



WHEN IS AN ISLAND NOT AN ISLAND?

St. Lawrence Islands National Park works with its neighbours to protect species at risk

When it comes to protecting its vulnerable species, St. Lawrence Islands National Park (SLINP) doesn't work in isolation. It can't afford to. SLINP is a small, fragmented, protected area in one of the most densely populated parts of North America. Not surprisingly, the park is subject to many environmental stressors from outside its boundaries and a good number of the local flora and fauna are species at risk.



St-Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada

Reaching across boundaries

For Parks Canada, the implications of the park's southern Ontario location are very clear. The only way to tackle the stressors – to reach across boundaries. To protect and recover species and habitats throughout the park – and indeed, the entire region – Parks Canada needs to engage landowners, municipal governments and many other agencies.

To truly make an impact within the park, planners needed to look well beyond arbitrary borders and consider the many larger protected areas in the Thousand Islands region as a whole: SLINP, several provincial parks and the Queen's University Biology Station. For these individual areas are to remain healthy, it is essential to take care of the connections – or linkages – between them. Conserving natural linkages is crucial to maintaining the habitats and travel corridors required by these species.

To focus on the big picture, Parks Canada and its partners established the Thousand Islands Ecosystem Species at Risk Habitat Availability Project. Parks Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and other agencies would identify linkages by examining the numerous other green spaces among and between the larger parks.



Developing the knowledge base

A major conservation effort like this needs good data on species and habitat. To build the knowledge base, the Southern Ontario Land Resource Information System (SOLRIS) was applied in the Thousand Islands area.



Parks Canada
Parcs Canada

Canada

Administered by Ontario's MNR, SOLRIS uses ecological land classification techniques to identify, evaluate and map habitat for species at risk and other wildlife. In the process, it provides abundant useful information on forests, soils, wetlands and other natural features. The exercise is helping to identify high priority areas for conservation and restoration across the region.

Parks rely on their neighbours

Project Manager Shaun Thompson clearly summed up the importance of maintaining green connections. Shaun, who was on loan to Parks Canada from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, emphasizes that, despite being mainly surrounded by water, SLINP is not an island in an ecological sense. "The ecological integrity of any protected area relies on the surrounding landscape," he says.

He also points out the importance of landowners in the equation. The majority of green links between parks are on private or municipal lands. That's why community involvement and private stewardship are so important. It is essential to build trust and communication, says Shaun, because property rights can be a concern when discussing habitat conservation measures. "We need to be up-front with landowners," says Shaun.

Getting to know the landowners

The project's intent is that landowners can become stewards for species at risk, if they are equipped with the data and informed about species' needs and legal requirements. To encourage stewardship, the project organizers first had to get to know the local community. They asked social scientists to survey the landowners to gauge their attitudes and their understanding of the value of natural ecosystems. By relating the survey results to conservation value mapping, our colleagues in the Thousand Islands could use this information to identify the best opportunities for contacting landowners about participating in conservation.

The landowners are getting involved

Some 230 landowners agreed to have ecological surveys conducted on their properties, and over 40 of them participated in the fieldwork. Parks Canada and its partners are also developing stewardship activities with property owners and volunteer groups like the Leeds County Stewardship Council. Among its many projects, the council is working with landowners to protect at-risk turtle populations (Stinkpot, Blanding's and Northern Map) along the St. Lawrence River.



Stinkpot turtle © Michele Rodrick



Landowner participating in an ecological survey while standing by a large Shagbark Hickory tree © Parks Canada

Lasting partnerships

Through the Habitat Availability Project, Parks Canada has formed invaluable links with other agencies. As he returns to his work with Ontario's MNR, Shaun Thompson has a great sense of satisfaction, and he's enthusiastic about continuing cooperation between Parks Canada and the province. He has established "some phenomenal partnerships" at the national park. "This will benefit me in my work with MNR," says Shaun.

For more information:

Contact Josh van Wieren, St Lawrence Islands National Park, Tel. 613-923-5342.