

# Nature as a Cornerstone of Growth: Regional and Ecosystems Planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe

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## *Résumé*

La province de l'Ontario a récemment voté une série de lois portant sur la gestion régionale de la croissance pour la région du Golden Horseshoe dans le sud de l'Ontario en combinant deux notions apparemment contradictoires—croissance et protection environnementale. Depuis une trentaine d'années, l'environnement qui était jadis relégué à l'arrière plan de la planification régionale est passé au premier plan. Toutefois, le contexte législatif de planification et de croissance verte et régionale contient des provisions pour le développement d'infrastructure et pour l'extraction de ressources alimentant la croissance, compromettant la protection des écosystèmes et des terres agricoles, et instituant un agenda compétitif de développement régional économique. Cet article illustre les façons différentes, mais souvent contradictoires, par lesquelles traditions et positions de valeur peuvent être exploitées par les lois et politiques d'implémentation. Dans cette étude de cas, nous examinons comment la nature devient un fondement ou pierre angulaire, lubrifiant ou nouvel espace-état pour une planification régionale intégrée et centralisée, et comment ce complexe opère de façons contradictoires et trompeuses causant un mal continu à l'environnement non-humain.

**Mots clés :** Toronto, région du Golden Horseshoe, Plan Oak Ridges Moraine, Plan de ceinture verte, planification régionale, nature, planification écosystémique, croissance, gouvernance régionale.

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*Abstract*

The Province of Ontario has been successful in passing legislation for a regional growth management plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe in southern Ontario by bundling together two seemingly contradictory notions: growth management and environmental conservation. Over a period of about thirty years, the environment has moved from background to foreground in regional planning. Yet the green and region-wide growth planning legislation contains provisions for infrastructure expansion and resource extraction that fuel growth, compromise the protection of ecosystems and agricultural lands, and institutionalize a competitive regional economic agenda. This illustrates the ways in which different, and often contradictory, traditions and value positions can be harnessed in legislation and policy implementation. In this case study, we show how nature can provide a cornerstone, lubricant or new state space for centralized integrative regional planning, and how this complex may operate in contradictory and self-defeating ways to cause continued harm to the non-human environment.

**Key words:** Toronto, Greater Golden Horseshoe, Oak Ridges Moraine Plan, Greenbelt Plan, regional planning, nature, ecosystems planning, growth, regional governance.

The Greenbelt is a cornerstone of Ontario's proposed Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan which is an overarching strategy that will provide clarity and certainty about urban structure, where and how future growth should be accommodated, and what must be protected for current and future generations (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005a, p. 1).

In the last three years, the Province of Ontario has been successful in passing legislation for a regional growth management plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), a region of over 3 million hectares with a population of 7.5 million in southern Ontario. It had not managed to achieve this in the past thirty years, and it has been accomplished by combining two seemingly contradictory notions—growth management and environmental conservation. Three prominent plans passed by the Province in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan*, *Greenbelt Plan* and *Places to Grow/Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (referred to herein as the *Places to Grow Plan*), focus on preserving nature and countryside, promoting intensification, and designating growth centres. They have been lauded as long overdue, innovative and challenging of the prevalent growth mentality. However, we argue here that in the emphasis on the Greater Golden Horseshoe's competitiveness in a global marketplace, the growth and greenbelt plans interact in highly contradictory and self-undermining ways.

The literature on growth and ecosystem planning at a regional scale is often presented from a managerialist perspective, focusing on regulation, evaluation and implementation (Bengston et al., 2004; Cortner & Moote, 1999; Hollis & Fulton, 2002). Another literature sees such planning as part of promoting the territorial competitiveness of city regions, where environmental planning is a sub-component of an overall state strategy to attract external capital and the creative classes that are part of it to the city region (Brenner, 2004; Cowell & Murdoch, 1999; Haughton & Counsell, 2004). In this situation, as Noel Castree (2005, p. 10) argues, the state may be viewed as “a non-neutral actor interposing itself between business, the public and the natural environment” where there are both winners and losers, and where apparent advances in ecosystem planning and nature conservation may be illusory. In contradistinction to the notion of the shrinking state under neoliberal regimes, state intervention in land use persists to facilitate land development and growth. This suggests the relevance of investigating “the major role of *urban regions* as key sites of contemporary state institutional and spatial restructuring” (Brenner, 2004, p. 2, emphasis original).

In this paper we pay attention to the ways in which environmental and planning narratives may constitute a central agent in promoting regional competitiveness. We hypothesize that growth management and ecosystem management may not be just policy instruments, but malleable narratives that frame problems, strategic actors, and potential solutions. (See Wilson & Wouters (2003) for the uses of growth discourse to shape core city redevelopment.) Recent analyses of regional development (Haughton & Counsell, 2004) have built upon scholarship in communicative planning (Healey, 1997; Innes, 1995) and analyzed the constructions of meaning through policy documents, arguing that regions are not given but discursively constructed. Policy debates here become “arenas in which alternative sets of meanings and values are tested and developed as attempts are made to influence policy formation” (Haughton & Counsell, 2004, p. 43). Policy narratives are viewed as often competing, contested and strategically constructed to appear ‘natural’ in an ongoing jostling to gain and maintain power (Fischer, 2003). They focus on the ways in which issues are framed, policy processes and practices are associated with planning issues (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003), and the “system of meaning embodied in a strategy for action” (Healey, 1997, p. 277).

Although growth and nature conservation are popularly viewed as antithetical, in practice, a policy discourse that embraces both nature and growth can become a common frame through which growth plans and conservation efforts are conceived, negotiated and executed. In the debates on nature and growth, nature and its associated terms, ecosystems, watersheds and environments, can be mobilized as a political strategy, where discourses of nature become “a political resource drawn on selectively by people, and a battleground for ideas and conflicting ideologies” (Haughton & Counsell, 2004, p. 26). Yet we argue that the outcomes are

not always positive. We suggest that nature can, in fact, be used to legitimate, facilitate and lubricate specific state policies related to growth and its management.

In this way, different, and often contradictory, traditions and value positions can become encapsulated in legislation and policy implementation. This may include the commodification of nature for planning purposes; the adoption of ecosystem planning approaches that set the stage for integrative regional planning; and the use of both to lay the groundwork for the restructuring of regional planning and governance. Such shifts in planning discourse may support a centralization of control over regional planning, thereby allowing for the implementation of a new regionalism agenda of greater coordination of planning for natural heritage protection, settlements and infrastructure across a fast-growing region.

In the first part of the paper, we trace the emergence of policies for nature conservation in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and their evolution from background to foreground and assimilation into growth narratives. We also examine some of the reasons for this transition. In the second part, we examine, in some detail, the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and the *Greenbelt* and *Places to Grow* plans. We chose these plans because they are regional in scale, were successfully passed into legislation in a short time span, and received extensive support from planners, environmentalists, and the general public. We ask to what extent they protect non-human nature and to what degree they are infused with and subordinated to a growth agenda and a language that promotes growth. We explore the relationship of the growth plan to the green plans. Though rhetorically in the background, we nevertheless investigate the growth plan's underlying importance, and the extent to which it addresses green concerns. In the third section, we investigate the ways in which green concerns have been harnessed to promote growth and how a new regional growth management regime may have become consolidated, naturalized, and accepted. We conclude by discussing the ways in which an historical narrative approach to policy formation of regional and ecosystem planning is useful in tracing the contingent relationship between the promotion of growth and nature conservation, and the positive and negative consequences that may flow from this interaction.

### Regional Planning and Ecosystems in the Greater Golden Horseshoe

Since the 1970s, there have been various attempts to implement regional growth and nature conservation plans in the Toronto region. The Province of Ontario attempted regional planning in the early 1970s with the *Toronto Centred Region Plan* covering an area three times the size of the GTA. The plan sought to deal with the congestion associated with population growth through decentralization to targeted growth centres separated by green space. According to White (2006), this was a regional economic development plan that sought to distribute growth to less developed areas to the east of Metro Toronto, and to counter urban sprawl

as the result of uncoordinated public policy at the local level. This set the stage for future attempts to institute regional control over planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Ontario Ministry of Treasury and Economics, 1971). The cornerstone of the plan was the Parkway Belt, a planning concept that attempted to combine an urban boundary and environmental buffer with infrastructure corridors linking Toronto to proposed satellite communities (Ontario Ministry of Treasury and Economics, 1971). The plan placed green space in the background as a place for recreational opportunities for urban residents. In the language related to the Parkway Belt the coordination of large-scale infrastructure projects was the central focus, rather than conservation of green space or farmlands.

The vital and unifying organ of the entire system is the Parkway Belt. This is a multi-purpose service system which would incorporate many kinds of transportation, pipelines and electrical power lines, water and sewer lines, where applicable, with open space added (Ontario Ministry of Treasury and Economics, 1970, p. 19).

Ultimately, the *Toronto Centred Region Plan* was never formally implemented and failed to achieve its conservation or growth management objectives. Between 1976 and 1991, the Toronto region gained more than a million people, of whom 86% settled in areas outside Metropolitan Toronto (Frisken, 2001). From the 1970s to the present, there continued to be an outlet for population growth in the GTA suburbs, as the *Toronto Centred Region Plan* had allowed for more than enough land to accommodate thirty years of growth. By 1996, the last remaining portion of undeveloped lands within the Parkway Belt became the site of Highway 407 and the concept was subsequently abandoned (Robinson, 2000).

Although the provincial government took an interventionist stance in initiating the Toronto Centred Region strategy, it was derailed by an economic slowdown in the early 1980s and demands to reduce provincial spending. As Frisken (2001, p. 528) notes, “the government ceased to take any interest in issues of regional governance for more than a decade after 1974”. However, it continued to actively support policies such as funding for trunk sewer and water pipes and new highways that stimulated further sprawl development in the region (Frisken, 2001). After 1995, as a consequence of the downloading of infrastructure and social welfare costs, municipalities competed with one another to actively seek new development that would bring in additional property taxes and development charges (Frisken, 2001).

Despite the prevailing growth agenda, the provincial government also engaged in policy initiatives that would bring nature and ecosystems planning into the foreground. Biophysical and watershed boundaries rather than administrative boundaries, often at a large scale and within a long time frame, were becoming the norm, beginning with the Conservation Authorities in the 1940s and the

Niagara Escarpment in the 1970s (Ontario Ministry of Environment and Energy, 1994). These ideas were widely disseminated by the Royal Commission on the Toronto Waterfront (1990; 1991; 1992), in provincial policy documents of the Commission on Planning and Development Reform in Ontario (1992) and the Ontario Round Table on the Environment and Economy (1990; 1991), as well as various technical reports on the Oak Ridges Moraine in the early to mid-1990s (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, 1991; Oak Ridges Moraine Technical Working Committee, 1994a; 1994b). A Ministry of Environment and Energy report (1994, p. 4) succinctly outlined the value orientation of an ecosystem approach, which “means treating ecological goals equally and simultaneously with economic and social goals. It is based on recognizing that there are limits to the degree of stress ecosystems can accommodate before they are irreversibly degraded or destroyed.”

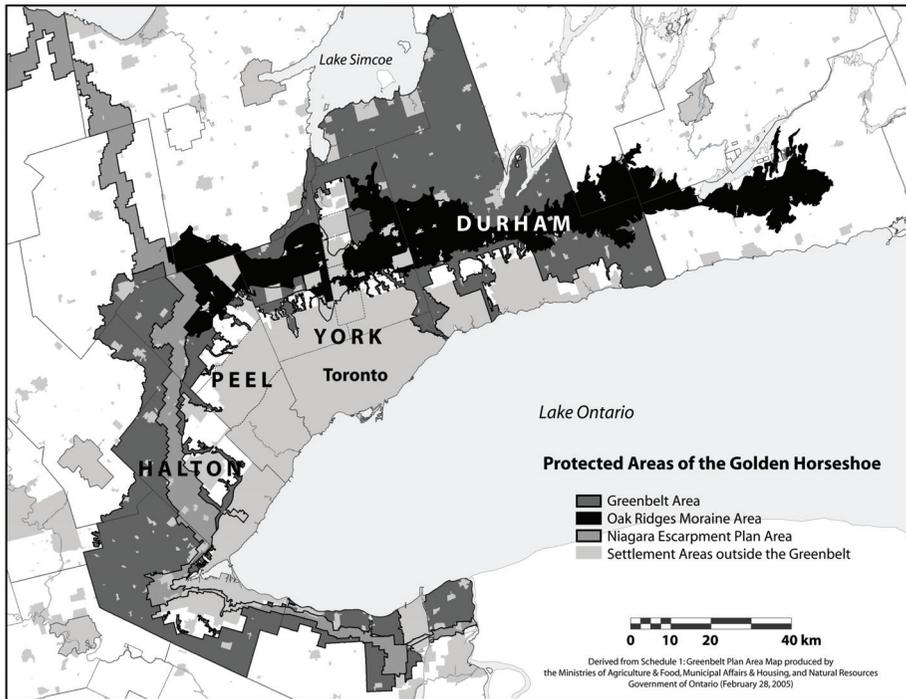
By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, growth was constructed in many accounts to have hit a ceiling in the Greater Toronto Area. Newspaper coverage highlighted gridlock in the suburbs, increasing commute times for suburban residents, loss of green space and agricultural lands, rising energy costs, and unsustainability of low density, auto-dependent developments. Between 1991 and 2001, the Toronto region population increased by more than one million, mostly outside the City of Toronto where 52% of the population now resides (Statistics Canada, 2003). Between 2001 and 2006, the population of the Greater Golden Horseshoe grew 8.4%, adding 630,000 persons. Exurban municipalities experienced the highest growth rates, with Milton growing 71%, Brampton 33.3% and Vaughan 31.2% in a five-year period (Statistics Canada, 2007).

These rapid population changes and the associated sprawl developments resulted in concerted citizen campaigns starting in the late 1980s to ‘Save the Oak Ridges Moraine’ and protect the countryside through a greenbelt (Wekerle, 2002; Wekerle et al. under review a and b; Gilbert et al., 2005). A stakeholder-based planning process put in place by the provincial government laid the groundwork for the passage of two region-wide ecosystem conservation plans, the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and the *Greenbelt Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2002; 2005a), respectively.

The *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2001, p. 5) has the objective of “ensuring that the Oak Ridges Moraine is maintained as a continuous natural landform and environment for the benefit of present and future generations.” Building on bioregional planning concepts adopted by staff within the Ministries of Natural Resources and of the Environment in the 1990s, the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* covers an area crossing 32 municipalities from the Trent River to the Niagara Escarpment, providing varying degrees of protection from development according to ecological features. Throughout the plan, we find the language of conservation

biology: ecosystems (p. 34), ecological functions (p.16), hydrological cycle (p.16) and watershed plans (p. 34). Following ecosystem planning principles, the plan divides the Moraine into four land use designations: Natural Core Areas (38% of the land base), Natural Linkages Areas (24%), Countryside Areas (30%) and Settlement Areas (8%). Municipal land use decisions under Ontario's *Planning Act* and *Condominium Act* must be consistent with the use designations prescribed within the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan*.

**Figure 1. Greenbelt in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, which includes the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment**



Land use planning principles based on the above designations were repeated in the *Greenbelt Plan* of 2005. The *Greenbelt Plan* draws upon similar terminology in its division of the region into Settlement Areas, Agricultural Systems and Natural Systems, which are further subdivided into specific categories with varying guidelines. The plan is intended to play a complementary role to the land use and management approach previously adopted in the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and the *Niagara Escarpment Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005b). This new greenbelt extends 325 km from Rice Lake in the east to the Niagara River in the west. It protects approximately 1.8 million acres

from various levels of development. The natural heritage system gives 535,000 acres full protection, creates areas of protected countryside and protects specialty crop areas.

This succession of conservation policies, beginning with the *Niagara Escarpment Plan*, followed by *The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and most recently the *Greenbelt Plan*, has, over time, brought a significant amount of land under provincial planning guidance. Collectively, these conservation plans are now referred to as the “key building blocks of the GGH’s natural system” in the *Places to Grow Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2006, p. 6). Over a decade, an ecosystem planning and bioregional lexicon became naturalized and widely accepted as the way in which to frame policy debates about the conservation of nature and growth in the region. Constructions of nature and ecosystem that were in the foreground of key policy documents in the early 1990s, were adopted and disseminated in environmentalists’ campaigns on the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt, and subsequently found their way into the policy language of the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and *Greenbelt Plan*. These policy discourses and their associated practices were powerful, insofar as they suggested specific directions for policies that were regional in scope, as ecosystems traverse jurisdictional and political boundaries. Through a focus on watersheds, they connected the City of Toronto, which lay outside the political boundaries of the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and *Greenbelt Plan*, with exurban communities that contained the headwaters flowing through the City and into Lake Ontario. These narratives of nature and open space conservation engaged the imaginations and commitments of environmental organizations and homeowners that operated and lived not just in the exurban region but in the cities as well (Wekerle et al., under review a).

### How Green is Green?

In the foregrounding of environmental issues in provincial planning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, little attention was given to the ways in which conservation in provincial policy documents has also explicitly linked to an ongoing narrative of growth. This is expressed in several ways. We first explore the conservation plans and then turn to the growth plan.

#### *The Oak Ridges Moraine and Green Belt Plans*

In the Oak Ridges Moraine legislation, a variant on ‘smart growth’<sup>1</sup> which prioritizes highway construction and economic development, is firmly embedded:

The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act 2001 and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan are key elements of Smart Growth. Smart Growth is the Ontario government’s long-term strategy for promoting

and managing growth in ways that build strong communities, sustain a strong economy and promote a healthy environment. This strategy involves integrating decisions on development, infrastructure and the environment and making sure those decisions are economically sound (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2002, p. 4).

Some environmental advocates point out that new transportation, infrastructure and utility corridors are still allowed in Natural Core and Natural Linkage Areas if they are shown to be necessary and there is no reasonable alternative, thus creating the potential to undermine the plan's conservation objectives (Matlow, 2005). Despite extensive and long-term lobbying against the destruction of nature and agricultural lands by aggregate companies, such developments were spared additional and more onerous restrictions. The plan may also be subject to change and development pressures due to a 10-year review (in 2014) of regional growth patterns and aggregate demand. While the plan was developed through multi-stakeholder negotiations, most controversial was a Minister's Order allowing the construction of 6,600 housing units (of 10,000 initially proposed) on 613 hectares of core moraine lands in Richmond Hill. While no growth was not an option, many environmentalists expected no further development on the most environmentally sensitive areas of the Moraine. They publicly protested what they considered a backroom deal. This prompted *Globe and Mail* columnist John Barber to comment: "Moraine deal about paving not saving". The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Chris Hodgson responded "by pointing out that his government never denied the fact that its 'saving' included so much paving" (Barber, 2002).

The *Greenbelt Plan* also reveals an ongoing discourse of growth (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005a, p. 4). While it protects 26% of prime farmland, an area twice the size of the City of Toronto between the urbanized area and the greenbelt, mostly farms, remains unprotected. Urban expansion can thus continue for 26-30 years before it hits the greenbelt. The *Greenbelt Plan* also increases the pressures for development on lands falling outside the protected areas. Leapfrog development is now occurring just beyond the protected lands of the Greenbelt and the Oak Ridges Moraine in southern Simcoe County. Large tracts of land can be purchased in Simcoe County for a lesser cost than those in closer proximity to provincially protected areas, but they remain close enough to both the GTA and the newly protected natural amenities to make them an attractive investment to new home buyers and wealthy retirees (Neptis Foundation, 2004).

The *Greenbelt Plan* protects only 30% of all identified green space in the region. This takes the pressure off developers, many of whom already own the remaining unprotected land, and municipalities that want to develop it and increase their

tax base. The plan creates a more stable and predictable environment for capital investment, both on the greenbelt, where the rules are clear, and off the greenbelt, where the land is open for development. The *Greenbelt Plan* also permits renewable resource activities throughout the protected countryside, including forestry, aggregate extraction, water taking and wild life management.

Infrastructure is permitted throughout the protected countryside, including key natural heritage features, if need is demonstrated and no feasible alternative locations can be found. The *Greenbelt Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005a, p. 5-6) forcefully supports “[a]ll existing, expanded or new infrastructure... within the Protected Countryside”... provided “it serves the significant growth and economic development expected in Southern Ontario beyond the greenbelt by providing for the appropriate infrastructure connections among growth centres and between these centres and Ontario’s borders.”

This suggests that growth is prioritized over conservation. The provisions in the *Greenbelt Plan* that accommodate growth as usual and link nature preservation with growth serve to naturalize a growth discourse. By embedding growth policies in legislation that purportedly conserves natural heritage, the inevitability of growth is emphasized and the assumption is made that conservation can only be allowed if growth is also supported. Thus, nature is constructed to mask growth by appropriating nature metaphors and commodifying nature.

### *Places to Grow Plan*

*Places to Grow* is the successor to previous attempts to implement a regional growth plan in the Greater Toronto Area and covers the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. According to the plan’s accompanying legislation, *The Places to Grow Act*, the plan is intended “to enable decisions about growth to be made in ways that sustain a robust economy, build strong communities and promote a healthy environment and a culture of conservation” (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2005a, p. 1)

It is not unexpected that the plan favours growth, while also incorporating smart growth policies, but it is the forceful and unqualified way it does so, while at the same time integrating the *Greenbelt Plan*, that is remarkable. In introducing the *Places to Grow - Draft Growth Plan*, the Premier of Ontario stated: “The McGuinty government will not squander the opportunity to enhance the competitiveness of what will soon become North America’s third-largest region” (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2005b, p. 2). With such statements, the region is clearly expected to retain its position as the ‘economic engine of Canada.’ The *Places to Grow Plan* starts from the premise that the unprecedented high population growth experienced at the present will inevitably continue. The region is expected to grow by 3.7 million people by 2031. There is no discussion of the distinctions among population growth, economic growth, employ-

ment growth or productivity, even though these various concepts of growth are not necessarily linked. The Plan does not discuss sustainability or any limits to growth (Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, 2005). There is no reference to the fiscal impacts on regional, county and municipal governments that bear responsibility for implementing the growth targets and providing infrastructure to meet the needs of new residents and businesses.

Municipalities in the Region of Halton have challenged the Province's *Places to Grow* strategy that forecasts a doubling of the region's population by 2031. They argue that existing municipal infrastructure deficits and future demands on transit, roads, schools and recreational facilities should be funded by the Province, not the municipalities. They also demand that the existing quality of life and character of communities be maintained (Alcoba, 2007). The Minister for Public Infrastructure and Renewal responded: "At the provincial level, we now have a plan for growth, and a plan to provide the infrastructure to support that growth" (Caplan, 2007), noting that the Province and its partners were investing \$7.5 billion in the Greater Golden Horseshoe over five years, but that the federal government was also expected to provide infrastructure funding. However, this covers primarily region-wide infrastructure and ignores concerns about the appropriateness of growth targets and impacts on quality of life.

The primary focus of the *Places to Grow Plan* is to "create a clearer environment for investment decisions" by addressing an "infrastructure deficit" (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2006, pp. 6, 8). The emphasis is on traffic congestion and the need for the construction of new highways, a recurrent regional issue that has long attracted the provincial government's attention and funding priorities (Friskin, 2001). The *Places to Grow Plan* focuses on the mobility of goods in the trade between the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the United States. The *Draft Growth Plan*, for example, states (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2005b, p. 6): "Maintaining a free flow of goods through the GGH and to the international borders is key to our economic strength and growth potential."

*The Places to Grow Plan* seeks to frame itself as 'smart growth' by designating 25 growth centres, setting intensification targets of 40% by 2015 (promoted as a strategy to save nature), and encouraging transit-oriented development. The creation of satellite towns, a re-urbanization remedy, has been tried before with very limited success in the GTA (Filion, 2003). Intensification is unpopular with suburban residents, and estimates suggest that at least 60% of future households will live on vacant land that has already been approved for subdivision development (Neptis Foundation, 2006). Transit development is also in doubt because the Province has not made firm funding commitments. Finally, the plan to build even more trunk water and sewage mains and four new highways—projects exempted from full scale environmental assessments, public input and appeals—is

likely to further undermine the viability of public transit, encourage urban sprawl and aggravate traffic gridlock.

With respect to nature conservation, the initial quotation of this paper indicates the ‘cornerstone’ position of the *Greenbelt Plan* in the *Places to Grow Plan*. The plans bundle conservation and growth together. They are also conflated more generally. This happens specifically, for example, when new highways are called “economic corridors”, mimicking the language of ecosystems corridors (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2005b). The *Places to Grow Plan* promises to conserve natural systems and prime agricultural lands as well as water, energy, air and “cultural heritage” (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2006, p. 8), but there are no specific policies. With respect to natural heritage, the *Growth Plan* merely states, in general terms, that “[t]hese valuable assets must be wisely protected and managed as part of planning for future growth” (p. 30).

The *Growth Plan* overrides local and regional Official Plans and gives the provincial government the powers to designate growth areas throughout the Province and to develop growth plans for them. These plans support a coordinated approach to growth-related issues that cross municipal boundaries. The Province also forces growth on lower tier municipalities, whether they want it or can accommodate it. The *Provincial Policy Statement* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005c) requires each municipality to have three years’ supply of serviced land and ten years supply of land designated for residential uses. The Province also sets growth targets for each municipality. With 25 designated growth centres, it is unclear how some of these communities will attract population growth, whether it is desirable, or how it will impact on local communities.

While effectively poking large holes in the nature conservation agenda, the *Places to Grow Act* passed as legislation. This is in stark contrast to the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* and the *Greenbelt Plan*, where public meetings drew hundreds of people, including environmental groups that presented briefs to the government. In each case, the provincial government set up citizen advisory taskforces comprised of different stakeholders (Wekerle et al., in review a and b). The Toronto and regional newspapers often provided daily and weekly coverage of different points of view. The *Places to Grow Plan* received far less public scrutiny. It was launched in the summer of 2004 at the same time as the *Greenbelt Plan*, which gained most of the public and media attention. Nor did the Province appoint a citizens advisory committee to provide input to the Plan.

### **Nature as a Cornerstone for Regional Governance**

Recent debates in the literature on the new regionalism have focused on three aspects: the region as a building block in the global economy; the fragmentation of metropolitan regions and need for coordination with regard to sprawl and more

sustainable development; and regional justice issues (Wheeler, 2002). Canadian urban policy analysts (Filion, 2003; Frisken & Norris, 2001) have long favoured a top-down, new regionalist approach to implement sustainable planning. In Ontario, the Province tried at various times over 30 years to develop a form of regional governance and regional planning, but lost interest when faced with the combined pressures from land developers and growth-oriented municipal governments (Frisken, 2001). With the passing of the new plans, this dynamic may now have been overturned.

Though less attention has been given to regional ecologies, regional spatial planning frameworks increasingly combine both land use and property regulation and protection of habitats, landscapes and resources (Haughton & Counsell, 2004). The *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation and Greenbelt Plans*, and the *Places to Grow Plan* have created a new instrument for the provincial government to manage growth in the region. In arguing that the *Greenbelt Plan* and the *Places to Grow Plan* needed to be dealt with simultaneously and passed at the same time, the provincial government managed to conflate two pieces of legislation in the public's mind and, perhaps, dampen the scrutiny and potential opposition to growth from both citizens and municipalities. By linking *The Greenbelt Plan*, widely perceived as a pro-conservation policy document, with the pro-growth agenda of the *Places to Grow Act* and its accompanying plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Provincial government has been able to pacify public concern over the environmental consequences of unchecked growth and justify the need for regional control of planning, while ensuring that any discussion of conservation is embedded within the context of inevitable growth.

Throughout the public consultation process on the *Greenbelt Plan*, public attention was focused primarily on one set of regional problems—the preservation of nature and the protection of countryside. But the rabbit in the magician's hat is the solution to another set of problems: the lack of coordination of planning in the region; the local municipal cultures that sometimes support growth at any cost and at other times seek to restrict development; the developers thwarted by delays created by legal challenges and environmental assessments; and the citizens that increasingly resist development and government infrastructure projects such as highways and sewage pipes when these threaten their own quality of life. By reasserting its interests in regional planning, and requiring that all municipal and regional plans be in conformity with the *Greenbelt Plan*, the provincial government seeks to address these regional issues.

## Conclusion

As a recent Neptis Foundation report (2006) notes, this is the first time in provincial history that there is a legislative base for provincial plans for metropolitan regions. This is the aspiration of city-regions across North America. The provin-

cial government's definitive declaration of its interest in the region is a substantial turnaround. In Ontario, although municipalities are 'creatures of the province,' past attempts at regional coordination have had limited success. In this paper, we have argued that the provincial government has been able to utilize dominant policy and planning narratives of ecosystems planning and smart growth to seize the political opportunity to implement a competitive regional growth strategy and effect spatial and state institutional restructuring in the region.

Conservation and growth policy processes are highly intertwined, but the former are foregrounded in public discourse. In the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the *Growth Plan* promises that "preserving natural and agricultural resources will contribute to maximizing the benefits and minimizing the costs of growth" (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal, 2005b, p. 1). In discursively linking the preservation of nature and growth in several pieces of legislation, the provincial government has thus been able to meet seemingly contradictory goals. First, the Province has responded to demands for preservation of the Oak Ridges Moraine and protected countryside with a greenbelt. Second, it has incorporated smart growth objectives within an infrastructure growth plan. Third, the provincial government and the growth regimes that support it have radically restructured regional governance and redirected planning in the region within a framework of growth. Requiring municipal Official Plans to be in accordance with new provincial legislation constitutes a region-wide evening out of regulations to create more predictable and uniform conditions for investment. Finally, the fact that the provincial government could ensure safe passage for major infrastructure projects without an organized and vocal opposition is consistent with its history of support for such projects.

Since the 1970s, environmental scientists and activists have pushed for a prioritization of nature in regional planning (Bocking, 2005). Environmentalist campaigns to save the Oak Ridges Moraine and create a greenbelt to limit sprawl provided the political opportunity for the Province to establish an integrative regional planning system. By framing legislation as saving the Moraine and countryside, the Province was able to draw upon the support of major environmental organizations for legislation that also sought to manage growth at a regional scale. Similarly, combining smart growth policies within a growth plan pre-empted environmental critiques, thereby papering over difficult tradeoffs and contradictions. In both *The Greenbelt* and *Places to Grow Plans*, region-wide planning legislation thus bundles together policies to protect ecosystems and agricultural lands with policies of infrastructure expansion and resource extraction that fuel growth. We conclude that more than ten years of bureaucratic and environmentalist efforts to preserve ecosystems at a regional scale in the Greater Golden Horseshoe have not only been successful in institutionalizing ecosystem conservation, but have also provided support for regional growth management legislation

and the restructuring of regional governance. In this way, nature conservation has served as a cornerstone or lubricant for implementing a regional planning framework in the service of growth. However, the conflation of conflicting and contradictory policy objectives and the many exemptions for infrastructure and extractive activities may serve in future to compromise the protection of sensitive lands and water resources.

We also argue that the priority given to regional-environmental planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe may be self-undermining in a crucial way. It has created the political opportunity for the provincial government to re-insert itself into planning for the region, while at the same time taking some powers away from local councils. This creates a new state space that has allowed the fast-tracking of a regional growth management strategy and new infrastructure projects that support growth.<sup>2</sup> New provincial legislation on source-water protection, the Clean Water Act (Province of Ontario, 2006a) and the Nutrient Management Act (Province of Ontario, 2006b), also reassert the planning authority of the Province. As Houghton & Counsell (2004) suggest in their research in Britain, this shift to regional-scale policy interventions represents the re-workings of power dynamics within and beyond the region.

As narratives of nature, reflected in policy documents, become more widely accepted and twinned with growth, a naturalized growth discourse may be developing. Such a discourse places conservation in the position of fighting a rear-guard action against growth, at the same time as growth narratives are tacitly or explicitly supported by environmental frames, metaphors, and organizations. Growth is normalized and narratives of win-win ecologies may come to more widely permeate the conservation community. This raises questions about the hidden power infused in the taken-for-granted notions of naturalized growth and the institutions and initiatives through which they are implemented.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Ontario government's Smart Growth initiative was smart growth in name only. The website, [www.smartgrowth.gov.on.ca](http://www.smartgrowth.gov.on.ca) (accessed 08/29/01) stated: "Smart Growth focuses on managing growth and development to ensure that the planning and building of vital infrastructure-such as roads and highways, public transit and electricity, water and sewage treatment services-maximizes efficient use of existing infrastructure and is well co-ordinated locally and regionally."

<sup>2</sup> This strategy is also being applied elsewhere. For example, the provincial government has capitalized on recent concerns of energy shortages in the City of

Toronto following the blackout of 2003 in the passing of Bill 51, which grants the provincial government the ability to override the municipality's ability to resist zoning changes for electricity projects (Kellway, 2006).

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