

Habitat Health Check Pilot Program Summary

Program Overview

The purpose of the Habitat Health Check program is to encourage and educate landowners on how to maintain and steward their properties in a way that not only suits their needs and tastes, but also addresses the needs of the species with whom they share the land. The program has three primary objectives: 1) to increase biodiversity and habitat connectivity on private land; 2) to directly enhance, increase, and protect habitat on private land for all species, but with a specific focus on turtles, snakes, birds and bats; 3) to educate landowners on the benefits of doing so in the process. The program also aims to maintain long-term contact with every participant, both to ensure the program objectives are met, and to continue to support landowner stewardship efforts.

The Habitat Health Check program has four primary steps:

1) **Pre-survey Assessment.** In this step, we use aerial imagery (MPAC) to conduct a preliminary assessment of habitat connectivity on the property and the surrounding landscape. We then use species at risk records (NHIC) to determine what species may be supported by the property (species-at-risk occurrence data is never shared with landowners). This information is then used to guide the subsequent steps in the Habitat Health Check process

2) **Interview.** In this step, we discuss the landowners' goals, priorities and plans for the maintenance and stewardship of their property including their current or planned land uses (recreational trails, logging, large gardens, etc.), species they would like to attract, their priorities for their land (attracting a wide variety of species, having a large lawn for kids or dogs to play, etc.), and any problems they would like addressed (invasive species, mosquitos, etc.). We then use the landowners' goals and priorities as a framework around which we make all recommendations (in Step 4 - Report) for habitat improvement. That is, we recommend ways landowners can reach their goals in an ecologically beneficial way.

In this step, we also discuss the landowners' current land stewardship and maintenance practices so as to identify the beneficial actions they are already taking, and any areas where there may be room for improvement. Topics discussed include: pesticide or fertilizer use, general backyard maintenance, night lighting, outdoor noise, pets and livestock, septic practices, wildlife interactions, and flooding.

3) **Site visit.** In this step, we tour the property with the landowner and complete a checklist on the various aspects and features of the land. The checklist evaluates the overall ecological value and health of the property, as well its potential to support common and at risk-species.

Sections of the checklist include (where applicable): Shoreline Habitat Assessment, Upland Habitat Assessment, Lowland Habitat Assessment, Turtle Habitat Assessment, Snake Habitat Assessment, Hog-nosed Snake Habitat Assessment, Bird Habitat Assessment, Bird Species-at-Risk Habitat Assessment, and Bat Habitat Assessment. Other aspects of habitat health assessed through the checklist include:

habitat connectivity, the presence of beneficial features (natural and anthropogenic), animal evidence or sightings, and the abundance of snags and woody debris

4) **Report.** In this step, we use the information obtained in steps 1 through 3 to generate an individualised report for the landowner. The report outlines how the landowner can best address their land use priorities and goals in a way that benefits both them and the natural environment.

Rather than provide a list of problems and criticisms, the report acknowledges and compliments the efforts and beneficial practices the landowner is already engaged in, and provides recommendations on how they can continue their efforts and achieve even greater success towards their goals. The report also provides many supplemental resources where further information can be obtained and connects landowners with tax incentive programs they may qualify for.

Approach

With the help of a Behavior Change Psychologist, both the overall Habitat Health Check program approach and the report language were tailored to encourage landowner behavior change. The language is encouraging and positive, never scolding or negative, and the overall approach is designed to help the landowner reach their own goals, rather than dictating what must be done on their property and how. This was done to increase the likelihood of report recommendations being followed, and long term habitat creation, protection and enhancement being achieved.

Pilot

As this year served as a pilot for the Habitat Health Check program, all participants were asked to provide feedback on the program. We asked for feedback on the process overall, as well as specific questions about the language used in the report, the questions asked during the interview, and the recommendations made at the end of the process. Of the six pilot participants, feedback was received from three, and has been incorporated into the program for following years.

Summary of pilot program outcomes

- **Duration:** August - November 2020
- **# of assessments completed:** 6
- **# of shoreline properties assessed:** 2
- **# of acres assessed:** 330.11
- **# of snake habitat-specific recommendations:** 4
- **# bird habitat-specific recommendations:** 11
- **# turtle habitat-specific recommendations:** 5
- **# bat habitat-specific recommendations:** 6
- **# general backyard maintenance recommendations:** 11
- **# recommendations to plant some/more native/pollinator friendly plants:** 2
- **# recommendations against invasive plant species:** 3
- **# shoreline maintenance recommendations:** 5

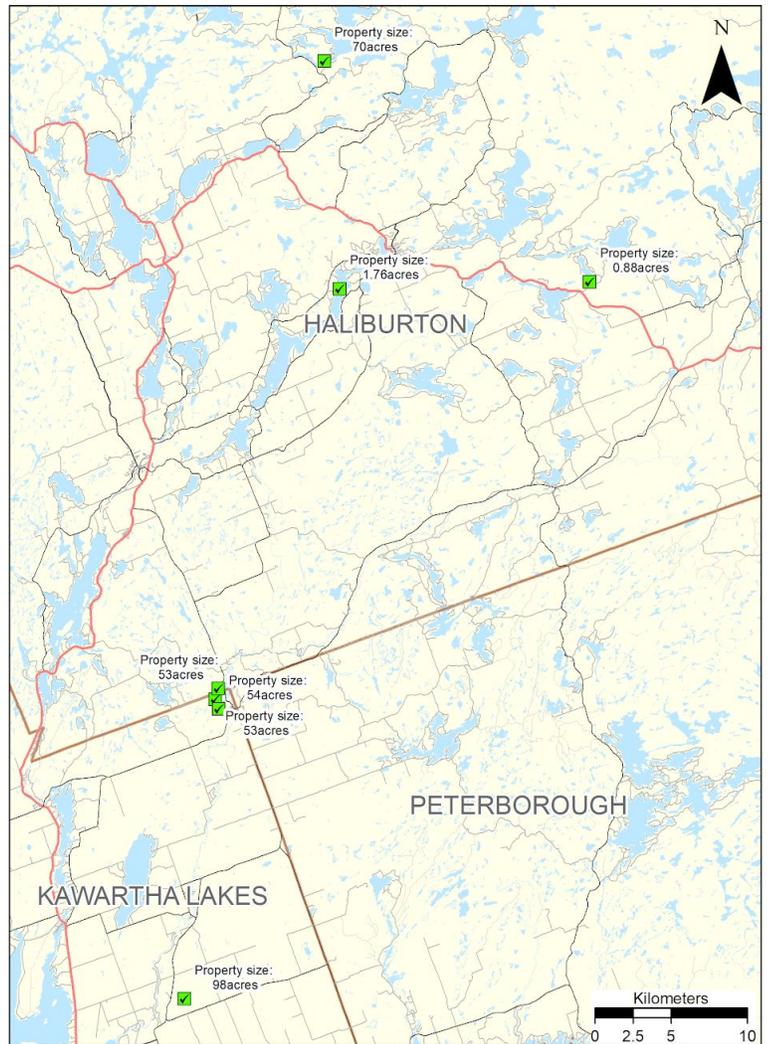
Assessment Locations

The map on the right outlines the locations of the six properties that were assessed as part of this pilot.

Next steps

Going forward, using The Land Between's Greenway Mapping data, we plan to target high-priority landowners for participation in the program. We will target landowners in or near areas with sightings of snake, turtle, bird or bat species-at-risk who own 90 acres or more. This way, habitat protection and improvement efforts will be focussed in areas where they will have the greatest positive impact. The landowners' contact information will be obtained through municipal roll numbers.

To increase program participation, at least in the early stages, we will also create an online signup sheet where any landowner who would like to participate in the Habitat Health Check program can register. We will specify that we are looking for, and will give preference to, people with large properties, or people who acknowledge their properties require a great deal of improvement, and who are willing to make the recommended changes. This will be done to target efforts in areas where the greatest impact will be realized.



This project was undertaken with the financial support of:
Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier de :



Environment and
Climate Change Canada

Environnement et
Changement climatique Canada