur.

Key principles for protection and conservation have been drawn from international frameworks, including those of the IUCN, and from global, large-landscape protected area case studies relevant to the Coastal Region. The key principles include:

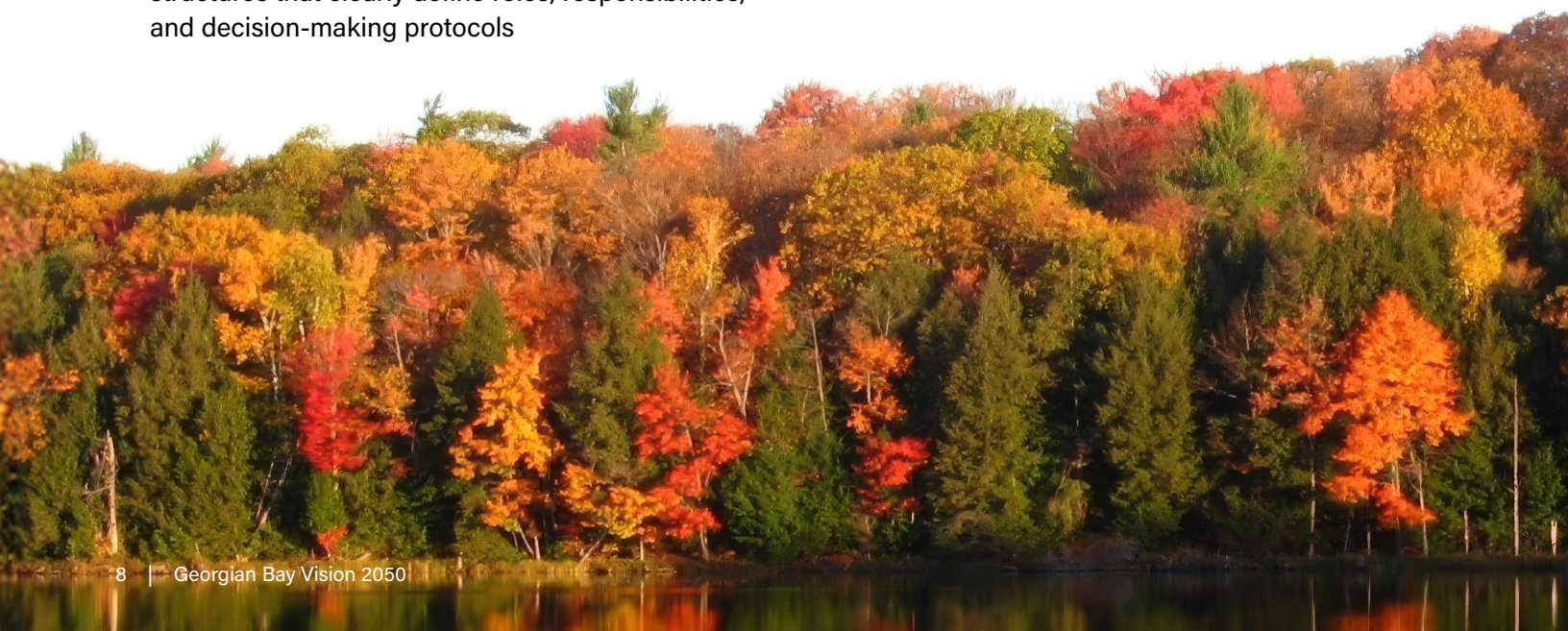
- **Regional, ecosystem-based protection** involving bodies with jurisdiction across the land, waters, and littoral components of the Coastal Region ecosystem
- **Inclusive approaches** that support First Nations participation or leadership and incorporate the perspectives of local communities and interest holders
- **Layered conservation mechanisms** including legislation, policies, stewardship, and enforcement tools to strengthen and expand protection
- **Adaptive, collaborative management** supported by shared data, coordinated conservation priorities, ongoing monitoring, and management strategies that can evolve over time
- **Secure political backing and sustainable financing** supported by agreements and working structures that clearly define roles, responsibilities, and decision-making protocols

Building on these principles and the situational analysis of the Coastal Region, a collaborative governance model is proposed for discussion. Collaborative governance is a decision-making approach in which multiple governments, First Nations, NGOs, communities, and interest holders share responsibility for establishing, implementing, and overseeing environmental conservation objectives.

Notable options for protection and conservation mechanisms include:

- Identifying additional protected and conserved areas (including water)
- Creating a cohesive network of existing protected and conserved areas
- Creating an area-specific land use plan, such as the Niagara Escarpment Plan or Greenbelt Plan
- Creating a Conservation Authority for the Coastal Region's watershed
- Promoting additional First Nations and community conservation, collaboration, and actions

However, no single mechanism will be sufficient for a region of this scale and ecological diversity. A coordinated suite of protection and conservation tools will be required.



The appropriate mechanisms and governance structure must ultimately be determined by the willing and engaged interest holders. What should no longer be deferred is the decision to begin. The time to start is now.

It is time to convene all concerned partners to co-design a coordinated, region-wide protection and conservation framework that safeguards the Coastal Region's ecological integrity before it is lost.

Now Is the Time to Act

Governments, First Nations, conservation organizations, communities, landowners, and other interest holders are invited to work together to establish a shared vision, define governance and conservation mechanisms, and commit to a sustained regional framework for long-term protection and conservation.

The Coastal Region is unique. It is vulnerable. It is worth protecting.

Now is the time to act.

Nature does not have a seat at the table.
Who will speak and act for it?

