

Sustainable Natural Environment – Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs) and Muskoka Heritage Areas

BACKGROUND:

- Natural heritage features and areas provide numerous economic, environmental and social benefits. Collectively, they contribute to the conservation of biological diversity (biodiversity) and to the maintenance of the quality of our air, land and water. The benefits of conserving natural heritage occur at local, regional and broader scales.
- Natural heritage features and areas provide ecological functions that are critical to the survival of all species, including humans. These ecological functions include the provision of habitat, hydrological functions, nutrient and energy cycling and storage, succession and disturbance functions, reproduction and dispersal, and landscape linkages. Locally, these areas help to sustain a way of life that attracts people to live, work and carry out recreational activities in the Town.
- Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) are defined by the Province as areas of land and water containing unique natural landscapes or features. These features have been scientifically identified as having life or earth science values related to protection, scientific study or education.
- MNRF identifies two types of ANSI, life science and earth science ANSIs. Life science ANSIs are significant representative segments of Ontario's biodiversity and natural landscapes. They contain relatively undisturbed vegetation and landforms, and their associated species and communities. Provincially significant life science ANSIs include the most significant and best examples of the natural heritage features in the province. Earth Science ANSIs are geological in nature and contain significant examples of bedrock, fossils, landforms or ongoing geological processes.
- MNRF ranks ANSIs as being provincially, regionally or locally significant. The PPS defines significant ANSIs as those identified as provincially significant by MNRF.
- The Axe Lake Wetland is a life science ANSI and is the only provincially significant ANSI within the Town of Huntsville. The ANSI predominantly occurs on Crown land within the Axe Lake Wetland Conservation Reserve. However, a small portion of the ANSI occurs on private land where it coincides with a provincially significant wetland designation.
- The District of Muskoka completed a Natural Heritage Evaluation in conjunction with MNRF and the Muskoka Heritage Foundation in 1994, which identified the most significant natural areas in the District.
- Muskoka Heritage Areas identified as significant were evaluated as being of historical, geological, archaeological, scenic or biological value. They have been identified to protect them from development and the impacts of adjacent development.
- Huntsville has 6 identified Muskoka Heritage Areas: the Axe Lake Wetland, Wadis Creek, Buck Lake River, Westernmain Wood, Britannia Esker, and Fairy Lake Wave – Cut Notch. A map showing the identified sites is attached as Appendix I.

POLICY CONTEXT:

Provincial Policy Statement (2014):

2 Natural Heritage

2.1.1 Natural features and areas shall be protected for the long term.

2.1.2 The diversity and connectivity of natural features in an area, and the long-term *ecological function* and biodiversity of *natural heritage systems*, should be maintained, restored or, where possible, improved, recognizing linkages between and among *natural heritage features and areas, surface water features* and *ground water features*.

2.1.4 Development and site alteration shall not be permitted in significant wetlands in Ecoregions 5E; and

2.1.5 Development and site alteration shall not be permitted in:
significant wetlands in the Canadian Shield north of Ecoregions 5E;
significant wildlife habitat;
significant areas of natural and scientific interest; and
coastal wetlands in Ecoregions 5E, that are not subject to policy 2.1.4(b)
unless it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the natural features or their ecological functions.

2.1.8 Development and site alteration shall not be permitted on adjacent lands to the natural heritage features and areas identified in policies 2.1.4, 2.1.5, and 2.1.6 unless the ecological function of the adjacent lands has been evaluated and it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the natural features or on their ecological functions.

4.7 Implementation

Official plans shall identify provincial interests and set out appropriate land use designations and policies. To determine the significance of some natural heritage features and other resources, evaluation may be required.

Current Muskoka Official Plan & Policy Directions:

F.96 Significant heritage areas were defined.

F.97 Areas containing significant values should be protected from incompatible development and uses.

First Draft of the Updated Muskoka Official Plan

F1.2 Development and site alteration shall not be permitted in significant ANSIs or on adjacent lands unless it has been demonstrate that there would be no negative impacts.

F1.6 ANSIs are defined and identified, including the Axe Lake Wetland Life Science ANSI.

F1.9 Muskoka Heritage Areas background is provided, criteria for evaluation described, with the clarification that the policies in regards to SAR, significant fish habitat, etc. apply to the Muskoka Heritage Areas as well. Further, it is noted that “appropriate regard shall be had for the reasons” of the designation of the site, when development or site alteration and its impacts are being considered. Site assessments may be required, to ensure that the proposed development including any mitigation measure would result in no negative impacts to the features or functions. The intent is to ensure that the features and functions of the heritage area are being protected.

F1.10 Adjacent lands are identified (in metres) according to type of natural heritage feature, and no development or site alteration is permitted unless an ecological assessment can demonstrate that there would be no negative impact on the feature or its ecological function.

F1.11 DMM will work with area municipalities and non-profit organizations to secure natural heritage features and areas in public ownership, where feasible and appropriate, through the development approval process.

F1.12 Legally existing agricultural uses in and adjacent to natural heritage areas and features may continue.

Town Strategic Documents:

Strategic Plan

Natural Environment and Sustainability

Goal #1: Demonstrate the Town’s commitment to protecting the quality and character of the natural environment.

Goal #2: Integrate sustainability principles into planning and development policies and processes.

Unity Plan

Goal #5 Land Use Planning: Huntsville will become a model of sustainable community development, by incorporating the principles of smart growth, sustainable design and green buildings into all land use planning decisions. This will include a commitment to the protection and maintenance of Huntsville’s rural small town character and vibrant downtown, both of which are valued by the community.

Huntsville Official Plan:

Environment:

3.13 Axe Lake identified as only provincially significant ANSI, notation that provincial policies governing it shall apply.

3.14 Muskoka Heritage Areas (regionally important sites for environmental or social values)

- identified and included on Appendices, however additional areas may be identified through development applications or other evaluations

- should be preserved and protected
- development should not occur within boundaries of site, however, an EIS or impact assessment can determine if development could be permitted while ensuring preservation of site
- protection of heritage areas can take various forms, including restricted zoning, limiting uses, site alteration restrictions, conservation easements, taking areas as parkland dedication, etc.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- MNRF's [Natural Heritage Reference Manual](#) recommends that “adjacent” lands generally be considered to be those lands within 120m of a Life Science ANSI, and 50m of an Earth Science ANSI.
- Adjacent lands are areas where the compatibility of a development proposal must be considered and any potential impacts addressed. Adjacent lands are generally those areas that are contiguous to a specific natural heritage feature or area where development or site alteration may have a negative impact.
- Areas that are not determined to be provincially significant (in the context of the PPS) may still be considered regionally or locally significant and important to local residents or the tourist industry. Policies can be implemented to protect natural heritage values of regional or local interest.
- Identification of additional areas could form the beginning of a Natural Heritage strategy
- The reason each Muskoka Heritage Area was identified follows: Axe Lake Wetland (Biological); Wadis Creek (Biological), Buck Lake River (Biological), Westermain Wood (Biological), Britannia Esker (Geological), and Fairy Lake Wave – Cut Notch (Geological).
- Upon review of the most recent (2013) air photos, it appears that no new development has occurred within or adjacent to any of the identified Muskoka Heritage Areas, except Wadis Creek.
- A 50 metre buffer from Muskoka Heritage Areas has been identified in some local Muskoka Ops as adjacent lands.
- Local knowledge of heritage areas and features should be captured.

SUMMARY:

A review of best practices from other municipalities across Muskoka has revealed that the following policy approaches may assist in addressing some of the considerations:

- The Province recommends inclusion of policy which states that development and site alteration shall not be permitted in provincially significant ANSIs unless it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the ANSI features or their ecological functions, and that development and site alteration shall

not be permitted on adjacent lands to ANSIs unless the ecological function of the adjacent lands has been evaluated and it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the ANSI features or their ecological functions.

- The Province recommends inclusion of policy that defines adjacent lands to a life science ANSI as those lands within 120 metres of the boundaries of the ANSI as per the *Natural Heritage Reference Manual*.
- Include policy for adjacent lands for identified Muskoka Heritage Areas of 120m as per MOP draft.

Draft