

What Do You Mean, The Land Between?

What do you notice when driving from Haliburton to Toronto? Or when traveling to Barrie? Or Lindsay for that matter? Even more, when you travel west to east, from Georgian Bay to Kingston, what do you see?

Perhaps what stands out is that the land is less rugged than in the near north, but not as flat and not arable like that to the south. Or maybe you notice more open areas, exposed bedrock in various greys and pinks. Look further and you will notice a repeating and wavy pattern of low to high and wet to dry. What you are seeing is the Land Between.

The Land Between is a transition zone between the Canadian Shield and the St. Lawrence Lowlands and what ecologists call an ecotone: the edge of a homogeneous ecosystem. This is no small “fringe” area either. The whole of it extends west from Muskoka and southern Parry Sound all the way, at approximately 240 km., to Kingston. On average it is 40 km. wide. The Land Between is what we identify primarily as Cottage Country.

A mosaic or patchwork of habitats marked by Limestone “stepping stones” to the south and Granite barrens at the edge of the shield to the north characterizes the area. Shallow soils predominate as well as many interconnected small lakes and wetlands. In fact The Land Between has more shoreline to area than anywhere else in Ontario. As is typical of ecotones The Land Between is a mix and not uniform and so it has some of the highest habitat diversity in Ontario. Globally rare ecosystems such as alvars and savannahs, fens and meadow marshes are also found here. Furthermore, its wild lands, at 90%, are relatively intact compared to anywhere to the south.

Furthermore, The Land Between has a very distinct culture and heritage in Ontario. Beginning with First Nation’s value and use of the area as key east to west travel corridor. Then with post-contact settlement, areas arose of fluctuating and dispersed agriculture and lumbering. And presently, the area is known for its serenity and beauty and is appreciated by residents as well as thousands of cottagers and visitors for thriving and dynamic land-based tourism and recreation.

Of course, the value of the place is not only in our appreciation, use and care of it, but this region may have many important functions as well and there is much research needed. Because of its placement and physical make-up, with transitions in elevation and plant hardiness, The Land Between is at the northern limit for some species such as White Oak and Yellow-throated Vireo, and the southern limit for other species such as Wolf, Moose, and Jack Pine to the east. So that The Land Between may provide a reservoir and refuge for key species during climate change. Other functions are the recharge and water provisions to southern Ontario. Interesting is that associated with Granite rock is acidic water, while the calcium of Limestone to the southern extent neutralizes waters making them more alkaline. It is a meeting point for these waters. What role then, does this play in water chemistry and functions further south?

When you think about it, it seems obvious that The Land Between is different. It stands out and we've known it all along! However, until recently the entire area was not at all recognized as an entity. It did not even have a name. Most planning authorities and ministries have typically classified and managed ecosystems that are homogeneous: large areas of similar make-up, and so an ecotone being an area of variations, despite its size, was not detected.

Because it was elusive The Land Between is in the middle of larger defined ecoregions, and is at the edge of OMNR jurisdictional boundaries. It is beyond most Conservation Authority interests, and as a whole the planning responsibilities for the area are fragmented. Lastly, because it was not recognized, we have limited information to characterize its value, understand its functions or monitor changes.

And The Land Between is under accelerating threats. Development for leisure and retirement residences is increasing at an alarming rate. It is pushed by an increase in total population, by boomers reaching the ages for buying leisure residences or for moving outside of cities for retirement living, and by increasing numbers of commuters. Restrictions in the new Greenbelt area will squeeze development northwards.

The Land Between is also pretty easy to damage. Due to its shallow soils, rapid drainage and interconnected aquatic resources, it is very susceptible to contamination. Thin soil means low absorptive capacity, and so limited capacity to filter water. Combine this with a harsher climate and the area has reduced capacity to buffer against injury. It takes very little development, be it housing, septic systems, golf courses, roads or trails for motorized vehicles, to spoil the soils, vegetation and water quality. Rebounding from any man-made alterations or damage is also inhibited because of the climate and structure. Disturbance here is long lasting.

There is a real risk of losing the very reason that people migrate to and live in the area. If land use management continues as "business as usual", the damage from these trends is certain. Forces of population change are unavoidable, but development can be guided.

Two years ago, the late Mr. Peter Alley and two local land trusts, formed The Land Between Collaborative to encourage ecological and cultural research and aid in conserving the distinct heritage of the area. The group has now 11 projects and key partners conducting research across the region, including University of Toronto, the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust, Bird Studies Canada, the Natural Heritage Information Centre and others.

Research is encouraged in order to bring it into public view and discussion. Through consultation and collaboration, the group hopes to facilitate stewardship and protection of The Land Between. But while early research is evocative, much remains to be done to define its character and vulnerabilities. Conservation measures and alternatives to land management practices are also being gathered. There is an urgent need for public education so that stakeholders and cottagers can take advantage of what becomes known before the landscape is damaged too much. Eventually, it is imagined that the

collaborative will be able to foster a network of active volunteers as well as support pilot projects and stewardship groups across the region.

Today the area is finally gaining recognition and The Land Between has been identified as the “next frontier” in conservation. This is because prevention and proper planning is still possible. So get involved! Consider watershed plans, working with local groups and land trusts; encourage recognition of The Land Between in planning documents; look into alternative policies and of course learn more to effectively keep well and steward your own land.

Learn more about the region by reading “An ecological overview-The Land Between”, available via email at your request. Follow up on progress and lend your support by volunteering, passing the message on to neighbours, Counsellors and colleagues, and by actively appreciating the unique beauty and significance of The Land Between.

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