

Time to protect the 'green lace doily' of Montreal, environmentalists say

Coalition is pressing Quebec to create a provincial park joining endangered lands

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Environmental groups across southwestern Quebec are ratcheting up the pressure on the Quebec government to create a new kind of provincial park to stop the rapid destruction of forests, wetlands, islands and other natural spaces around Montreal.

Fifty-five groups have united behind the innovative project to create the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park, Montreal's answer to the "green belts" other Canadian cities have established to stop urban sprawl, combat climate change and preserve nearby natural green space.

"We don't call it a green belt, though, it's more like a green lace doily," said David Fletcher, a spokesperson for the new coalition calling itself Partners for the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park.

The ship has sailed long ago on creating a true green belt around Montreal, since the island is surrounded by rapidly growing suburbs. But environmental groups say it would be possible for the province to legislate as protected the remaining forests, shorelines, wetlands and other natural spaces on Montreal Island and Laval's Île Jésus, as well as a number of undeveloped islands in the region.

The groups want to see this "green doily" of remaining natural lands protected with the same status as a provincial park, or what the Quebec government refers to as a national park.

The government has made repeated international commitments to protect at least eight per cent of its territory, ensuring that the protected areas reflect the biological diversity of the province.

While the government has recently created some new conservation areas in northern Quebec, Fletcher says nothing is being done to protect southwestern Quebec, an ecologically rich domain that biodiversity experts refer to as the sugar maple bitternut hickory bioclimatic domain. Less than four per cent of this domain, which stretches from the lower Laurentians to the U.S. border, is protected from development.

"The tough job that needs to be done is down here, where half the people of Quebec live, and this is simply being ignored." Although former Liberal environment minister Thomas Mulcair had expressed enthusiasm for the park project, current minister Line Beauchamp has been at best lukewarm.

In a recent letter to the project's proponents, responding to their request for support, an Environment Department official suggested the protection of these lands is a municipal and regional responsibility.

"I share your concerns about the protection of biodiversity in southern Quebec, where we find a great richness of species and ecosystems, both land-based and aquatic," wrote Patrick Beauchesne, director of ecological heritage and parks in the Environment Department.

But Beauchesne went on to suggest that municipalities are responsible for zoning of privately owned urban land, and did not offer support.

Fletcher said his group is determined to take the debate to the National Assembly.

Members of his group met last week with Mulcair, now an NDP member of Parliament, and with Parti Québécois environment critic Camil Bouchard.

"The political establishment has to get behind this project," Fletcher said. "Quebec has (biodiversity) commitments that are international. ... Now it's time to move from statements of principle to action."