



# Eco-Tourism Development in Norfolk County: Eco-Destinations and Use of Web-based Interpretative Products

Part 1. Nature Trails, Waterways and Cycling Routes

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## **Our Biosphere Reserve and Sustainable Tourism**

The Long Point area, comprising 26,250 hectares, was designated as a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in April, 1986, the third to be named in Canada and one of 15 biosphere reserves found in this country today. It provides an example of the Great Lakes coastal ecosystem and a unique blend of habitats – long uninterrupted beaches, undisturbed sand dunes, grassy ridges, wet meadows, woodlands, marshes and ponds, coldwater streams, and the shallow Inner Bay. Its delicate dunes and marshes teem with songbirds, spawning fish, turtles and frogs.

As with all biosphere reserves, the Long Point World Biosphere Reserve Foundation promotes has three major functions:

- contribute to the **conservation** of countrysides, ecosystems, species and genetic variation;
- foster **sustainable development** (development that is socially, culturally, economically and ecologically sustainable), and
- **build local capacity** for research, monitoring, education and training activities related to the promotion of conservation and sustainable development.

Amongst many biosphere reserves, a key component of the sustainable development function is tourism. The Long Point World Biosphere Reserve has adopted the following definition of Sustainable Tourism, as set out by Parks Canada & the Tourism Industry Association of Canada

“Tourism which actively fosters appreciation and stewardship of the natural, cultural and historic resources and special places by local residents, the tourism industry, governments and visitors. It is tourism which can be sustained over the long term because it results in a net benefit for the social, economic, natural and cultural environments of the area in which it takes place.”

## **Benefits of Developing a Local Ecotourism Industry**

Ecotourism, a component of sustainable tourism, is environmentally responsible travel to natural attractions without destroying the habitat.

Norfolk County has many natural attractions to encourage the development of ecotourism. These include:

- High biodiversity of species and habitats, including the highest number of species at risk in the country.
- Central to the unique Carolinian Life Zone, a confluence of northern temperate forests and more southern “Carolinian” forest, resulting in a blend of species and habitats found nowhere else in Canada.
- 25% forested cover – the majority being private woodlots.
- Presence of oak savanna, tall grass prairie remnants, cold water streams, coastal dunes, shorelines and wetlands.
- Two provincial parks, a biosphere reserve, numerous conservation areas (including the 433 ha Backus Woods), the St. Williams Conservation Reserve, and other properties owned by land trusts, naturalist groups and conservation organizations.

- Long Point is a major spring and fall migratory stopover for birds, monarch butterflies and dragonflies.
- Miriads of hiking, biking, and equestrian trails; as well as canoeing, kayaking and wind surfing opportunities.
- Growing number of eco-friendly tourism businesses promoting the local environment
- Hotspot for environmental research, stewardship and “green” business development (i.e. wind turbines, solar energy, biofuel production)

The Sand Plains Region, part of which comprises the Long Point Biosphere Reserve’s “Area of Cooperation”, can benefit from the local development of ecotourism in the following ways:

- ✓ Small scale ecotourism attracts environmentally conscious visitors to rural areas. Sustainable travel and ecotourism family vacations need not be limited to beaches and well known natural areas (i.e. provincial parks).
- ✓ Economic growth through dollars spent by eco-tourists in local stores, tour companies, hotels, B & Bs, and campgrounds.
- ✓ Ecotourism can stimulate the sale of local handicrafts, use of local lodging and the use of locally-grown food in restaurants, as well as the implementation of training programs that enable locals to fill positions as tour guides, hotel managers and nature interpreters.
- ✓ The infusion of funds gained by small-scale ecotourism is not limited to the business sector. Government grants and donations to maintain trails and interpretive signs and centres highlighting natural attractions benefit the overall condition of an outdoor area.
- ✓ Exposure to various cultures or a rural community enhances cultural tolerance and a sharing of ideas between visitors and residents.
- ✓ Exposing travelers to the wonders of nature, and reducing the carbon footprint while vacationing is a primary goal of ecotourism promoters and travel guides.

### **The Importance of Trails to an Ecotourism Industry**

The Ministry of Health’s Ontario Trails strategy (2005) lists several important benefits of trail systems. These include:

- Trails support an active lifestyle that improves health. Physical activity helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity, colon cancer and depression.
- Trails attract tourists to Ontario communities. Tourism creates jobs and puts money into local economies.
- Trails strengthen the social fabric. Volunteering is one measure of the vitality of a society. People working together, giving their time freely, and sharing in socially valuable, meaningful activities – these are practices that create strong communities.
- Trails provide meaningful and satisfying outdoor experiences for many users. These experiences reaffirm a sense of connection with the natural environment and provide opportunities for a greater appreciation of Ontario’s natural heritage.

## Nature Trails and Eco-Activities in Norfolk

An important first step in developing a trails strategy within the framework of developing a local ecotourism industry is to develop a database of existing trails within Norfolk County. For the purposes of this study trails are defined as hiking/walking trails that go traverse natural areas (woodlands, grasslands, and wetlands), and canoe and kayak routes. To qualify trails had to be maintained and, preferably, have interpretive information – such as brochures, maps, etc. – developed and available for the general public. However, we also included several trails that have good potential but need interpretive information developed. We also included interpretive signs and centres as part of the database.

The below summary was prepared through conversations and interviews with local trail users, owners of trails, and Norfolk County’s planning department. We also perused brochures, existing trail guides and website links on hiking, canoeing and biking trails. In our search we also included a search on other eco-destinations and eco-activities in Norfolk County.

It should be noted that Norfolk County’s GIS department has a fairly extensive database of trails, mapped by GPS and available as digitized aerial maps with the trails marked. In addition to trails outlined in the table below they have maps of literally dozens of additional, unmaintained trails in municipal woodlots and local conservation areas (personal communication with Rich Roberts, Planning and Economic Development Services). There is a huge potential to develop these trails for their natural heritage, recreational and human health values.

TABLE 1. DEVELOPED NATURE TRAILS IN NORFOLK COUNTY					
			OVERSIGHT/	USER	
Nature Trails	FEATURES	RESOURCES	OWNERSHIP	COST	Km of Trails
St. Williams Conserv. Reserve	hiking, horseback riding	brochure, map	St. Williams CRCC	no	>20
Turkey Point Provincial Park	hiking, cross-country skiing	trail guides	MNR	park fee in season	6.4 total
Lynn Valley Trail	walking, biking, jogging, cross-country skiing	brochure, trail map	LV Trail Assoc.	no	10
Big Creek Nat'l. Wildlife Area	Dykes Walking Trail	brochure, map	CWS	no	2
Backus Woods	hiking, cross-country skiing	brochure, map	LPRCA	no	14 total
Spooky Hollow	hiking	no	HNC	by permission	w
Rowanwood Sanctuary	hiking	no	NFN	no	?
Bird Studies Canada	walking	brochure, map	BSC	no	
Wilson Tract	walking		LPRCA	no	
Hay Creek	walking	brochure, map	LPRCA	no	2
Waterford Heritage Trail	walking, biking, jogging, cross-country skiing			no	6.2
Delhi Heritage Trail	[under development]				

Canoe Routes	FEATURES	RESOURCES	OWNERSHIP	COST	km
Big Creek Canoe Route	woodlands, shorelines, agricultural land	map	n/a	no	?
Deer Creek	woodlands, shorelines, agricultural land		n/a	no	?

Cycling Routes	FEATURES	RESOURCES	OWNERSHIP	COST	km
Norfolk County	across Norfolk	map	Norfolk County	no	576

TABLE 2. OTHER ECO-ACTIVITIES IN NORFOLK COUNTY				
NAME/LOCATION	FEATURES	RESOURCES	OWNERSHIP	USER COST
<b>Viewing/Interpretive Areas</b>				
Big Creek Marsh Lookout	Lookout, Viewing Platform, Interpretive Sign	info sheet, map	CWS	no
LP World Biosphere Reserve	Interpretive sign - in Pt. Rowan, lookout	website	LPWBRF	no
LP Causeway Improvement Project	Interpretive sign - on Causeway	website	LPWBRF	no
Lee Brown Waterfowl Mgmt. Area	Viewing Area, Platform, Interpretive Kiosk		LPRCA	no
Erie Shores Wind Farm	Interpretive kiosk, driving tour	brochure with map	AIM Gen	no
Bird Studies Canada	Interpretive signs, displays	displays	BSC	no
Backus Education Centre	Interpretive displays, heritage village	display, building	LPRCA	no
<b>Eco-Adventures</b>				
Long Point Eco-Adventures	zip lines, trail, canoe/kayak rentals	pamphlet, website	private	yes
<b>Guided Tours</b>				
Acorus Restoration	guided hikes and workshops	pamphlet, website	private	yes, by appt.
Y U Ranch	wagon ride, stewardship projects	pamphlet, website	private	yes, by appt.
Grand River Experiences	guided canoeing on Big Creek, Inner Bay	pamphlet, website	private	yes, by reserv.
at Play Adventure	guided boat trip around Long Point, canoe	pamphlet, website	private	yes, by appt.

## Project Design

The intent of the LPWBRF's **Eco-Destinations in the Long Point Biosphere Reserve** project is to develop an interactive, web-based product for those who are interested in hiking, canoeing, kayaking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing, including woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and waterways; as well as cycling routes.

Communication avenues will rely primarily on development of internet resources and utilities (e.g., Google Maps, integrated itinerary planner, multimedia resources), utilizing resources and expertise of Brock University's Tourism and the Environment Department, which has developed a similar product for the Niagara Greenbelt ([www.niagaragreenbelt.com](http://www.niagaragreenbelt.com)).

A key component of this initiative is the creation of an inventory of Long Point Biosphere Reserve trail and water route attributes, features, and resources, in the form of a series of internet-based point of interest (POI) web pages. These searchable POI pages are arranged within categories and subcategories, and include Google Maps integration to show the location of individual POI sites and provide navigational information for pedestrians, cyclists and skiers. POI pages will profile public and private sector destinations, parks, trails, natural areas, agritourism and wine tourism destinations, landscape features, cultural and artistic attractions, and a wide array of other attributes consistent with SCOR objectives. POI pages are part of an information commons, posted and accessed free of charge. They include a range of information about the feature or attribute, and include descriptions, key features, location information, an interactive map, direction-finding capabilities, GPS coordinates, and multiple digital photos of the POI. POI pages are also designed to fulfill a role as accessible public reference resources as well as interpretive tools.

Built into the program will be a *Eco-Destinations Itinerary Planner*. This utility allows users to choose any POI sites from the inventory and join them together into a custom tour. POI sites can be added, deleted, or rearranged at will. When finished, the completed itinerary, route map, directions, POI data sheets, and media content can be downloaded to user's computer desktop to be saved for personal use, or to be named, thematically classified, and shared on the website with other users.

A POI locator will be incorporated into the Itinerary Planner, which will allow users to find the nearest POI in any given category based on proximity to a given POI already incorporated in the itinerary. This feature will assist in the development of custom tour routes, and in the incorporation of public transit and non-motorized transportation options into the itinerary.

To partially mitigate impacts of using personal automobiles to reach the area, the website will eventually include a link to a carbon offset calculator and service, which will allow travellers to automatically calculate the greenhouse gas emissions associated with their travels and pay fees to offset the impacts created by their tourism activities. A proposal will be advanced to develop a biosphere reserve-based joint venture with one of the several credible and audited Canadian carbon offsetting companies, channelling proceeds into offsetting projects that are physically based in the Long Point Biosphere Reserve (including its core area, buffer zone, and zone of cooperation) and which contribute positively to maintaining or enhancing the ecological and historical integrity of the region.

The web product designed by Brock University for the Green Belt has also incorporated "tripclips", a range of audio, still image, and video multimedia content in downloadable formats (mp3, mp4), playable on a wide range of personal digital devices such as iPods, mp3 players, smartphones, and car stereos. These can provide flexible and enjoyable self-guided tours for individuals, families, or larger groups, tours which emphasize and promote the natural resources, biodiversity and conservation/stewardship projects being conducted within the Long Point Biosphere Reserve.

## **APPENDIX 1: Important Organizations, Programs and Projects to Support an Eco-trails Strategy in Norfolk County**

### **Hike Ontario ([www.hikeontario.com](http://www.hikeontario.com))**

Hike Ontario is the sole provider of province-wide hiking information and services, and acts as the voice for over 9 million hikers and walkers in Ontario. Hike Ontario is the umbrella organization that provides trail associations in Ontario with resources and services to build on these long-established local and regional initiatives in a way in which complements and enhances them. Its mission is “to encourage walking, hiking and trail development in Ontario”. As such its objectives are:

- To encourage walking for recreation, transportation and health.
- To encourage and facilitate trail development for walking and hiking throughout Ontario.
- To encourage good trail maintenance and hiking practices and the enhancement and quality of the walking experience.
- To encourage and facilitate the development of trail building hiking clubs in Ontario.
- To act as an advocate for a club or clubs when requested or when an initiative is deemed necessary.
- To encourage education and research into the health benefits and other aspects of recreational walking.
- To encourage conservation and appreciation of the natural environment.
- To maintain and disseminate information on hiking and hiking trails.

Hike Ontario has developed standards and training programs for Hike Leaders that are used by community colleges, universities, hiking clubs and outdoor training organizations for course delivery. Currently, Hike Ontario offers Standard Hike Leader, Youth Hike Leader and Wilderness Day Hike Leader certification courses. In addition we are planning to offer the Wilderness Trip Hike Leader course in the future. At present there are over 300 certified hike leaders from across Canada who have taken the Hike Ontario Certification program. These Hike Leader course are recommended by Hike Ontario for any individuals and/or groups interested in leading organized hikes and walks in Ontario . They are excellent forums for learning some of the necessary and important tools in leading hikes or walks.

### **Ontario Trails Council (OTC) ([www.ontariotrails.on.ca](http://www.ontariotrails.on.ca))**

OTC is a charity that promotes the development, preservation, management and use of recreational trails in Ontario. Its goals are:

- Continue to increase the number, length, variety and accessibility of trails throughout the province
- Provide government and other public bodies with an informed, credible voice in support of trail interest groups
- Promote the safe and responsible use of trails
- Act as a provincial resource centre for trail information
- Encourage the establishment of the Trillium Trail Network

Members include trail organizations and others with compatible interests and values.

**Ministry of Health Promotion's 2005 Ontario Trails Strategy**  
(<http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/OntarioTrailStrategy.pdf>)

The Ontario Trails Strategy is a long-term plan that establishes strategic directions for planning, managing, promoting and using trails in Ontario. Developed in collaboration with other ministries and a wide range of stakeholders in the community, the strategy supports continued cooperation among governments and the not-for-profit and private sectors as we work towards a shared vision for trails. All stakeholders will be important partners in the success of the strategy.

The document provides strategies for realizing goals relating to improving collaboration between stakeholders, enhancing the sustainability of Ontario's trails, enhancing the experience for trail users, educating Ontarians about trails, and fostering better health and a prosperous economy through trails.

**Norfolk County's Trails Master Plan**

([http://www.norfolkcounty.ca/images/stories/files/parks\\_and\\_rec/norfolk\\_county\\_trails\\_master\\_plan\\_2009.pdf](http://www.norfolkcounty.ca/images/stories/files/parks_and_rec/norfolk_county_trails_master_plan_2009.pdf))

In October 2009 the Community Services Department released the *Norfolk County Trails Master Plan*. The objective of the master plan is "to provide a framework for future trails development throughout Norfolk County. A county-wide trails system integrating communities, parks, open space, on-road links and on-waterway links will provide trails to be used by residents and tourists alike".

Norfolk's County's trail vision is "an organized linear network of trails connecting our communities and to the Trans Canada Trail", and the mission statement is "Norfolk County's trail mission is to support the creation of a network of trails and that the County will work together with groups and organizations to provide a quality service for diverse users.

Strategic directions for recognizing natural heritage values are:

- Conserve and preserve the natural heritage values of the oak savanna, tall-prairie grasses, woodlots and wetlands.
- Understand and minimize the impact of trail development in the oak savanna, tall-prairie grasses, woodlots and wetlands.
- Interpret and educate the users of the range of biodiversity of the oak savanna, tall-prairie grasses, woodlots and wetlands and their impact on the resource.

The County intends to accomplish this by:

1. Recognizing the biodiversity and promoting environmental stewardship of oak savanna, tallgrass prairie, woodlots and wetlands
2. Encouraging sustainable development practices which don't alter drainage, cause erosion, or encourage invasive species
3. Implement a unified interpretive program to include walking tours of points of interest, rare and at risk ecosystem features and rail history. Focus on endangered and threatened species of flora and fauna that exist in the county.

## **Carolinian Canada's Lake Erie Coastal Zone Program** <http://www.carolinian.org>

The Lake Erie Coastal Zone Program is a way for public and private partners to work together, to manage the coastal zone in a way that allows for multiple land uses, recreation and tourism opportunities, and education and demonstration areas, all while considering the ecological integrity and conservation of the coastal zone. One way to highlight the beauty and significance of the coastal zone is through a Lake Erie Community Stewardship Trail Network.

With the aid of trail groups, public and private landowners, conservation groups, and all interested stakeholders, the basis for a strong coastal zone trail for all partners can be identified. Implementation of a suitable network will provide youth, trail, and other groups with activities such as trail building, maintenance, and stewardship, as well as educational opportunities. The important agricultural contributions of this highly productive zone can be highlighted through a Lake Erie Community Stewardship Trail, as well as natural areas that provide sites for maintaining rare species, biodiversity and valuable ecosystem services.

### **Goals of the Coastal Zone Program**

- To develop a concept for a Lake Erie Community Stewardship Trail along the north shore of Lake Erie, and an accompanying trail guide to highlight significant sites and species in the coastal zone
- To connect rural and urban residents, and individual and group conservation and stewardship efforts along the North Shore Lake Erie coastal zone, into a network of interconnected projects
- To enhance ecological integrity, and conserve coastal ecosystems and Species at Risk in the Coastal Zone of Carolinian Canada
- To enhance the enjoyment of coastal landscapes, and provide greater opportunities for access to and understanding of rare species and habitats