

# Land Between

Efforts to preserve a vulnerable land

Over Alley

What will your place be like in 15 years? As you drive the last few kilometres of narrow winding road to your cottage, you may have noticed more houses springing up in the last decade or two. You may have also seen stretches of shoreline newly subdivided. We cannot stop change, but can offer guidance and management to limit its negative impacts. It takes understanding of all issues and stakeholders, and working together towards a common goal.

One group in Ontario began to look around their locales and found they shared a 240-kilometre-long landscape, unique in its mixture of features that was vulnerable to future development. Without an official name for the area, like the Oak Ridges Moraine, the group coined the term 'The Land Between'.

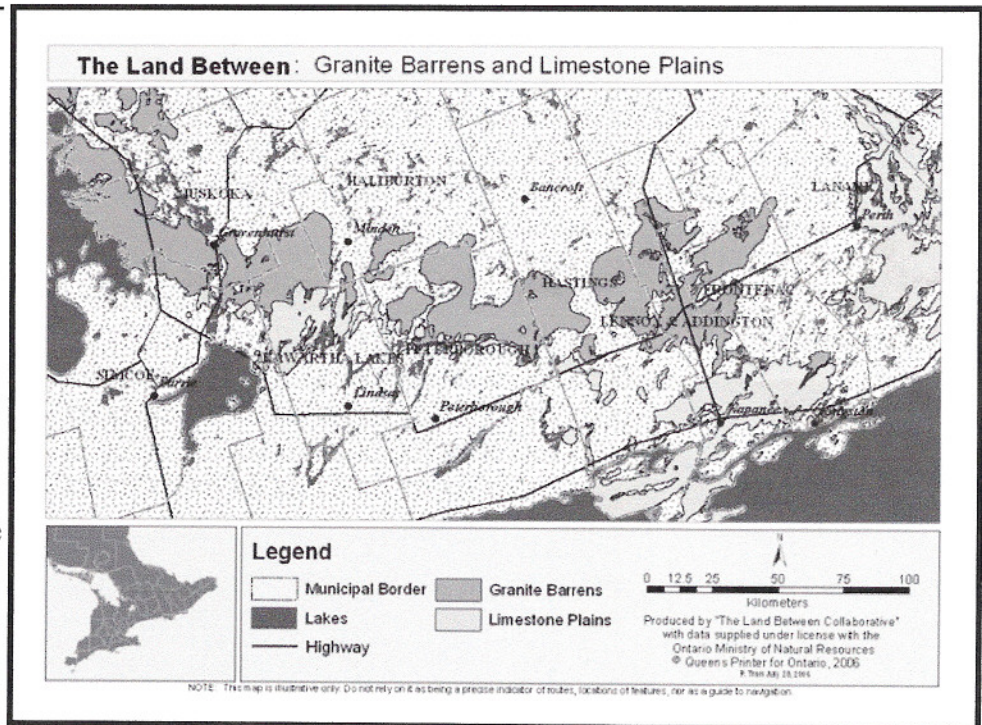
The Land Between is a mosaic transition zone, 15 to 40 kilometres wide. It lies on a line from the southeast corner of Georgian Bay to the middle of Frontenac County. On a map of Ontario's ecological regions, it straddles the dividing line between the Boreal Shield (or Ontario Shield) Ecozone and Mixed-wood Plains Ecozone. As an area of transition between two distinct ecological communities, scientists call The Land Between an ecotone. Ironically, what makes the region unique is also one of the reasons why it was overlooked in Ontario's ecological land classification system. Ecoregions are classified by homogeneous units; The Land Between is heterogeneous, as seen by the jigsaw puzzle shapes of granite barrens and limestone plains on the map, above right.

## Biodiversity

The area's distinctive mixture of wetlands, shallow waterbodies and open patches of bare rock create a

region of high biodiversity. The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario reports the mosaic transition zone contains several of Ontario's hot spots for diversity of nesting birds, a reliable indicator of overall biodiversity. Transitions in elevation and plant hardiness zones make The Land Between the northern limit for some species such as white oak and the yellow-throated vireo, and the southern limit for others such as jack pine, wolf, and moose.

Field observations suggest that The Land Between has greater biodiversity than the adjoining regions. Home to rare, threatened, and endangered species



such as prickly pears, loggerhead shrikes, and eastern Massasauga rattlesnakes, the region remains 95 per cent wilderness.

Swamps, marshes, bogs, creeks, and shallow lakes and ponds divide the low-relief, bare granite ridges. And the limestone plains have a sprinkling of alvars, wetlands, and small moraines. Unfortunately, the ecology of The Land Between is easy to disturb and damage. Soils are bare to less than one metre in

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depth, without the ability to process ground water, which includes absorption and filtration of septic effluent, drainage from garbage dumps, or pesticides. Even small soil disturbances can be long lasting. The small, shallow waterbodies are connected by slow-moving streams, characteristics that make them more vulnerable to pollution.

Even small amounts of additional development, be it housing, golf courses, or roads can spoil this natural heritage system. Spread across at least eight counties, The Land Between is within a two-hour drive from the Greater Toronto Area, Barrie, Kingston, or Ottawa. Experts predict development will expand outward at an accelerated rate up to 2025.

### Research and public information

While early research on The Land Between is strongly suggestive, much remains to be done to define its character, biodiversity, and vulnerabilities. At the same time, there is a need for public education so stakeholders, such as cottagers, can take advantage of what becomes known before the landscape is damaged too much.

Land trusts, which acquire lands to protect natural heritage areas, need this kind of knowledge to choose among acquisition opportunities in their area of operations. Ron Reid of the Couchiching Conservancy and Ian Attridge of the Kawartha Heritage Conservancy created a partnership as The Land Between Collaborative to promote this research and education. They are closely assisted by four individuals, three permanent lakefront residents and a seasonal cottager: Peter Alley and Paul Wiancko (Muldrew Lakes and Six Mile Lake in Muskoka); Heather Brooks-Hill (Stony Lake in Peterborough) and Sissy Tanner (Denbigh Lake in Lennox & Addington).

The group's goal is to encourage research on The Land Between and bring it into public discussion on an array of conservation measures. The Collaborative continues to consult widely among individuals in major stakeholder groups and experts—academics, professionals and government officials. The research is supported by four other Land Trusts, Muskoka Watershed Council, and Parks Canada. Many others have helped, including generous access to data provided by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Funding for the initial stage of research was provided by Ontario Trillium Foundation,


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EBJL Foundation, Salamander Foundation, and others.

### Next Steps

Despite its proximity to urban centres, the region does not lie within any conservation authority and flies under the radar of other governing bodies, which means there is no land use management plan. Without a doubt, the area could benefit from carefully managed conservation that gives priority to environmental protection.

The first step is to engage property owners, businesses, government, First Nations, and other stakeholders. By far the largest group, in numbers and financial investment, is cottagers—about 60 per cent is privately owned. Finding the right mix of conservation activity will take considerable time and discussion among stakeholders. Special landscapes elsewhere in Ontario, such as the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine, have achieved improved conservation through three successive stages:

- Research and public education.
- An open public consultation process about decisions on ecological boundaries for management, classes for different uses, and suitable conservation alternatives.

- Implementation by a mixture of actions by private owners; legislation; changes to county/regional/district and municipal official plans; and even visitors' behaviour to improve conservation.

### What can a Cottagers' Association do?

Cottagers' associations are major stakeholders in The Land Between. Cottagers and cottage associations can help protect The Land Between, suggestions include:

#### ► Focus plans and activities

If your cottage is in the District of Muskoka, City of Kawartha Lakes, or counties of Simcoe, Haliburton, Peterborough, Hastings, Lennox & Addington, or Frontenac, you may be in The Land Between. (Check map.) Learn more about the region by reading, "An ecological overview – The Land Between," available via email at your request. The paper can help cottagers decide if their land lies in The Land Between.

Include taking steps to protect the region in your association's stewardship plans and activities. Follow the progress of the Collaborative and lend your support when possible.

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