

## Sustainable Natural Environment – Natural Heritage System

### BACKGROUND:

- The 2014 PPS defines a Natural Heritage System (NHS) as, “a system made up of natural heritage features and areas, and linkages intended to provide connectivity (at the regional or site level) and support natural processes which are necessary to maintain biological and geological diversity, natural functions, viable populations of indigenous species, and ecosystems. These systems can include natural heritage features and areas, federal and provincial parks and conservation reserves, other natural heritage features, lands that have been restored or have the potential to be restored to a natural state, areas that support hydrologic functions, and working landscapes that enable ecological functions to continue.”
- The foundation for a NHS consists of core areas connected through a series of natural linkages and corridors. NHS planning is premised on identifying those “Greenways”, recognizing the shortfalls of protecting specific features in isolation.
- Ontario Nature has compiled a manual on [Best Practices Guide to Natural Heritage Systems Planning](#), which provides examples of best practises and policies from Southern Ontario municipalities. Policies should recognize that NHS cross municipal boundaries/jurisdictions, and all levels of government.
- Benefits of NHS, known as ecosystem services, include flood control, soil retention, water purification, climate change mitigation, provision of wildlife habitat to name a few.
- Muskoka is considered “the land between” in terms of the environment as it is located between the northern and southern ecoregions of Ontario.
- In areas of the Canadian Shield, like Muskoka, forest cover is relatively continuous and forest and wetlands are often contiguous. In this case, protecting and maintaining a connected system of high-quality habitat within the forest landscape should be the preferred approach
- Currently no Natural Heritage System is in place in Muskoka, although the District has undertaken two projects to form the basis of a strategy – [Urban Centres Natural Heritage Review](#) (2011), [Species at Risk – Potentially Suitable Habitat Mapping](#) (2009).
- The Town convened a working group to review Natural Heritage Areas as the first step of a NHS in 2013-2014.

### POLICY CONTEXT:

#### **Provincial Policy Statement (2014):**

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*.

### **Muskoka Official Plan & Policy Directions Report:**

There are no policies that speak directly to Natural Heritage Systems in the MOP, however there are consistent themes throughout in regards to maintaining and enhancing natural resources (F.3) and ensuring growth has minimal impacts on the environment (C.2-4).

### **First Draft - Muskoka Official Plan:**

F1.1 “Diversity and connectivity of natural features and long-term ecological function and biodiversity of NHS or resources be maintained, restored or improved , recognizing linkages”... Policies and objectives speaking to maintaining “ecological functions” and biodiversity are repeated throughout Section 4 of the plan.

### **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 #1 Environment: The community will protect, preserve, restore and enhance the terrestrial and aquatic environments and biodiversity of Huntsville and surrounding area by being responsible stewards of the environment.

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:**

There are no policies in the OP that speak directly to natural heritage systems, although throughout the plan there is mention of the importance of environmental protection and conservation.

#### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- There is a lack of information Muskoka-wide, field studies are required to identify natural features on a smaller scale
- Within designated growth areas and communities, NHS are a key component of a healthy community and should be integrated into the urban community

- The Urban Centres Natural Heritage Review report recommends that:
  - a) The Natural Heritage Review identifies the natural heritage interests of The District Municipality of Muskoka in the context of the Provincial Policy Statement in support of the DMM Official Plan Review. This report should be used as reference for ongoing local initiatives to refine natural heritage systems.
  - b) Both the upper and lower tier Natural Heritage System processes would benefit greatly from focused field investigations to verify the locations and health of natural heritage features and functions, and to better understand significant pathways of connectivity for wildlife and vegetation.
  - c) In the event that DMM builds a Natural Heritage Strategy, the outcomes of studies at the lower tier should inform the regional Natural Heritage System and vice versa.
  - d) The data provided in this report helps to focus where growth may occur in urban centres with minimal impact to SAR habitat and significant wildlife habitat.
  - e) The framework should be used to identify the scope of environmental studies associated with land use change applications under the Planning Act with the objective of creating a sustainable natural heritage system for the District of Muskoka.
  - f) The list of Species at Risk in Ontario is updated every year, consequently the most current list will need to be consulted to determine if any additional species to those mapped in this report will need to be considered for site specific development applications within the urban centres.
- The Natural Heritage Working Group concluded that key steps in establishing a natural heritage system are a commitment by the Town to provide tax incentives to private landowners who commit some or part of their land as natural heritage areas; and ground-truthing areas of potential significance, using defined checklists and scientific experts.
- Ensuring that shoreline areas are well buffered will provide wildlife movement corridors.
- Larger lot sizes in the Rural area can avoid habitat fragmentation.
- MNRF's Natural Heritage Reference Manual recommends that a preliminary NHS be identified prior to any other planning interests being considered allowing an opportunity to assess the natural heritage features and ecological functions up front and to determine the best way to connect them.

#### **SUMMARY:**

- Identification of a Natural Heritage System should be part of the Town's approach to adaptation to climate change. An NHS should require the retention and restoration of natural areas and linkages, corridors and buffers throughout the Town to assist in habitat protection. Improving the resilience of ecosystems will

protect and promote biodiversity, as well as help manage flood risks at a watershed level. This involves policies that protect natural heritage features, shoreline areas, water courses and drainage features should remain naturalized or restored to a naturalized state.

- The first step in identifying a Natural Heritage System in a forested landscape is to direct the majority of growth to urban centres and communities in order to help maintain more undisturbed areas.
- In the Urban Settlement Area and Communities, policies should ensure that natural features and corridors are identified protected, enhanced and where necessary, restored.
- In the Waterfront and Rural areas, Natural Heritage Systems, features and areas should be protected through policy. In this regard, the other Sustainable Natural Environment policy background papers make specific recommendations to protect, endangered or threatened habitat, Significant Wildlife habitat, fish habitat, shoreline buffers and wetlands, which are components of a natural heritage system. Further protection should occur through policies that require a technical study where development is proposed on adjacent lands to prevent negative impacts.
- Further, to ensure that the rural hinterland continues to provide habitat, low density development on larger lot sizes can avoid habitat fragmentation, and retain large natural areas.