

The following article is reprinted from Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education Summer 2001, 13 (3)

From End to End on the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail

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The notion of a “trail” typically elicits visions of wilderness and uninhabited, natural settings but if there is an exception to this image, it is found in the form of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail. Stretching along the edge of the lake for more than 350 kilometres from Niagara to Trenton, the award-winning Waterfront Trail passes through the largest megalopolitan area in Canada: an aggregation of skyscrapers, superhighways, suburbs and rural landscapes that emerge within and beyond the city of Toronto.

During the last year or so, we have been engaged in a research project, investigating the values and perceptions that inspire people to travel the trail from one end to the other. Funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research grant, we have attempted to interview the majority of travelers who have registered with the Waterfront Trust as “end-to-enders.” While the research is still underway, some significant insights have already emerged in terms of favourite public access points to the lake and the richness and diversity of the trail.

What do end-to-enders have to say about this trail? Before considering some of their experiences, let us take a brief look at how the trail emerged as an inspiration for some Canadians to set out on a 350-km hike along the water’s edge of a major, megalopolitan settlement.

The Story of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail

The Waterfront Trail project began with the Watershed report, published in 1990 by the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, headed by former Toronto mayor David Crombie. The outcome of two years of research and public hearings, this report made an explicit link between the deteriorating ecological health of Lake Ontario’s watersheds and the dangers to the future health and prosperity of surrounding communities.

Taking stock of the environmental damage as well as the dislocation and lack of public accessibility to the lake, the report called for a new, more responsible, approach to waterfront development. Advocating an “ecosystems approach” that acknowledged the connection between environment, community and economy, the Royal Commission outlined a set of principles to guide regeneration projects in a more sustainable and inclusive direction. The aim was to work towards the realisation of a waterfront that would be “clean, green, useable, diverse, open, accessible, connected, affordable and attractive.” (Barrett, 2000, p. 4-5.)

Building upon these principles, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust was founded in 1992 to help put these ideas into action. Different agencies, companies, community groups and levels of government were to participate in waterfront conservation and restoration projects. In 1995, the

Trust published the Lake Ontario Greenway Strategy, a more detailed, comprehensive plan for realising these regeneration goals. This Strategy was guided by five major objectives:

1. Protecting the physical, natural and cultural attributes of the area through co-operative actions;
2. Identifying restoration needs and methods and encouraging landowners, communities and agencies to undertake regeneration and enhancement;
3. Promoting greater awareness, understanding and recreational use of the waterfront;
4. Promoting compatible economic activities and employment; and
5. Reducing the gridlock among jurisdictions, sharing resources and co-ordinating waterfront activities. (Waterfront Regeneration Trust, 1995, p. 10-14.)

The Waterfront Trail is an attempt to put these ideas into action, linking together communities along the Lake and consolidating their efforts to reclaim, restore and conserve public spaces and parkland in the process. The trail was opened in 1995, connecting and upgrading existing trails systems to create a continuous route that weaves its way through cities, towns, parks and conservation areas along the edge of the Lake. Originally running from the city of Hamilton through the Greater Toronto Area to the city of Trenton, the Trail has since been extended westward to Niagara-on-the-Lake, near the US border. There are also plans to extend it further east, as some hope that it might eventually link up with the Seaway Trail in New York State to form a continuous trail around Lake Ontario.

The Trail currently links 28 local communities, 177 natural areas, 143 parks, promenades and trail systems, 80 marinas and yacht clubs, as well as hundreds of local historical sites, monuments, museums and art galleries. Many local communities have been motivated by this project to restore and rebuild their own waterfront, transforming neglected areas into vibrant public spaces. With the assistance of provincial and federal government funding, municipalities have acquired public lands for the Trail, widening existing parkland, creating new parks and increasing public access to the waterfront.

The redevelopment of Toronto's waterfront has been exemplary in this regard, with the creation of a large number of new parks over the last ten years. Along the edge of the Lake, abandoned industrial sites and brownfields provide opportunities for creating new areas for recreation and cultural activities. Such waterfront regeneration projects are central to Toronto's current bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics.

In their recent publication, *A Decade of Regeneration: Realizing a Vision for Lake Ontario's Waterfront*, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust invites communities to consider the Trail in the context of these larger efforts to revitalise Lake Ontario's waterfront. Municipalities are encouraged to transform abandoned and neglected private land into public spaces that harmoniously integrate natural and urban areas. Such projects promise to move us closer to creating cities that are more humane, more livable, and integrative of the natural environment.

Valuing the Trail, from end to end

The Waterfront Trust has already carried out some studies of meaningful places along the trail. As one report concludes, however, the way in which peoples' perceptions are determined by their preferences, attitudes and expectations has proved to be beyond the scope of much of this work. (Landplan Collaborative, 1995, p. 25.) Yet, it is precisely an interest in human values and perceptions that has driven our own investigation of end-to-enders' evaluative images of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail.

Our analysis of interviews remains in its preliminary stages. Nevertheless, it is already evident that for many travelers, the lake itself is a primary inspiration for their journey. As one end-to-ender put it, the water "just pulls the stresses away from you somehow. You just sit there and they fall away... We tried to always have lunch and pick somewhere where we could either be right beside the water or see it." Areas of the trail that were not in close proximity to the lake typically were less attractive to travelers. Another person reported how, in one section of the trail along Lakeshore Drive, "time passed and I found myself waiting for glimpses of Lake Ontario."

At the same time, it was not only the draw of nature that was cited. Frequently, it was the interplay between the vast, spacious expanse of the lake and the variety of human settlements – the sounds of traffic and steeple bells, the changing built landscape, the friendly people, the cultural artefacts – that provided for the vivid experience of *diversity* and richness of the broad array of images along the trail.

Many valued the opportunity to learn about the cultural development and history of Lake Ontario that travelling along the waterfront presented to them. In the words of one end-to-ender,

"I really found it interesting to see the whole history of Lake Ontario and how much really goes on. You think that it's more recreation and parks and yacht clubs all the way along, but there are other aspects too: so many sewage and water purification plants, and hydro and nuclear facilities. You could see how industry started and how the towns developed. The lake was really the focus of the towns and there's really a lot of history there. Even though Whitby and a lot of those smaller towns didn't develop into big centres, they started out a long time ago and there's a history there."

This experience of discovery of the ecological and cultural diversity of the waterfront was a theme that recurred throughout many accounts of positive experiences along the Trail. Many people were amazed to discover that interesting places could be found so close to their own home. For some, these places were primarily the parks and conservation areas nestled between towns and cities, while others were attracted to the history, architecture and culture within particular communities along the Lake. In both cases, many expressed a sense of joy at discovering something that had been previously ignored.

A number of end-to-enders contrasted the experience of traveling at the slow pace afforded by cycling or walking, with the experience of daily high-speed travel along the nearby highways. By slowly and leisurely traveling the Trail, they were able to come into contact with areas that had previously been completely overlooked. For many, this experience seemed to give them a greater sense of connection with their surroundings.

Some of the negative comments made by the end-to-enders highlight some of the problems, obstacles and challenges that projects of this nature face. Chief among these is the problem of public accessibility to the waterfront. Although great effort has been made to keep the Trail close to the waterfront, there are a number of spots where the presence of private land, whether industrial or residential, prevents public access. At these points, the Trail turns further inland and is often forced to run along major streets through densely urban areas with heavy vehicular traffic.

Not surprisingly, many of the people with whom we spoke found these areas to be most unpleasant, both because of the presence of heavy traffic and because of the absence of the water and dedicated trails. Air and noise pollution, boredom, and the dangers posed by traffic were some of the major complaints associated with these areas. A number of people told us that the name “Waterfront Trail” was entirely inappropriate when referring to these sections. They urged us to ask the Waterfront Regeneration Trust to continue working towards closing the existing gaps in the Trail and moving the Trail as close to the waterfront as possible.

Of course, these are no small tasks, given that a project of this size requires the co-operation of a wide variety of different community groups and municipalities. Certainly, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust must be commended for all that it has accomplished to date. Despite the political and geographical obstacles, the Trail continues to be upgraded and expanded, inspiring new restoration projects in the process.

Resistance to the Trail has primarily come from private land owners, both residential and commercial, who are opposed to having hikers and cyclists crossing on or near their property, as well as a handful of municipalities who have been less enthusiastic about the project, perhaps due to more pressing local concerns or a lack of available funds. A number of people suggested the need for promoting public awareness about the Trail in order to encourage support for its further development.

Many of the end-to-enders found that only a very small number of people encountered on their travels actually knew about the Trail. Even those who used local areas of the Trail on a regular basis did not realise that they were part of a much larger system connecting to other communities. For this reason, many of the end-to-enders told us that better signage as well as local advertising is necessary to promote increased awareness of what the Waterfront Trail is, where it is located and why it is of value.

Some suggested that more community events, such as festivals, charity events and school trips along the Trail would increase local interest and support for the project, while others stressed the importance of improving public transportation to and from the Trail, so that it is more accessible. A number of cyclists proposed that the Trust clearly demarcate the Trail with a white line along the entire route, so that both local residents and drivers recognise the Trail as a distinct entity with its own separate space.

As many of the end-to-enders noted, there is still a great deal of waterfront land that is occupied by industry and commercial development. The problems of public access that projects like the

Trail face can be attributed to a more general attitude that frequently privileges the rights of the individual property owner over the needs of the community as a whole. Such an attitude has deep, historical roots in our liberal society that correctly aims to preserve basic rights of each individual citizen. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly evident that turning one's back to the commons does not contribute to the overall social or ecological health of a community.

Perhaps one of the most important and encouraging aspects of a project like the Waterfront Trail is the way in which it engenders co-operation between different communities to soften this division, creating more public spaces that allow shared access to common assets and amenities. Due in part to projects like the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail, more people are beginning to realise the importance of preserving and further developing public spaces that are free and available to all – a genuine commons in which the ecological and cultural diversity that defines the unique character and shared values of a community can be recovered and preserved.

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