



Courtesy of NPC

The Benefits of Parks & Open Spaces

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This article is intended to share information on the benefits of parks and open spaces in our communities. While commonly known benefits such as improved health, wellness (physical/emotional), recreation (passive and active), education and security, habitat, environment, biodiversity, economics and adjacent property value enhancement have been well documented, the focus of this article is on some lesser known and emerging benefits. These lesser known benefits include improvements to the environment through energy production/conservation, emergency uses, environmental “filters,” and food/renewable resource production.

Conservation

We hear much in the news these days about climate change. Environment Canada defines it as “a long term change in weather over time.” To combat climate change, new concepts are emerging through technology. For example, wind farms over forests, while feasible from an engineering perspective, must also provide for conservation and environmental principles in forests, whether protecting trees or bird flight and migration paths (see: www.dwworld.de/dw/article/0,,15281635,00.html). The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is contemplating how solar farms might be incorporated into its parks, conducting policy reviews on this and other forms of renewable energy (see: www.mnr.gov.on.ca then, from the home page, search - renewable energy strategic policy review).

Another popular new initiative in various sectors is the establishment of Greening Committees. Various government and non-government agencies embraced energy conservation in the 1970s in response to then rising oil prices, and efficiencies were found as a result. Greening Committees are currently being created in response to not only the current need to conserve energy in light of rising energy costs and to combat climate change, but are also being sold on solid business cases to reap associated cost savings. These committees can also bring forward additional green ideas. Agendas at meetings focus on such items as environmental initiatives, waste management/recycling and energy savings opportunities. The key purpose is to bring forward new energy saving/green ideas for action and implementation, investigate/apply for applicable energy grants, create

NIAGARA PARKS COMMISSION

Established in 1885, The Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) is a Crown Agency of the Ontario Government. The core purpose of NPC is to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of the falls and the Niagara River corridor for the enjoyment of current and future visitors while being financially self-sustaining. Certainly, the vision of our founders allowed for a small park surrounding Niagara Falls to grow to include lands covering the full length of Niagara River, for mandated protection and enhancement and so much more. Ideally, all can agree it is important to protect our precious parklands by “thinking globally” and “acting locally.”

proposals and support corporate greening goals by meeting with each other regularly to discuss challenges, accomplishments and new ideas.

Beyond establishing a Greening Committee at Niagara Parks, some additional greening projects include:

- Waste diversion: recycling and composting
- *Spare the Air*: Emissions Reduction Program
- Policy, inventory and monitoring projects: e.g. habitat restoration, prescribed burns, education and volunteer programs with sustainability themes
- Legends Golf Complex Environmental Management Plan
- NPC trademarked green products and procurement
- Energy Audit and Conservation Program

Emergency Uses

Japan has a number of examples in recent memory where public parks and open spaces were crucial as places for establishing temporary shelter during emergencies. In big cities with tall buildings falling down, a lack of such spaces to run to during emergencies can literally mean the difference between life and death. The Kobe earthquake and the 9/11 twin tower attack in New York City are both grim reminders that open spaces are important. Beyond

better preparation for crises like these, open space such as the Memorial Park in New York City at the ground zero site provides a more traditional purpose as a place of remembrance, also often served by our parks.

World Crops Study

Beyond community gardens, *Think Globally, Act Locally* is a way to describe the new Vineland Research and Innovation Centre's (VRIC; Vineland, ON) World Crops research program. In 2009, Vineland Research and Innovation Centre initiated a world crops study to investigate grower and locally grown ethnic vegetable market

POSA HIGHLIGHT

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opportunities. New crops for Canadian farmers and adequate supply to the marketplace are key to the research.

VRIC has partnered with the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association and along with federal/provincial funding, has initiated production trials. This year, field trials were conducted on a number



Riparian Buffer, Courtesy of NPC

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of new crops, with three promising crop varieties including okra, yard long bean and Oriental eggplant (see: www.vine-landresearch.com then, from the home page, search - world crops). Niagara Parks has a trial bed of these crops in both our Queenston Heights Park and at Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens. This is a new and unusual addition to our park “flower beds” with the attractive plants serving an aesthetic purpose, as well as being served to our guests. We are told that a number of these crops already are enhancing community gardens.

Riparian Buffers

Utilization of parkland as riparian buffers (naturalized zones beside watercourses and sites of surface water such as ponds and lakes) has gained much support recently not only for their importance as environmental filters, but also for reduction of maintenance costs. While many people can agree with the concept in principle, when contrasted with well-groomed parks, natural buffers can “look messy.” How the use of buffers is framed and communicated makes a significant difference with adjacent residents, which is important if you wish to garner their needed support.

Education and outreach about water quality improvement, habitat restoration and ecosystem health can go a long way to counter concerns. Reducing mowing is an option and replanting with native vegetation can improve biodiversity as well. With an addition of attractive wildflowers in the mixture, such concerns can be mitigated. It is even better if the adjacent



Beaver at work, Courtesy of NPC

residents can be involved in the selections, with expert guidance. The ultimate goal of improving water quality and protecting natural water sources is worth the effort and is aided by buffers (see www.npca.ca then, from the home page, search - buffers).

Approximately ten years ago, Niagara Parks created a small series of habitat restoration efforts in several areas of its parks. The result is the establishment of a riparian buffer zone along portions of Niagara River.

Addressing Challenges

Interesting challenges sometimes exist in parks and nature when these environmental initiatives are implemented. At Niagara Parks, with improved habitat conditions, beavers have re-populated in a number of areas. With increased adjacent development, deer and geese populations are shifting to parklands in record numbers, causing nuisances and damages along with

the rising beaver population. Some human park guests also abuse nature through thoughtless acts of vandalism. Economics and restricted budgets present the need for creative and appropriate new revenue streams and the completion of long-term strategic plans for sustainability to achieve mandated objectives. The ever-present threat of climate change adds yet another concern to the list.

Protection has grown to mean more than a “hands-off” approach. It merits active and well-considered decision-making, management and mitigation of impacts to natural spaces. Parks and related open spaces continue to provide historically documented benefits. Additionally, park agencies are engaged in addressing a number of emerging opportunities. The benefits of our parks and open spaces, and their related value, remain important in potentially new ways as a result.

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