



York Region
State of the
Environment
Summary Report
2000

PRINTED ON



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- p. 1-2 LSCA (Lake Simcoe Conservation Authority)
- p. 2-1 STORM (Save The Oak Ridges Moraine)
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FOREWORD

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The Health Services Department monitors and reports on the health status of the residents of York Region. The ecological model of public health is based on the understanding that we cannot have healthy people and healthy communities without also having healthy environments. Few now question that a wide range of environmental factors - the air we breathe, the food we eat, what we earn, the built structures we live in or travel on - influences the health of individuals and communities. Knowing the state of our environment is crucial to planning for the health of individuals and communities.

The Health Services Department decided to develop a State of the Environment Report after the release of its Health Status Report in 1997. Because of the sheer scope and nature of the task, the State of the Environment Report required the assistance and expertise of all Regional Departments. The Report had its formal beginning in July 1997, when an Environmental Focus Group was held in the Regional Administrative Building. The event was attended by over 70 individuals from all levels of government and a variety of Ministries, York Region departments, area municipalities in York, a wide range of environmental and community organizations, conservation authorities, several universities, and the transportation and energy sectors. The Focus Group Day was a great success and provided a clear outline for the report as it now stands. Many who attended this event provided materials, data, or suggestions as the report proceeded.

This first comprehensive Regional State of the Environment Report provides baseline data on the state of the Region's natural resources and the stresses that we put on those resources. It represents a knowledge base on which to build, benchmarks against which progress can be measured, and recommendations for actions that will help ensure that our environment will continue to sustain healthy communities in the Region of York.

Dr. Helena Jaczek

Commissioner of Health Services

FOREWORD

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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As a result of the Environmental Focus Group Day in 1997, a State of the Environment Report (SOER) Steering Committee was formed. The committee was an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental group, and representatives from local area municipalities were invited to join. The SOER Committee's purpose was to guide the process of writing and producing the components that together comprise the first York Region State of the Environment Report. We wish to thank these individuals who took time out of busy schedules to contribute as members of our Steering Committee and Sub-Committees.

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Over the course of the nearly three years it took to develop the concept, acquire, analyze, and format appropriate data and materials for this report, many hands have shaped the work. We wish to thank the following individuals for their consistent enthusiasm, their dedication to the project and their assistance when called upon.

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INTRODUCTION

1.0

What is a State of the Environment Report?

A State of the Environment Report (or SOE Report) is, at its simplest, a document that tries to answer the question "How healthy is our environment?" By environment, we usually mean the biophysical environment - the air we breathe, the water in our lakes, rivers and underground aquifers, the land we live on, and the wildlife that live there too. Our health as individuals, and the health of our communities over the long term is tied intimately to the condition of the natural world around us. Put another way, this Report tries to answer the question: "How healthy is this place that we call home?"

To understand the health of our environment we need to look at the conditions of the physical environment, the stresses we put on that environment, and the responses to those stresses. What is the state of the land, air and water in the Region? What kind of stresses are being exerted on these resources, and where are these stresses coming from? What are we doing about it? How is the system responding to our actions?

The State of the Environment Report is the first attempt by the Region to document, in a holistic way, the state of the natural environment here. It provides the most recent information on the state of the Region's natural resources, the stresses on them, and their current conditions. It also contains benchmarks (or yardsticks) against which we can measure environmental conditions, stresses and responses over time. These benchmarks are intended to help in planning and decision-making and to provide a baseline against which progress can be measured.

This report is a *Summary* of the Region of York's first SOE Report. It is intended to convey the major themes and findings of the SOE Report, but at a lesser level of detail. It contains recommendations aimed at improving the health of the natural environment in York Region. Readers wishing more information should consult the entire Report.

About the Report

Guidance for the contents of the SOE Report was taken from other regional SOE Reports and advice provided by a broad range of stakeholders who attended an Environmental Focus Group Day in July 1997. The Report uses existing information from a wide range of sources including government bodies, agencies, and published materials. Although no new primary research was done for its development, the Report presents this information for the first time in a cohesive and coordinated manner. Where possible, the authors tried to use Region-specific information. This was not always possible, especially with respect to air quality, drinking water from Lake Ontario and wastewater treatment that is provided in the Region of Durham.

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This report tries to answer the question "How healthy is this place that we call home?"

INTRODUCTION

1.0



The Region's Official Plan lays out policies that are aimed at protecting the natural environment.

A number of important information gaps were noted in the preparation of the Report. In some cases, it is recommended that these be addressed as a priority. The SOE Report has included the most recent data at the time of its development.

Context for the Report

The Region's Official Plan (ROP) provides important context for the SOE Report. The three themes for the ROP, released in 1994, are a sustainable natural environment, economic vitality, and healthy communities. The Sustainable Natural Environment Goal is "to conserve and improve the natural environment for this and future generations so that it will sustain life, maintain health, and provide an improved quality of life". The Region's Official Plan lays out a number of policies that are aimed at protecting the Region's natural environment including the Regional Greenlands System, significant environmental features and functions, wetlands, forests, significant landscapes, the Oak Ridges Moraine, ground and surface waters and air.

In 1998, the Region launched a process to develop a Report Card to measure the success of the ROP. The average score given by respondents for the natural environment was a "C+", but many gave the Region a failing grade. Many raised concerns that development was jeopardizing the natural environment (green space, rivers, streams, lakes, forest cover, wetlands and the Oak Ridges Moraine) by reducing both the amount of natural land and its quality. The results of the Official Plan Report Card suggest that the time is right for a York Region State of the Environment Report. Residents care about the natural environment, are worried about development's impact, and wish to see action. The SOE Report complements the Region's Health Status Report that was released in 1997. The Health Status Report compiled information on demographics, determinants of health and environmental health issues in the Region. It provided a baseline of understanding and a body of relevant information that can be used to help plan healthy communities. Similarly, this State of the Environment Report provides critical information that can assist in decision-making and planning and can be used to monitor progress towards the Region's goals of a sustainable natural environment.

The Structure of the Summary Report

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of this Summary cover the three main compartments of the biophysical environment: land, water and air. In each chapter, an overview is presented of the resource, the stresses on that resource, the current conditions of the resource, and benchmarks of health. Chapter 5 addresses some key aspects of the social environment. Recommendations are provided in Chapter 6 and information about how individuals can help improve the environment is provided in Chapter 7. Next Steps are outlined in Chapter 8.