

Ecological park gains momentum

Sprawling area. Politicians of all stripes send letters supporting proposal

MICHELLE LALONDE, The Gazette December 27, 2007

A movement to create an "ecological park" protecting Montreal, Laval and surrounding islands and regions is gaining momentum now that a majority of provincial and federal party leaders have signed letters endorsing the idea, the park's proponents say.

About 50 environmental groups are now signed on to the "Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park" project, an ambitious proposal to keep developers out of all remaining forests and wetlands in a 14,000-square-kilometre region extending from the foothills of the Laurentians between Lachute and Sorel-Tracy, all the way to the U.S. border.

"The highest proportion of hot spots for biodiversity loss are in this one per cent of the province," said David Fletcher of the Green Coalition, which has been leading the movement to create the protected zone.

Most of Quebec's threatened or vulnerable plant and animal species, almost 70 per cent according to Quebec's environment department, exist along the St. Lawrence River. In the St. Lawrence lowlands, where Quebec's population is concentrated, development pressure is very high and only four per cent of the region is protected.

The Quebec government has pledged to conserve 12 per cent of the province's territory by 2010, but environmental groups and ecologists are concerned efforts are focused in northern areas.

They would like to see 12 per cent of each of the province's 10 bioclimatic domains - distinct regions defined by species, habitat and other physical elements - protected by 2010.

The most important, and difficult, domain to protect is the one known to ecologists as the sugar maple-bitternut hickory bioclimatic domain, where Montreal happens to be.

"The Montreal region was very attractive to our ancestors as a place to settle because of its warm climate, rich soil, and great variety of hardwood trees, so it was the ideal place to build Quebec's metropolis," Fletcher said.

But there is very little forest and wetland area left in southern Quebec, and what is still green should stay green, the environmental groups say, because it is extremely valuable ecologically.

About 94 per cent of wetlands originally in this domain have already disappeared, along with 80 per cent of its forests, because of residential, commercial or agricultural development.

"Wetlands are like the kidney and liver of land. They do the cleansing and purifying to remove toxins from the water that goes back into the St. Lawrence River," he said.

A committee of environmental groups, made up of the Green Coalition, and the regional environment councils of Laval, Montreal, the Montérégie and the Laurentians, sent requests last month for support to each of the leading provincial and federal political parties.

They received more or less solid endorsements from the Parti Québécois, the Green Party of Quebec, Québec solidaire, the Bloc Québécois, the New Democratic Party, the Liberals and the Green Party of Canada.

"The Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park is not only a desirable project, it is an absolute necessity for the preservation of our natural heritage and the protection of biodiversity," wrote Scott McKay, leader of the Green Party of Quebec.

Liberal leader Stéphane Dion was more circumscribed in his endorsement.

"In principle, I am ready to support the 12-per-cent protection target of the World Conservation Union," Dion wrote. "As for your specific project you will understand that a firm and concrete commitment on my part would require a more careful study of the consequences it would have on the citizens, businesses and groups in the region targeted," he said, adding he will consider the project "with an open mind."

Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe called the project "praiseworthy" but said it was mostly under the purview of the government of Quebec, not the federal government.

A spokesperson for the Parti Québécois's environment committee pledged support for the project in principle but cautioned the 2010 deadline was unrealistic.

Québec solidaire leaders Françoise David and Amir Khadir said they support the project, "without reservation" and both the Green Party of Canada's Elizabeth May and the NDP's Jack Layton sent letters of support.

An aide to Quebec Premier Jean Charest sent a letter promising the project would be brought to Environment Minister Line Beauchamp's attention.

Fletcher said environmental groups expect to form a separate organization in the new year that will be dedicated to pushing for the creation of the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park.