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Bringing back the Don: Sixty years of community action

In the summer of 1983, Charles Sauriol, conservationist and long-time champion of the Don River Valley, sat down to capture some of his memories of the valley in the 1920s. He recalled a time before the Don Valley Parkway punched its way along the valley bottom, before the worst of the urban pollutants fouled the waters of the river – a time when the river valley was still largely rural, and partly wild. Thinking of the summers he and his family had spent in a cottage at the Forks of the Don, he wrote:

> I remember seeing the full moon break over the pines, spreading its beams of mysterious phosphorescence over the misty shrouds that rose from the river to the flood plain . . . Many an evening I walked to and from the swimming hole as twilight gradually closed down on the day. Then, seated in front of the cottage, I could hear the water flowing over the river stones, and sometimes, just at dusk, the strident call of a whippoorwill.[1]

Sauriol's love for the valley was rooted in personal experience – in time spent living and playing in the valley, tending his vegetable garden, harvesting honey from his apiary, watching his children swim in one of the river's rare deep pools. Biking through the valley's cool green corridors on a summer evening, or taking in the sweep of brilliant fall foliage from the Don Valley Parkway, many of us have felt something like Sauriol's deep sense of place, and of fortune that such a unique urban wilderness exists in the heart of Canada's largest city. The valley, with its resilience through more than 200 years of human settlement and modification, spoke to Sauriol, as it does to us, of hope. Hope for a new commitment to accommodate and nurture natural systems as our city continues to grow, and hope that the legacy of past mistakes, borne in the landscape of the river, will teach us a new way of belonging in the very specific place where we live. For Sauriol, lived experience in the Don Valley led to a lifelong quest to protect it; by drawing together and building from our experiences, we can begin to do the same.

1 Charles Sauriol, *Tales of the Don* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History, 1984), p. 19.

CHARLES SAURIOL AND THE DON VALLEY CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Charles Sauriol's life story is also the story of the Don River Valley. In his youth in the 1920s, Sauriol developed a passion for the outdoors, camping in the woodlands of the Don as a member of the 45th East Toronto Boy Scouts Troop. Over the years, he refined his skills as a naturalist by cataloguing the plants and animals – muskrat and leopard frogs, white pine and basswood – he observed on his frequent rambles through the valley. He was also painfully aware of the dramatic changes that had occurred in the valley. His father, Joseph Sauriol, had played an intimate role in the reconstruction of the Lower Don in the 1880s, operating one of the dredges that carved a new path for the river and replaced its meanders with a straight, hard-edged channel. But Sauriol gained his real knowledge of the Don, and the heartbreak that came with that knowledge, during the forty-one summers he spent with his family at a cottage at the Forks of the Don, near Don Mills Road and Lawrence Avenue East.

Charles Sauriol in front of the original cottage at the Forks, July 1935.

Every May from 1927 until 1968, Sauriol and his family moved from their city home to a rustic cottage in the valley, foregoing electricity and indoor plumbing to live close to the land. They were summers that, as Sauriol wrote in his 1981 book, *Remembering the Don*, 'filled my time with the orchard, the garden, the apiary, the easy living by the then clean Don River.' Forced to vacate the cottage in 1958 to make way for the Don Valley Parkway, Sauriol and his family moved across the Forks to the Degrassi homestead on the East Don. Their time in the valley, however, was almost up. Widespread damage caused by Hurricane Hazel in 1954 gave new urgency to flood-control measures, and the newly formed Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority wanted to remove houses from risky flood-plain areas. In 1968, the Sauriols were expropriated for a second time, and this time they left the valley for good, reconstructing their summer home on a property near Tweed, Ontario. In his time on the Don, Sauriol had seen the valley change from a picturesque setting of rural farms and woodlands to an increasingly threatened corridor of urban green space.

By the 1940s, the Don was no longer the same river that Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, had described in 1794 as 'abounding with wild ducks & swamp black birds with red wings.'[2] Straightened and industrialized in its lower reaches, the river had also borne

2 Mary Quayle Innis, *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), p. 104.

the impacts of deforestation and residential development upstream. With the draining and filling of the Ashbridge's Bay marsh in the early 1900s, the river had lost a crucial absorption and filtering function. Silt from upstream development flowed downriver and accumulated in huge quantities at the mouth of the river, hindering navigation and propelling the Toronto Harbour Commission to undertake costly annual dredging to keep shipways clear. Pollution had also plagued the Lower Don since the early decades of European settlement; while raw sewage and cattle manure had been the main sources of river pollution for much of the nineteenth century, rapid industrialization in the early decades of the twentieth century added new and dangerous effluents to the cocktail, including oil by-products released by the refineries at the mouth of the Don and chemical wastes from the soap factories and paper mills further upriver. Across the city, population growth pushed outdated sewage infrastructure beyond capacity, and increasing amounts of partly treated sewage were discharged into the city's river systems. Tests by the Provincial Board of Health in 1949 found a daily average of 6,500 pounds of suspended solids dumped into the Don River from six sewage treatment plants – almost double the normal summer flow of the river itself. Conditions became so bad that, in 1950, a provincial conservation report described the Don as an 'open sewer' and ranked its water as the most heavily polluted in Ontario.[3]

Perhaps the biggest threat facing the watershed, however, was urbanization. In the years following World War II, more and more valley lands (and the adjacent tablelands that drained into them) were earmarked for residential and industrial development. In 1949, Shirriff, the jam and preserves manufacturer now owned by the American firm Smuckers, proposed to construct a factory on the site of Todmorden Mills, a proposal that would have seen the existing historic mill and brewery buildings demolished to make way for a storage facility. Community opposition to the proposal was swift and vocal, and Shirriff abandoned the project the following year.

One of the outcomes of this successful community-based campaign was the formation of the Don Valley Conservation Association, established by Fantasy Farm owner Rand Freeland, East Toronto lawyer Roy Cadwell and Charles Sauriol in November 1949. For the next eight years, Sauriol and the DVCA worked to protect valley resources and educate the public about

3 Ontario Department of Planning and Development. *Don Valley Conservation Report* (Toronto: Queen's Printer, 1950), Part VI, Chap. 3, p. 15.

DVCA Conservation Special departing Don Station, c. 1954.

the need for conservation. Members of the DVCA patrolled the valley to protect trees from the hatchets of young boys and rare wildflowers from the enthusiasm of their admirers. Nature walks and annual tree-planting days helped inform the public about the threatened wilderness at their doorsteps, and the first Paddle the Don event, organized by the DVCA in 1949, encouraged Toronto residents to see the valley as a place for fun and recreation. In 1951, Sauriol organized the first of eleven popular steam locomotive trips – what he called the Conservation Specials – through the valley and beyond. The trip originated at the Don Station on Queen Street East and retraced by rail Simcoe's journey to the headwaters of the Don in Richmond Hill in 1793. High school students in period costumes adopted the roles of Simcoe, his wife Elizabeth and his aide-de-camp. The events were a huge success, attracting over 800 people to support the conservation cause.

At the same time as these initiatives, farmers, naturalists and foresters across Ontario were expressing growing alarm about the effects of soil erosion and flooding. In response to these concerns, the provincial government passed the Conservation Authorities Act in 1946, which enabled local residents to request a conservation authority to manage resources in their watershed. Two years later, the Don Valley Conservation Authority

was established – confusingly adopting the same acronym as Sauriol's DVCA. The authority differed from Sauriol's grassroots group in its access to funds from the Province and municipalities in the Don watershed, and in the technical support it received from the Ontario Department of Planning and Development, which published the comprehensive *Don Valley Conservation Report* as a background and guide for conservation activities in the watershed in 1950.

After joining the authority as the leader of its East York Branch in 1954, Sauriol built upon many of the grassroots activities he had initiated six years earlier as founder of his DVCA. Then, on October 15, 1954, Hurricane Hazel hit. Although no lives were lost in the Don Valley, two cars and their occupants were swept into the river; one man waited over eight hours in an elm tree before being rescued by authorities.

As the city rebuilt over the winter of 1954–55, it did so with a new awareness of the significance of valley lands as natural drainage channels for flood waters. In 1957, four Toronto-area conservation authorities, including the Don, amalgamated to form the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, which allowed for greater coordination between jurisdictions in regulating the use of valley lands. The MTRCA had the power to acquire valley lands for flood control and recreation purposes, a decision that would have dramatic consequences for the future of the Don Valley. Charles Sauriol played a large role in these acquisitions as chairman of the MTRCA Conservation Areas Advisory Board from 1957 to 1971, and as the first executive director of the Conservation Foundation of Greater Toronto – the fundraising arm of the MTRCA – from 1963 to 1966. Between 1957 and 1994, approximately 15 percent of remaining natural areas in the Don Valley were saved as part of the MTRCA flood-plains protection program. At the same time as the MTRCA began acquiring valley lands in the late 1950s and 1960s, the newly formed Metro Toronto Council made massive investments into the city's aging and overburdened sewage infrastructure, closing down small, inefficient sewage-treatment plants across the city and constructing trunk sewers through the major river valleys to carry flow to new and expanded sewage-treatment plants on the lakeshore. These developments had profound implications not only for river-water quality but also for the enjoyment of newly created valley parklands once made unbearable by the stench of sewage.

While protection of valley lands from private development and sewage pollution were important milestones in the conservation history of the Don, much remained to be done. In the years after Hazel, the MTRCA's focus on flood control tended to emphasize engineering solutions such as dams and channel reinforcements over habitat protection and environmental restoration. Groups like the Toronto Field Naturalists continued to press for more comprehensive ecological protection for urban valley lands, however, and in the following decades, a new generation of environmental activists began to lament the ongoing pollution of the river by stormwater runoff and other sources.

Don Valley safety officer Robert Speakman and Al Comber feeding three-to-four-week-old raccoons.

GROWING PUBLIC AWARENESS, 1969–1989

By the late 1960s, despite improved sewage treatment and significant reductions of sewage flow in the Don, the river was still dangerously polluted. Local industries continued to discharge harmful effluents into the sewer system, and combined sewers in the older parts of Toronto, including most of the Lower Don, continued to overflow during periods of heavy rain, sending raw sewage into the river. The river had also become increasingly inaccessible to Toronto residents, especially in its lower reaches. The construction of the Don Valley Parkway and the Bayview Extension in the late 1950s and early 1960s had cemented the perception of the Lower Don as an urban wasteland criss-crossed with rail and road arteries and littered with abandoned industrial buildings, road-salt storage sites and equipment storage yards. Highway construction destroyed a key wildlife corridor in the valley bottom and redirected the river's water flow, contributing to its low, listless appearance. Fences erected along the freeways made public access to the lower river valley very difficult, further sealing the fate of the Don as out of sight, out of mind. It had become very difficult indeed to imagine this portion of the river valley as settler William Lea remembered it in an address to the Canadian Institute in 1881:

> This wooded portion of the river was one of the most beautiful walks that could be taken. Here was quiet, only the rippling of the water over a stoney bed, or the whirr of wild ducks, or the partridge drumming in the distance. The water was pebbly and clear, the banks covered with evergreens and trees, forming a canopy of beautiful green. A temple not made with hands.[4]

4 Printed in the *Toronto Evening Telegram*, February 4, 1881.

Pollution Probe's 'Funeral for the Don,' 1969.

In 1969, Pollution Probe, an ad hoc group of University of Toronto professors and students led by zoology professor Donald Chant, brought the plight of the Don to public attention. Declaring the river 'dead' as a result of years of pollution and detrimental development, they donned clothes of mourning and led a funeral procession – Chopin's *Funeral March* playing in the background – to the banks of the river. The funeral event received widespread media coverage and fuelled new demands from individuals and community-based organizations for a cleaner and more accessible Don. Pollution Probe continued its campaign with educational tours of the Don that demonstrated the effects of water pollution, and a series of full-page ads in the *Toronto Telegram*, one of which offered a brimming glass of brown, viscous water from the Don River as a refreshment to politicians. Their message reiterated what long-established groups such as the Toronto Field Naturalists had been saying for years: the Don had the potential to be a vibrant green corridor in the heart of the city, a refuge for wildlife and a much-needed space for recreation, and it was worthy of protection. Unlike earlier groups, however, Pollution Probe spoke for a new generation that refused to accept the degradation of the environment as an inevitable consequence of development.

The 1969 funeral was followed by a brief surge of interest in the Don, and a 1971 campaign by the Ontario Water Resources Commission to reduce phosphates in Ontario waterways was successful in raising oxygen levels in the Don and improving aquatic habitat.[5, 6] In the summer of the same year, college students hired for the Don Patrol, a joint initiative of the MTRCA and General Foods Ltd., removed more than 200 tonnes of litter from the river and surrounding valley. It wasn't until the late 1980s, however, that heightened public concern for the environment generated new and sustained visions for a restored river environment. On February 23, 1989, responding to concerns from local residents' associations, Toronto City Council endorsed a recommendation 'that the Don River and its related recreation and wildlife areas be made fully usable, accessible and safe for the people of Toronto no later than the year 2001.'

That same year would prove to be a landmark year in the history of the Don. In the spring, the *Globe and Mail*'s *Toronto Magazine* published 'Rebirth of a River,' an article that looked to

5 Paul Theil Associates Ltd., *Strategy for Improvement of Don River Water Quality: Summary Report* (Toronto: Queen's Printer, 1989), p. 4.

6 Phosphates promote excessive growth in algae and other aquatic plants, creating a deadly environment for fish and shellfish by depleting available oxygen and disrupting ecosystem function. This process is called eutrophication.

other cities, including Cleveland and London, for examples of the types of effort and investment required to rehabilitate the Don. Through a series of interviews with Don River advocates from different backgrounds – concerned residents, naturalists, scientists and politicians – author Pat Ohlendorf-Moffat outlined, in broad brushstrokes, a vision for a revitalized river. Significantly, she stressed the vital role individuals could play in regenerating the Don by lobbying municipalities to purchase sensitive headwater lands from developers, participating in cleanup and restoration events, reducing individual contributions to toxic runoff by finding alternatives to pesticides and herbicides, and lessening the use of sidewalk salt in winter. The article was followed by a day-long public forum on the future of the Don at the Ontario Science Centre. Attended by about 500 people, the forum represented a watershed in public awareness about the Don.

MARK WILSON AND THE TASK FORCE TO BRING BACK THE DON

For Mark Wilson, the Science Centre forum was the beginning of over fifteen years of involvement and leadership in community-based advocacy and watershed restoration. 'That was where the Don caught my imagination and my heart. I learned about the water cycle and how stormwater was polluting the Don. Helen Juhola [of the Toronto Field Naturalists] talked about the great natural habitats and the urgent need for action to preserve them. [Landscape architect] Glenn Harrington told us about the moral imperative to restore the Don so salmon could once again swim and spawn. I learned about what other cities such as Cleveland were doing to restore their trashed urban rivers . . . When councillor Jack Layton stood up and said there were a group of people meeting at City Hall who were going to do something about the Don, I had to join.'

Wilson joined a dedicated group of citizens, City councillors and staff that worked together to develop a proposal for a public task force on the Don River. Completed in May 1989, the proposal presented a vision for a clean, green and accessible Don. The Task Force to Bring Back the Don was created several months later with staff support and a starting budget of $170,000 provided by the City of Toronto and the Toronto Harbour Commission. This unique formula of strong commitment from citizens, coupled with support from the City, has been the key to its success. That, and the passion and energy of its leadership.

Indeed, it is impossible to tell the story of the task force without referring to the leadership of Mark Wilson. Chair of the task force from its establishment until 1998, Wilson was to the citizens' movement to restore the Don in the 1990s what Sauriol was to Don Valley conservation efforts in the 1940s and '50s. In collaboration with other task force members, he built relationships with City officials and federal and provincial government agencies, secured funding from local foundations, corporations and federal granting agencies, attracted citizen support and injected the task force with a flair for playful, innovative communications. On Earth Day in 1990, for example, the task force put banners and wishing wells on the bridges over the Don Valley and asked Torontonians to make a wish for the Don. Recognizing the strategic importance of situating the Don within the broader urban sustainability movement, Wilson and the task force presented a vision of a restored Don River as a living demonstration of this approach in *Bringing Back the Don*, their first report to City Council. The report outlined six key objectives in its restoration strategy for the Don: enhancement of the river mouth; creation of aquatic habitats, including wetlands; restoration of terrestrial habitats; encouraging appropriate uses of the valley; improving access to the valley; and coordinating planning policy for the valley.

From the beginning, the task force has focused on small restoration initiatives rather than larger capital-intensive projects, on shovels in the dirt rather than lengthy studies. Since 1989, task force volunteers – over 10,000 at last count – have planted tens of thousands of trees, shrubs and wildflowers in the Lower Don Valley, and removed many tons of garbage and debris from the West and Lower Don. Forty restoration projects have been initiated throughout the central and lower valley. Visitors to the Don are likely most familiar with the restoration work at Chester Springs Marsh in the flats just south of the Bloor Street Viaduct. Completed in 1996, the marsh provides critical habitat for wetland wildlife. Monitoring between 1996 and 2004 showed that if you build it they will come: wetland species such as the painted turtle and great blue heron, and cattails and other aquatic plants have increased in number and diversity since the marsh was created.[7] The benefits of this wetland habitat have also been felt in the form of natural flood control and water purification: porous soils absorb excess stormwater in times of flood, and aquatic plants improve water quality by filtering

7 While few species of concern (the 'indicator' species of ecosystem health) have been recorded at Chester Springs Marsh, overall numbers of nesting marsh birds are equal to or higher than the average for the Great Lakes region. The number and diversity of amphibians, however, remains lower than the Great Lakes average, according to the Marsh Monitoring Program's *Marsh Bird and Amphibian Communities in the Toronto and Region AOC, 1995–2002* (www.bsc-eoc.org/download/MMP-AOC%20Toronto%20and%20Region.pdf). Native trees and shrubs such as tamarack and red osier dogwood have been especially successful reclaimers of the marsh. Although problems with invasive non-native vegetation persist in the upper dry areas of the marsh, vegetation surveys like Steve Gillis's 2003 *Chester Springs Marsh East Community Stewardship Report* indicate native wetland plants such as arrowhead, smartweed and water lilies now dominate the marsh shoreline.

Youth volunteer planting event at Beechwood Wetland, 2005.

pollutants. Finally, the marsh has created a connection with the past, becoming a living reminder of the historic marshlands and swimming holes that could be found in the area in the late nineteenth century.

Attempts to improve public access to the Don have perhaps been even more important than these restoration initiatives, however. Speaking about the lower river in 1989, Wilson recalls that 'there was no public access [to the river] between Pottery Road and the Lake – no recreational trail . . . and no regeneration projects.' Only a public who knew the Don, the task force realized, would take efforts to restore it. The City responded by opening the Lower Don Recreational Trail in 1991 and constructing stairs into the valley from Queen Street and the Riverdale Park footbridge. These access points have played an enormous role in reinserting the Don into the collective consciousness of Toronto residents. Through these initiatives and many others over the last twenty years, the task force has become a model for community-driven environmental restoration projects within an urban context.

NEW GROUPS AND NEW APPROACHES

Since the creation of the Task Force to Bring Back the Don in 1989, other groups have formed to address environmental concerns in the wider Don River watershed, as Task Force activities have been limited to the pre-amalgamation City of Toronto boundaries. In 1992, the MTRCA established the Don Watershed Task Force and charged it with the mandate to develop an ecosystem regeneration plan for the entire Don watershed. Comprising twenty-five representatives from

Chester Springs Marsh.

watershed communities, municipalities, community-based groups and external agencies, the Watershed Task Force completed its report, *Forty Steps to a New Don*, in 1994, and the MTRCA began implementing its forty distinct recommendations immediately. Three general principles guided the Watershed Task Force's recommendations: protect what is healthy, such as clean water sources and habitat linkages in the Don; regenerate what is degraded, including water quality, wildlife habitat and cultural heritage; and take responsibility for the Don by facilitating public access and co-operation across government jurisdictions and between community organizations. The Don Watershed Regeneration Council, a watershed-wide advisory committee, was established by the MTRCA the following year to implement the recommendations of the Watershed Task Force report and monitor its results. Four report cards have since been published describing DWRC progress on regeneration projects throughout the watershed, including the successful daylighting of Mud Creek and the development of a wetland site in the former Don Valley Brick Works, opened as a City park in 1997.

In 1993, the Friends of the Don East used the task-force model to undertake restoration and public education initiatives in the former Borough of East York. After Toronto's seven municipalities amalgamated in 1998, FODE continued its work in the communities east of the Don, hosting tree-planting days, local park cleanups and workshops on sustainable living practices. They initiated the Taylor Massey Project in 2003 with the goal of improving the water quality and natural heritage of Taylor Massey Creek (an eastern tributary of the Don), creating a recreation trail along the length of the creek and organizing a series of innovative 'reach stewardship groups' to align concerned residents and community groups with specific parts of the watershed. The TMP has since become a separate organization, and action at the sub-watershed level continues through groups like the Richmond Hill Naturalists and the Friends of Glendon Forest.

ONGOING CONCERNS

Even with all of the progress that's been made in cleaning and greening the Don, much remains to be done. A 2007 Environment Canada report gave the Don a water-quality rating of 34.8 out of 100, making it the most polluted river in Ontario and the third most polluted river in Canada. The bulk of this pollution comes not from industry or single-source polluters but from the everyday activities of urban life – flushing toilets, driving to the grocery store, salting driveways in winter. Runoff from streets and parking lots carries oil, road salt, animal wastes and other harmful substances into the storm sewer system, and from there directly into the Don. Almost 1,200 storm-sewer outfalls dump into the Don and its tributaries, and stormwater makes up over 70 percent of the river's flow. This stormwater not only contributes to poor water quality but also causes flooding and erosion of riverbanks. Each year, in fact, massive silt deposits at the mouth of the Don pose threats to ship traffic and necessitate costly dredging by the Toronto Port Authority.

Even more serious are the effects of combined sanitary and storm sewers in the older parts of the city, like the area around the Lower Don and along Taylor Massey Creek in the east end. Every time the city receives a heavy rainfall, these combined sewers overflow, carrying raw sewage directly into the river. 'Wastewater is the biggest problem facing the Don River

today,' current task force chair John Wilson observed in a 2005 newsletter. 'I hate the fact that my family and I contribute to this problem every time it rains. I just don't want to feel guilty about flushing my toilet during a storm.' Implementation of the City's Wet Weather Flow Management Master Plan, which will improve the quality and reduce the quantity of urban runoff entering the river, should help relieve some of this guilt.

Existing pollution makes the river unsafe for people to wade or swim in, but for wildlife, the consequences are life-threatening. According to the TRCA, chloride from road salt is harmful to aquatic wildlife at 240 milligrams per litre of water. Don levels are consistently higher than this, reaching a high of 3,920 milligrams in samples taken between 2002 and 2005. Runoff from streets also raises the water temperature of the river to levels only the most adaptable species can tolerate. White sucker, creek chub, fathead minnow and blacknose dace are among the seven exceptionally tolerant fish species that have adapted to the toxic conditions in the Lower Don.

Even with better water quality, however, the Don faces problems daunting to even the most optimistic of its advocates. In a watershed that was once almost entirely forested, only 7.2 percent of forest cover remains. Almost all of the watershed's original wetlands have been filled or paved over, and 85 percent of its lands have been developed for residential or industrial purposes. As subdivisions and industrial parks have replaced farmland in the upper watershed, pockets of critical wildlife habitat have been lost and porous soils paved over, sending more surface runoff into the streams and less into vital groundwater reserves, compromising the quality of the Don's remaining sources of clean water. And yet, much is in store for the Don, and what seem like insurmountable challenges are being taken up in a series of innovative visions for the future of the river and its place in the city.

LOOKING AHEAD: RESTORING THE LOWER DON

Big plans for the Don River seem to be everywhere these days, from Evergreen's redevelopment of the Don Valley Brick Works into Canada's first environmental discovery centre to plans to recreate a part of the historic wetland at the mouth of the Don. In March 2008, the TRCA and Waterfront Toronto hosted a public presentation of the work underway to naturalize the mouth of the Don. Under the magnificent chandeliers of St. Lawrence

Hall, the room packed with Don River advocates and interested residents, it was possible for a moment to dream big for the Don, to imagine, instead of a river moving through walls of concrete and abandoned industrial land to dump unceremoniously into the harbour, a river surrounded by vibrant wetlands and walking paths, the vision of a clean, green and accessible Don River so long advocated by the task force.

The plan certainly looks exciting: the Don Mouth Naturalization and Port Lands Flood Protection Project would provide flood protection for lands surrounding the Lower Don and establish a more natural river mouth. Since 2005, the TRCA has been working with a team of consultants on an environmental assessment of the project, and in the spring of 2007 a New York–based landscape architecture firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, was selected through an international design competition. MVVA's Port Lands Estuary proposal best met the two major objectives of the project, which were, according to the design competition jury report, 'to create naturalized mouth and iconic identity for the Don River, and to deliver a comprehensive plan for addressing the area's ecological, urban design and transportation issues.'

While early visions for the project saw the river running through a naturalized Keating Channel, MVVA proposed leaving the channel intact as an 'industrial artefact' while routing the mouth of the river further south through a naturalized wetland environment. The new river mouth would enjoy greater visibility from other points on Toronto Bay, 'reasserting the presence of the river in the city and allowing it to become a symbol of the Lower Don Lands as a whole.' This design, MVVA argued, would more closely reflect the historic course of the river before it was straightened and channelized in the 1880s. The restored wetland and native forests at the mouth would create much-needed habitat for migratory birds and insects and enhance the existing habitat corridor from the river mouth to its headwaters on the Oak Ridges Moraine. Harnessing the Don's natural sedimentation tendencies is a cornerstone of the MVVA vision: excavated sediment deposits from the mouth of the river would be filtered and treated for contaminants in on-site processing centres, then used to cap polluted land and to create landforms such as hills and flood-protection berms throughout the proposed parkland.

In keeping with Toronto's broader goals for waterfront revitalization, the MVVA design ranks social benefits as highly

as ecological ones. An 'urban estuary,' its vision embeds the restored river mouth within a parkland complex that includes recreational fields, walking and cycling trails and shoreline spaces for water-based activities. MVVA proposes to develop four distinct neighbourhoods on either side of Keating Channel and on the north side of the Ship Channel, south of the restored river mouth. Each neighbourhood, MVVA states, 'will have the complete DNA of a vibrant city: a mix of life-cycle housing, commercial, cultural and workspaces, public realms, parkland and access to water.' How and when various aspects of the project will be implemented will be determined through the environmental-assessment process, scheduled to be completed in early 2009. Implementation plans will likely reflect, at least in part, the loose plan forwarded in the MVVA concept design: a six-stage process with channel excavation, soil remediation and sediment capture from the river scheduled to occur in phases one and two, and park construction, infrastructure linkages and neighbourhood construction slated for phases three through six.

As chair of Waterfront Toronto's board of directors, Mark Wilson has been well-placed to shepherd the task force's 1991 vision of a naturalized Don mouth through to a time when fruitful partnerships and a commitment by government funders have made the project both tangible and realizable. Established in 2001 by the federal, provincial and municipal governments to fund and oversee the revitalization of the Toronto waterfront, Waterfront Toronto identified the Don Mouth Naturalization as one of four priority projects in their ten-year business plan. In partnership with the TRCA – the lead proponent of the DMNP – Waterfront Toronto has solicited the participation of stakeholders such as the Task Force to Bring Back the Don and the Toronto Port Authority throughout the planning stages of the project. They have also taken care to incorporate earlier visions for a restored Don River mouth into the planning and design selection process. Of the four viable alternatives for a naturalized river mouth, two of the plans were inspired by task force visions for the Don in the early 1990s. These alternatives were weighed along with a modified version of the MVVA design at public and stakeholder meetings in early 2008. Modifications included filling Keating Channel with clean lake water rather than river water, and the creation of a secondary channel perpendicular to Keating Channel to accommodate floodwaters

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MVVA's proposed 'Port Lands Estuary,' 2007.

and seasonal fluctuations in river flow. The revised MVVA design, with its large area of viable land to be naturalized, its provisions for reuse of site materials and its lower management costs for contaminated soils, emerged from these meetings as the preferred alternative.

Work is currently underway to develop a more detailed conceptual design for the preferred alternative, which will form the basis for the environmental assessment (EA) required by the provincial government before construction can begin. A series of detailed studies on the hydrology, soils and other conditions of the Lower Don conducted through the summer and fall of 2008 will inform this conceptual design. Consultation with the task force and other stakeholders has shaped the development of the design in significant ways: as a result of stakeholder feedback, for example, the TRCA has extended its plans for naturalization beyond the river mouth to incorporate the Don Narrows, the channelized portion of the river south of Gerrard Street. Next steps include the submission and approval of the EA and then the development of a detailed, phased design for the naturalization work. Implementation of the project is forecasted to start in late 2010 at the earliest, with a projected completion date sometime in the 2030s (the river mouth component is expected to be completed sooner, within ten to fifteen years).

While optimism and excitement are the prevailing responses to the project, some skepticism exists about its scale and the likelihood that it will be completed within the targeted time frame and budget parameters. Some feel that the massive scale of the project – redesigning an entire city district as well as a naturalized river mouth – will mean that many of us won't see the project completed within our lifetimes. 'The effort is far too slow,' Mark Mattsen, president of Lake Ontario Waterkeeper, commented in an article in the *Toronto Star* on December 7, 2007. 'It's being put off to another generation. The [naturalization] is "window-dressing."'

Like the City's Wet Weather Flow Management Master Plan, the project will likely take twenty to twenty-five years to complete. Smaller, incremental improvements to the ecological integrity of the Don mouth and narrows might, in some observers' eyes, produce more tangible results in the short term. It is difficult to find comparable terrain for comparison because the DMNP is so much larger in scale and scope than other urban river restoration projects. Improvements made to the Los Angeles

River and the Chicago River, for example, have concentrated on water quality and habitat enhancement, but have not involved major relocations of the river channel or redevelopment of surrounding neighbourhoods. Another area of skepticism concerns the proposed method and expense of cleaning up the contaminated soils left behind by former industrial sites around the mouth of the Don and throughout the Port Lands. Rather than attempt to cleanse contaminated soils in areas slated for residential development, MVVA proposes to leave them in place, purportedly preventing leaching by capping the contaminated soil with captured sediment from the Don River. In areas where extensive excavation will occur, such as the river channel, treating contaminated soils and sediments will be unavoidable.

A component of the EA now underway will weigh the effectiveness of different kinds of soil-remediation strategies, and add detail to the concept of an on-site soil-remediation plant to cleanse and recycle soils for use elsewhere in the development. There is some concern, nevertheless, that the management of contaminated soils will not be effective enough, or will cost more than predicted. Still others feel that the Don River and its mouth, situated as it is on public land, should not be dependent upon privatization and condo sales for its revitalization. Public sector funders hope to receive a 14 percent return on their investment through the sale of residential and commercial units, a plan that some feel places too much emphasis on the marketability of the proposed design plans. Whether the project will continue to move ahead as planned, and whether the funds available will prove sufficient remains to be seen. What is clear is this: not since the infamous Don Improvement Project of the 1880s, which straightened and channelized the lower river to make way for rail and industrial interests, has there been so much excitement and political will to imagine a new future for Canada's most notorious urban river. Perhaps, as Charles Sauriol believed and as Mark Wilson continues to remind us, a river that takes a place of pride in the collective consciousness of Toronto residents, rather than a place of shame, might affect the way we interact with the city we call home.