

The Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park - Proposal for a new National Park

Evolution of the concept: 2003-2007

Introduction:

The Green Coalition proposes that a new National Park, the *Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park*, be established to protect the distinct ecological domain in south-western Québec. The proposal is the culmination of grass-roots efforts dating from the 1970s to curb the steady and extensive erosion of the rich natural heritage of this region that is unique in all of Québec. This Green Belt plan for the Montreal region offers an overarching strategy to promote biodiversity and habitat conservation and to mitigate climate change. For Montreal, the strategy is the last chance to emulate the conservation achievements of other major urban centres in Canada. The following résumé traces the evolution of the vast project to protect a mosaic of green spaces; forests and floodplains, wetlands, natural corridors and islands that are linked together by the great rivers that criss-cross south-western Québec, ‘le Québec méridional’.

April 15, 2003 The seed is sown

On the morning following the decisive Liberal victory at the polls on April 14, 2003, Green Coalition members, Ryan Young, David Fletcher and Sylvia Oljemark dropped by Geoffrey Kelley’s campaign office to offer congratulations to the new incumbent MNA. During a brief discussion on the Green Coalition’s concerns for the rapid loss of Montreal’s natural areas and possible strategies to salvage the last green spaces, an important question was asked: Could Québec National Parks be established on the Island of Montreal to protect sensitive ecosystems like the Rivière à l’Orme ecoforest corridor? Député Kelley could see no impediment to such a proposal. The discussion was to bear fruit – providing the kernel of the idea for a new national park and ultimately a Green Belt for the Montreal region.

April 2003 – September 2004 – Steps towards Montreal’s Natural Spaces Policy; National Park Plan takes shape

During the following year and a half, the Green Coalition continued to work vigorously for the adoption of Montreal’s new natural spaces policy – long promised and long-delayed. In 1992, a moratorium (that was to last 10 long years) had been imposed on all greenspace spending on Montreal Island. The Montreal Urban Community’s \$200 million Green Space Acquisition Program was halted in its tracks with one-half its budget unspent and the job half-done. With no conservation plan in place, over 1,000 hectares of forests were stripped from the metropolis during the next decade. While struggling to prevent even more incursions into the last natural areas, the Green Coalition was crafting its vision for a new national park.

September 2004 - Meeting the Québec Environment Minister: Green Belt Plan proposed

A pivotal meeting for the Green Coalition took place on September 13, 2004. More than two hours long, the meeting with Québec Environment Minister, Thomas J. Mulcair, was animated and productive. MNA Geoffrey Kelley and GC reps Dave Fletcher and Sylvia Oljemark were present. A highpoint in the discussion concerned Pierrefonds’ distressing plans to ‘dezone’ floodplains, plans that amounted to spot-zoning to favour development. Mr. Mulcair subsequently placed a ‘freeze’ on construction in low-lying lands at Cheval Blanc West on the shore of Rivière des Prairies. The minister was particularly impressed by the Green Coalition’s proposal for a Green Belt, a National Park, to protect the natural spaces of the Montreal Archipelago in the watershed of its great waterways. As a pilot project, the Coalition proposed that **Lake of Two Mountains National Park**

be established to conserve shoreline areas at Oka, Hudson, Vaudreuil, Dorion, Île Perrot and the Islets and to include protection for the Lake itself. And, in a first for Québec, National Park status would be extended to at least two important natural areas on the Island of Montreal that are integral parts of the Lake ecosystem – Cap-Saint-Jacques and the Rivière-à-l’Orme Ecoforest Corridor.

Two Environment Ministers hear proposals

Innovative measures suggested by the Green Coalition to secure natural spaces for conservation intrigued Mr Mulcair. GC called for the creation of a landbank of surplus Federal and Québec and municipal properties to be swapped for natural areas owned by developers. The Green Coalition also proposed that revitalized brownfields (or contaminated lands) be traded for greenfields, offering exceptional economic opportunities for redevelopment while conserving natural spaces. Montreal Island has no lack of such land – 4,800 hectares of contaminated lands, three times the amount of protected parkland. An ongoing dialogue on these matters was also underway with Federal Environment Minister, Stéphane Dion.

November 15, 2004 – Meeting Minister Mulcair – follow-up

A follow-up meeting permitted GC reps an occasion to thank the minister for holding fast to his edict that no development should take place in flood-zones and for the ‘freeze’ he had imposed on construction at Cheval Blanc. Board member Richard Marcille joined the GC team at this meeting. Following further dialogue on the national park proposal and its “Eco-Récréo-Touristique” potential, Mr. Mulcair requested Député Geoffrey Kelley to meet the minister responsible for parks to explore the prospects for the Lake of Two Mountains National Park.

December 2004 « *La politique de protection et de mise en valeur des milieux naturels* » adopted

On December 13, the City of Montreal’s long-heralded natural spaces policy was adopted. Citizens fear the plan is fatally flawed. Major development projects and road building will be permitted within the limits of the ten ecoterritories designated for ‘protection’. After 3 months and with 300 participants at hearings in the spring of 2004, the Office de consultation publique de Montréal called for Meadowbrook to be an additional ecoterritory and for a moratorium: “*...to reduce current pressures on certain areas targeted by the policy, the Commission recognizes the necessity of imposing a moratorium on all development projects in the ecoterritories natural spaces and buffer zones.*” (*communiqué OCPM*) But the city trashed the recommendations and the public input. With the funding budget limited to \$36 million, the Politique is a pale shadow of the former MUC’s \$200 million program.

Saturday, January 29, 2005 Expanding Horizons – ‘Common Front’ Forum

On January 29, 2005, the Green Coalition hosted a Forum for a common front to protect Greater Montreal’s last ‘milieux naturels’ and to build a stronger and broader constituency to work for an overarching land-use strategy for the entire region. With groups and individuals gearing up to work together, from the South-Shore to the Lower-Laurentians, from Montérégie to Suroit and beyond, green space conservation efforts were given an important new impetus and wider horizons.

March 14, 2005 – Green Coalition presents Brief on Québec’s Sustainable Development Plan; Minister Mulcair has news

On March 14, Green Coalition members, Dave Fletcher and Sylvia Oljemark presented a wide-ranging brief to Mr. Mulcair at the Consultation on Québec’s Sustainable Development Plan. The Minister had praise for the effectiveness of the Green Coalition’s grass-roots efforts and he had news. He asked that particular note be taken that he now been assigned to the post of Minister for

Parks in addition to his responsibilities as Minister of Sustainable Development and Environment. As Minister for Parks, then, he heartily endorsed the Green Coalition proposal for the Lake of Two Mountains National Park and invited Dave Fletcher to describe the project. He said further that he would be working with the ministry during the summer and that an announcement on the park plan could come as early as September.

Business as usual in ‘ecoterritories’

While monitoring the progress of the National Park file, the Green Coalition is active. To publicize the potential of local sites for inclusion in the new park, on May 9, 2005, the organization hosts a Visit to the Rivière à l’Orme Ecoterritory for députés, Yolande James and Geoffrey Kelley. Efforts are ongoing to ward off plans for new arterial roads to be constructed through this ecocorridor and to prevent a residential project carving away the eastern end of Anse à l’Orme forest, known as the Forêt centenaire. Meanwhile, other concerns include the massive residential project, à la Miami Beach, that threatens Cheval Blanc and the building plans that are underway for other ecoterritories: at Les rapides de Lachine (Île des Soeurs), at the Le corridor écoforestier de l’Île Bizard. And in the east-end, so deprived of green space, Autoroute 25 and Bridge to Laval threatens the Coulée verte du ruisseau De Montigny and its off-shore islands. Clearly, the city’s natural spaces policy is weighted in favour of the interests of real estate development and real estate developers.

April 30 2005 - Front Vert is on the move : LA NATURE DÉBARQUE EN VILLE !

Environmental activists were mustering forces, ramping up widespread support for overarching strategies for biodiversity and habitat conservation throughout the region. On April 30, the banner of the Front Vert is raised and thousands march in the streets of downtown Montreal to save the natural spaces of ‘le Québec méridional’ - **LA NATURE DÉBARQUE EN VILLE !** Tommy Montpetit takes up the role of Front Vert spokesperson: his English counterpart is David Fletcher.

Preliminary Plan for new National Park delayed

Green Belt plan for entire region gathers momentum

September 2005 brings no announcement on the national park, but by year’s end and into the early months of the New Year, Environment Minister Thomas Mulcair is promoting the initiative in radio spots, call-in shows and print media pieces. And the tenor of his remarks shows that he has moved beyond the pilot project notion of Lake of Two Mountains Park and that he is cranking up the creation of a vast conservation area for the Montreal region and south-western Québec.

Archipelago Park Plan iced with minister’s ouster from Cabinet

Ironically, in March 2006, just as Mr. Mulcair’s plans for the new Green Belt were expanding to encompass all the ecologically valuable land in the entire archipelago of Montreal and just when he was poised to make public his preliminary plan for the new national park, the Minister was forced out of the environment portfolio. Quoted in the Gazette on April 17 in Michelle Lalonde’s front page article, **ONE ISLAND, ONE PARK – MAYBE**, Mr. Mulcair enthused, **“The idea was we take everything in and around the Montreal archipelago that is worth saving and consolidate it into what the Québec government refers to as a ‘national’ park, or what is called a provincial park in other Canadian provinces.”** The new Environment Minister, Claude Béchar, however, is cool to the plan; soon it is clear that he has off-loaded responsibility for Montreal region’s conservation needs to the Communauté Métropolitaine de Montréal (CMM), effectively killing off the project – for a time.

A Setback

Through the balance of 2006, the political climate was proving inauspicious for the new national park scheme. The Liberal Government, comfortable and complacent with its majority, was intransigent - insisting on dismantling parts of an established National Park - Parc Mont Orford, in the face of vociferous public outcries. New conservation proposals for south-western Québec were brushed aside.

Montreal is far off the pace set by other major Canadian cities

The City of Montreal has made very modest steps forward in the protection or acquisition of natural sites with its natural spaces policy: in 2005, 0.2% of the island territory was conserved (or 110 hectares). Figures for 2006 are unavailable. To date, just a little more than 3% of Montreal Island is protected natural green space. Montreal is judged to be last in a field of fourteen Canadian cities for per capita green space. Satellite off-island communities fare poorly as well. Laval has conserved a meager 0.73% of its territory; Montérégie, 3.69%. Municipalities in the Suroit and in Mirabel-Blainville track a 30% plus surge in population over the last five years, increasing development sprawl in the eco-domain. Compare Montreal to other major urban centres! Toronto has provided for the protection of its elaborate ravine ecosystem, a program begun in 1954. In 2005, Ontario set up an impressive 720,000 hectare Green Belt for Toronto (an area the size of Algonquin Park) to offset and manage urban sprawl. Thirty years ago, British Columbia set aside about five million hectares to protect agricultural land and preserve green belts. The Green Belt in and around Vancouver is lauded as a land-use model across North America. For the Montreal region, the national park solution is badly needed.

A window of opportunity – the Minority Government

The election of a new minority government on March 26, 2007 offers a window of opportunity; a fresh impetus spurs the conservation agenda. Climate Change is also giving traction to the debate. The new political climate is propitious for causes that have broad popular appeal and demonstrable support that transcend partisan-party politics. Since the Green Coalition's Annual General Meeting in April that showcased the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park, the new national park project has gathered momentum. Grass-roots groups from across the region are working together in partnership, pooling resources and expertise to shape, inventory and map a preliminary Master Plan for the national park. Meetings are in the offing to present this vision for the future Green Belt to the new Environment Minister, Line Beauchamp and to other cabinet ministers. Confidence is high that the Québec Government will bring back the responsibility for the creation of the new national park within its purview where it properly belongs and that now, long-past time, Québec will fulfill its obligation to establish a Green Belt for south-western Québec – the *Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park*.

Sylvia Oljemark
June 17, 2007

Reference documents are available in electronic form; News Releases available in french

2002-2005	Green Coalition reps meet Elected Officials
October 17, 2002	Urban plan " <i>The Intangibles that Define a Community</i> " -14 cities compared
November 6, 2003	News Release - Open Letter to Mayor
November 24, 2003	News Release - Citizens mobilized to City Hall

April 20, 2004	Honourable John Godfrey - Ottawa meeting
September 1, 2004	News Release 1sept04 - Spot-zoning to alter Floodplain Map
September 13, 2004	Agenda - Meeting Minister Mulcair
November 15, 2004	Thomas J Mulcair - Thanks Nov 15 2004 - Flood Plains (2nd meeting)
December 13, 2004	News Release Dec13, 2004 - Natural Spaces Policy Adopted
January 29, 2005	2005-01-29 Green Coal.verte JPG - Photo - Common Front Meeting
March 14, 2005	Green Coalition Brief - Quebec's Sustainable Development Plan
April 4, 2005	News Release - Collision Course
April 6, 2005	Cody_Transcription point de presse T_Mulcair_Parc
April 11, 2005	April 11, 2995 Honourable Stéphane Dion_Note of Thanks
April 26, 2005	Communiqué - Front Vert - LA NATURE DÉBARQUE EN VILLE !
May 6, 2005	News Release May 6,05 - Elected Officials Visit Threatened Forest
January 2006	Quebecaimstosavelocalgreenspaces- WEST ISLAND CHRONICLE
April 17, 2006	Fletcher Article (GAZETTE) One Island - One Park
October 31, 2006	News Release October 31, 2006_New Priorities Disaster for Natural Spaces
October 29, 2004	"B.C's move to green belt spurred political firestorm" Mark Hulme THE GLOBE AND MAIL
October 29, 2004	"Ontario applies brakes to urban sprawl" Richard Mackie THE GLOBE AND MAIL