St. Clair Region Conservation Authority

Conservation Lands Strategy

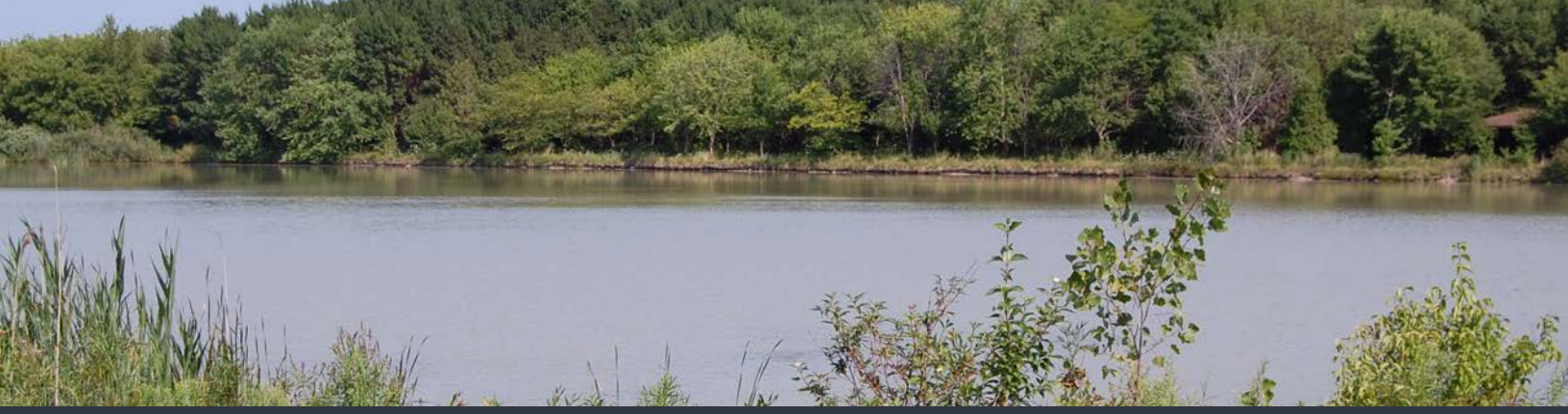
Version 1.0

For the lands owned by St. Clair Region Conservation Authority (SCRCA)

Approved by:
St. Clair Region Conservation Authority
Board of Directors

[Month] [Date], 2024

St. Clair Conservation



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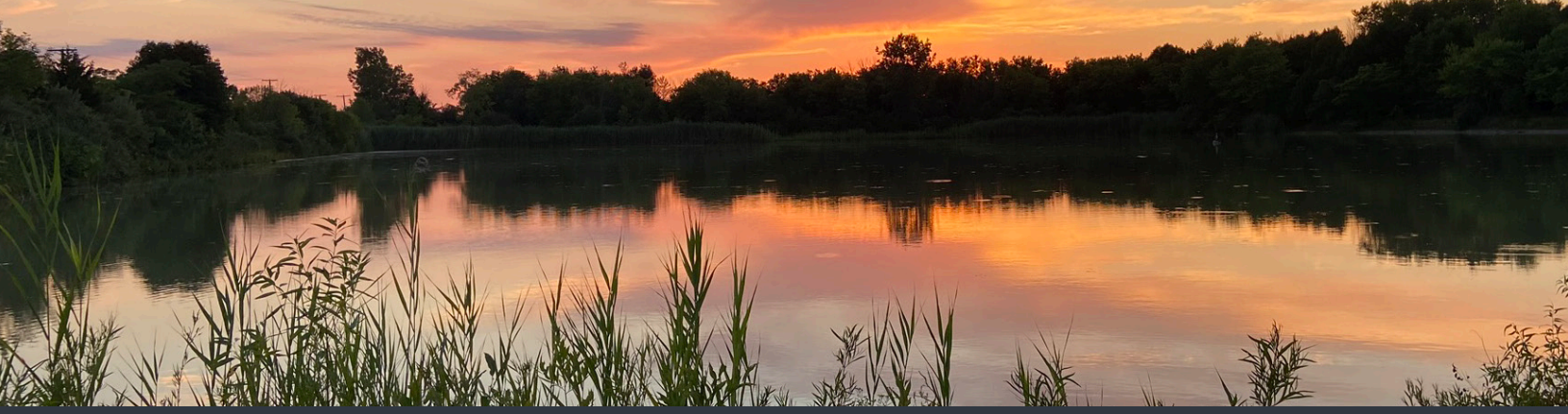


Purpose and Introduction

Legislative Background:

Proclaimed provisions within the *Conservation Authorities Act* and accompanying regulations establish requirements for Mandatory Programs and Services (see Section 21.1 of the Act and O. Reg. 686/21).

Ontario Regulation 686/21 sets out the Mandatory Programs and Services which must be delivered by all Conservation Authorities (CAs) in Ontario. Section 10 of the regulation requires all CAs to prepare a "Conservation Area Strategy" ("the Strategy") as a required component of the "Conservation and Management of Lands" mandatory CA program and service area.

As defined under Ontario Regulation 688/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act*, "conservation area" means land owned by an authority.

Purpose:

This Conservation Lands Strategy has been developed to align with the recent changes to section 10(1) of Ontario Regulation 686/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act*. This strategy will provide a clear set of objectives which will inform decision-making related to the land owned by the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority (SCRCA). Currently, the SCRCA has been operating under the 1987 Land Management and Conservation Area Management Plans.

Introduction:

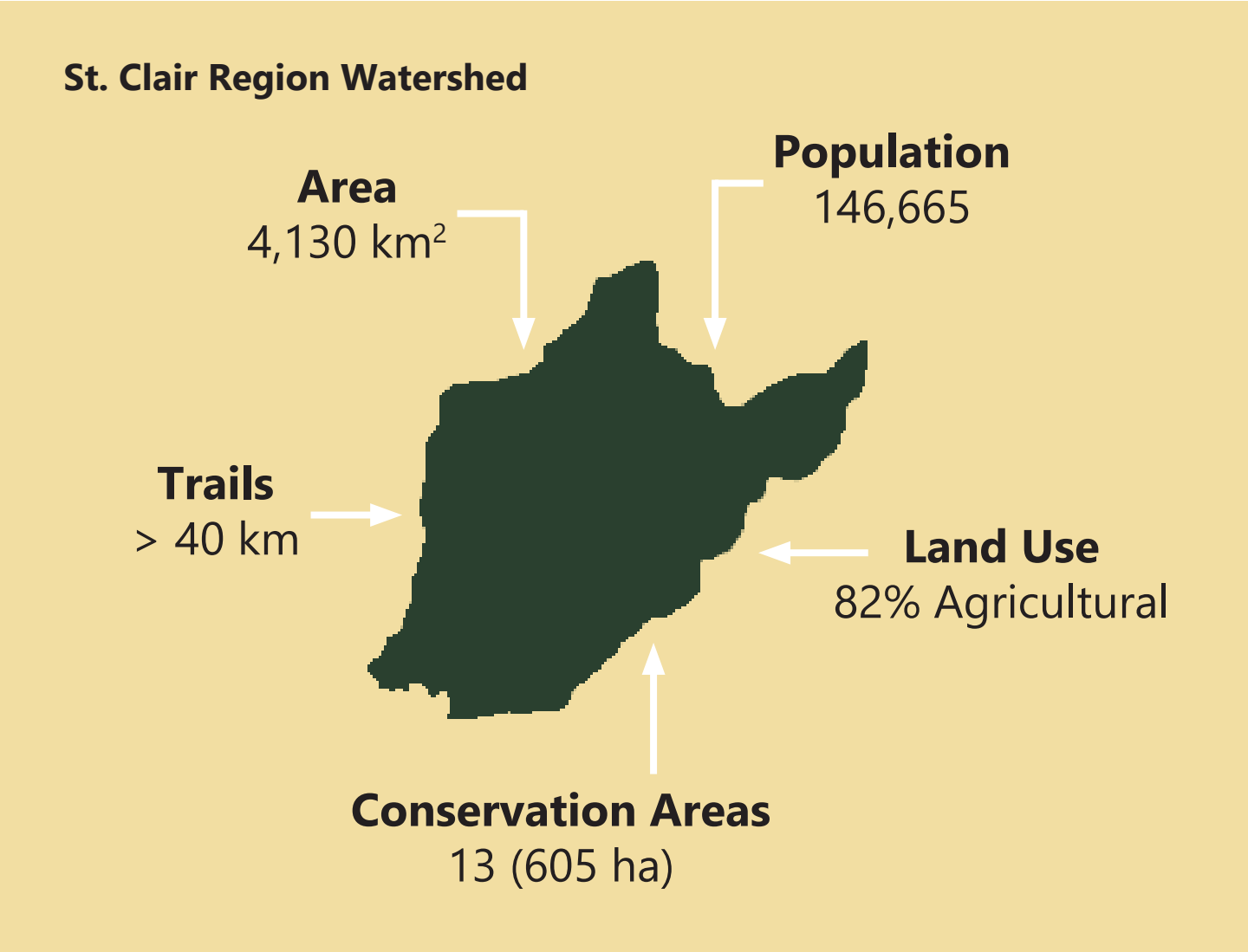
The St. Clair Region watershed is made up of the Sydenham River, east and north branches, and smaller tributaries draining into southern Lake Huron, the St. Clair River, and Lake St. Clair. The region is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lünaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations who have longstanding relationships to the land and water of southwestern Ontario. Located entirely within the Carolinian Life Zone, the St. Clair Region watershed boasts warm average annual temperatures and a long frost-free season which supports a variety of plants and animals. This makes it one of the most biodiverse watersheds in Canada. The climate and rich soils also support various forms of agriculture which is the predominant land use representing 82% of the total watershed.

Approximately 1,600 hectares of land/natural areas are owned by the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority. The SCRCA has a responsibility to conserve and protect these natural areas for the future enjoyment of the public. This includes providing opportunities for outdoor education, recreation, research, and protecting habitat from future development and the impacts of climate change.

The benefit of Conservation Lands are many, including:

- providing protection of environmentally significant/sensitive lands (including wetlands, woodlands, wildlife habitat, significant vegetation communities, fish habitat).
- contributing to biodiversity and the establishment of a Natural Heritage System, including linkages and corridors for wildlife migration.
- protecting hazard lands (e.g. floodplains, erosion sensitive areas, valleylands) and reduce flooding/soil erosion.
- protecting Provincially/Regionally Significant Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI - Earth and Life Science) and other significant features.
- protecting significant water resources (e.g. headwaters, riparian lands, significant recharge/discharge areas) and contribute to improved water quality.
- providing active and passive recreation to the public.

The conservation lands of the SCRCA not only promote environmental awareness and recreation for the public, but also bring economic opportunities through campgrounds, agricultural leases, and outdoor education.



Traditional Territory Acknowledgement

The Sydenham River Watershed is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lünaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations who have longstanding relationships to the land and water of southwestern Ontario.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in Canada have existing Indigenous rights and Treaty rights that are recognized and affirmed by Section 35 and protected by Section 25 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982.

First Nations
Eight First Nations have traditional territory that overlaps the Sydenham watershed:

The Anishinaabek People:
- Aamjiwnaang First Nation
- Bkejwanong – Walpole Island First Nation
- Deshkan Ziibiing – Chippewas of the Thames First Nation
- Wiiwkwedong and Aazhoodena – Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation
- Caldwell First Nation

The Haudenosaunee People:
- Onyota'a:ka – Oneida Nation of the Thames

The Lünaapéewak People:
- Bangonaang – Munsee Delaware Nation
- Eelünaapéewi Lahkéewiit – Delaware Nation at Moraviantown

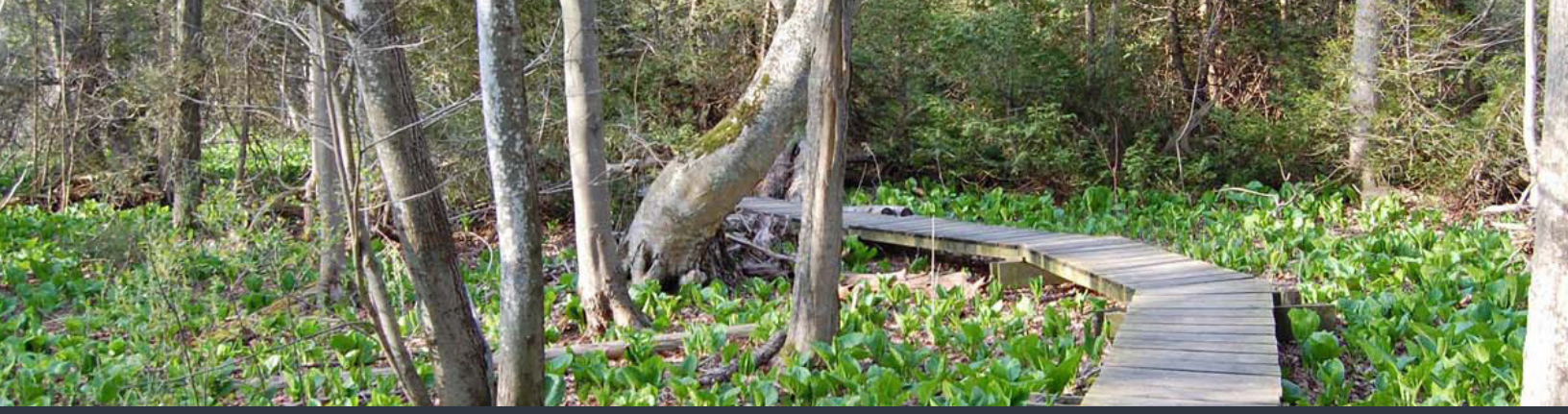
The Sydenham Watershed includes the following Upper Canada Treaties:

McKee Treaty 2 (1790)
London Township Treaty 6 (1796)
Sombra Township Treaty 7 (1796)
Long Woods Treaty 21 and/or 25 (1819 – 1822)
Huron Tract Treaty 29 (1827)
Moore Township Reserve Treaty 53 ½ (1843)

Bkejwanong Territory is unceded land, meaning the land was never legally ceded to the Crown through a treaty or other agreement.

The five Anishinaabek Nations with territory in the Sydenham watershed include Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa Peoples that are members of the Three Fires Confederacy, known as Nswi-shkodewinan. The Oneida Nation of the Thames is a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

Métis Nation
The Métis are a distinct Indigenous People and nation that is separate from their First Nation and European forebears. Métis communities share a common history, language (Michif), way of life, culture, and kinship. The two chartered Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) Community Councils with geographic territory in the Sydenham watershed are the Thames Blue Water Métis Council and the Windsor – Essex Métis Council. These Community Councils are part of MNO Region 9.



History of SCRCA's Conservation Lands

Following the adoption of the *Conservation Authorities Act* in 1946, the SCRCA was established in 1961 as the Sydenham Valley Conservation Authority, to conserve, restore, and manage natural resources within the St. Clair Region watershed. In 1974, the watershed boundaries expanded to include smaller tributaries in the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and southern Lake Huron. For over 60 years, the Authority has worked in partnership with our 17 member municipalities, local communities, and other organizations to:

- protect life and property from flooding and erosion.
- improve water quality.
- promote habitat creation and stewardship.
- provide outdoor recreation and education opportunities.
- and monitor and protect our most vulnerable species.

In 1984, the SCRCA undertook the development of the W. Darcy McKeough Dam and Diversion Project, the largest flood diversion project in Ontario. This project was completed to reduce the threat of flooding in the Town of Wallaceburg by creating temporary storage upstream of the dam and diverting water along the floodway to an outlet at the St. Clair River. Several properties were acquired during this period due to increased flood risks.

The SCRCA owns 67 properties consisting of 13 Conservation Areas, 3 Agreement Forests, 32 Properties as part of operation of the W. Darcy McKeough Dam and Diversion Project, and 19 urban floodplain properties totalling more than 1,600 hectares of land. These lands include campgrounds, day use parks, wetlands, forests, floodplains, and farmland. A wide range of recreation activities are available on these lands including swimming, boating, hiking, bird watching, camping, fishing, and hunting.

Many of the properties owned by the SCRCA were acquired as part of the water, conservation, land management and recreation programs and on recommendations contained in the 1965 Sydenham Valley Conservation Report.

Authority's Mission, Vision, and Objectives

Vision is defined as foresight. The **vision** of the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority reflects the future desired state of our region.

"A healthy and sustainable natural environment in the St. Clair region."

The **mission** of the SCRCA is to provide leadership through coordination of watershed planning, implementation of resource management programs and promotion of conservation awareness, in cooperation with others.

To guide the SCRCA the following objectives have been developed for Conservation Lands under the Goals and Actions of the Strategic Plan 2023-2028:

Conservation Lands

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority owns more than 1,600 hectares of land including campgrounds, day use parks, wetlands, and forests. Moving forward, the SCRCA must ensure that these properties remain valuable assets for the community and are able to withstand the pressures of growth and climate change.

Management of Authority Owned Lands

Through the completion and implementation of Property Management Plans, the Authority continues to manage its lands to balance revenue production with effective management of woodlands, wetlands, and biodiversity. Authority Property Management Plans will be updated and will include issues such as accessibility and natural heritage protection to balance pressures caused by increased demand for natural spaces, all of which will be informed by public input.

Create Master Plans for Conservation Areas

As the watershed population continues to grow, pressure on natural spaces for recreational, mental health, and passive use will increase exponentially. The SCRCA will undertake master plans for its properties to ensure that operations are sustainable, green infrastructure can be utilized, and revenue streams are increased.

Expand Education and Outreach

The SCRCA is the main provider of experiential environmental education in the watershed which is a valuable tool to combat climate change. Online and in-person programs have been developed to introduce students to nature and to empower them to make a difference. The SCRCA will expand programming to include adults to improve the outreach of the organization and to help increase awareness of services offered by the SCRCA. Further expansion of existing education program offerings in French and the creation of summer-based activities will also assist in helping to make the education program more sustainable and financially viable.

Ensure Accessibility for Our Programs and Parks

Utilizing Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities (AODA) standards for structures and communications, we will develop a plan to create accessible areas on SCRCA lands and make certain that our website and printed materials are available to meet the needs of watershed residents.

Develop Policies to Guide Acquisition/Disposal of Conservation Lands

The SCRCA will accept donations or acquire lands that further meet the objectives of the Conservation Authority. An acquisition plan will assist in prioritizing opportunities and provide direction in seeking funding for significant watershed properties.

Land Acquisition and Disposal Policy

Land Acquisition Policy

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority does not actively seek out properties to purchase but will consider securement of lands located within its jurisdiction, on a parcel-by-parcel basis, to increase its Conservation Lands base and contribute to its vision and goals. Land securement includes obtaining from a willing landowner, interest in land title for conservation purposes through land bequest, land trading, donation, and fee simple purchase, as well as other means of holding rights on land such as leasing, restrictive covenants, and easements.

When protecting environmentally significant lands, the preferred tool is holding title to land. Use of these other land securement tools will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Board of Directors. See SCRCA Land Acquisition and Disposition Policy for further information.

Additionally, the SCRCA works with the St. Clair Region Conservation Foundation in accepting donations of lands that further meet the objectives of the Conservation Authority.

Land Disposal Policy

Generally, the Authority will retain all properties that meet one or more criteria listed in the Land Acquisition policy. In some instances, properties acquired by or donated historically to the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority may not meet the needs and objectives of the Authority. In these instances, the Authority may look to dispose of these surplus lands. See SCRCA Land Acquisition and Disposition Policy for further information.

Guidelines for Conservation Land Management

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority's lands are divided into four broad categories: Conservation Areas Active Recreation, Conservation Areas Passive Recreation, Management Areas, and Administration Areas (Figure 1).

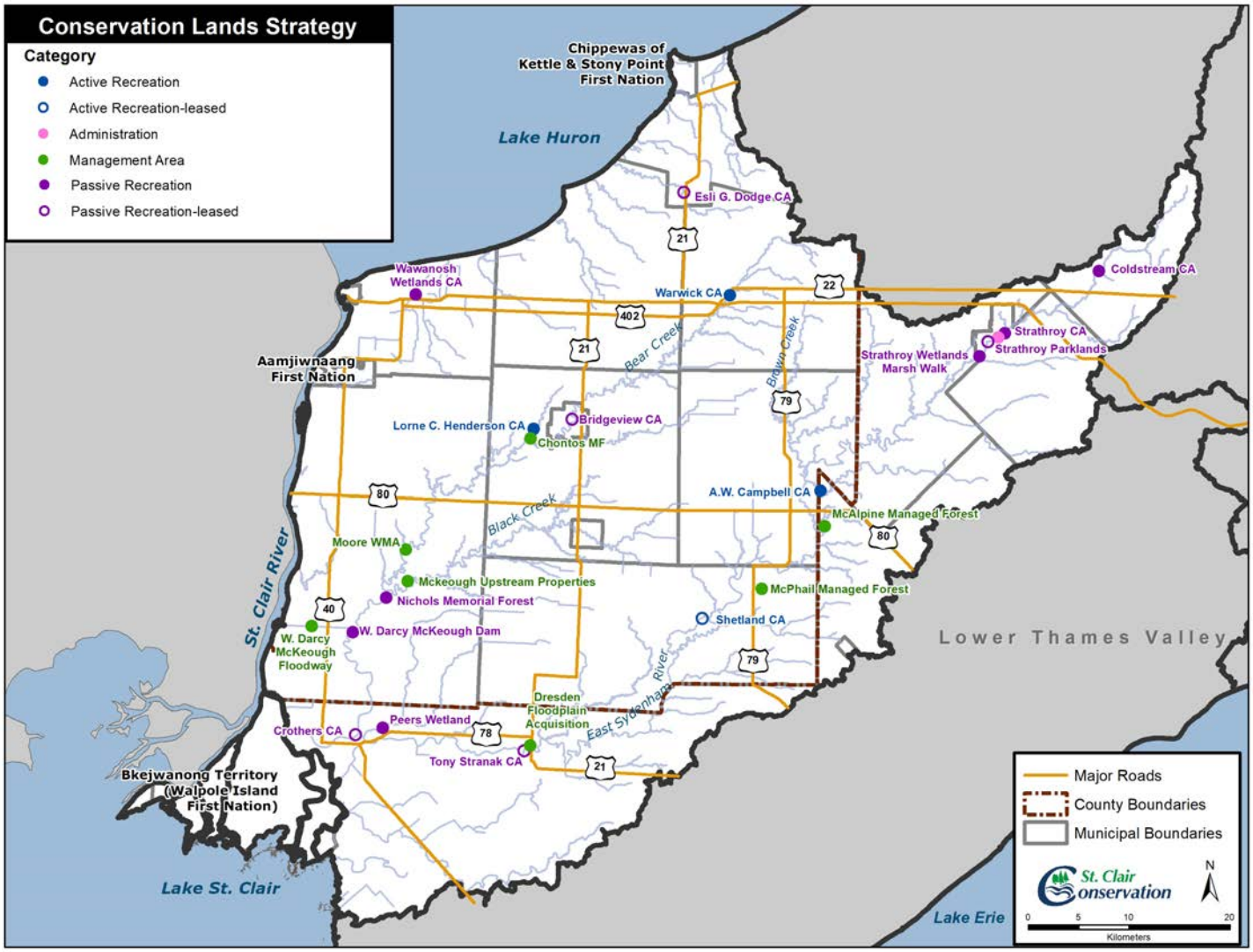


Figure 1: Map of conservation lands identified by categories throughout the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority watershed.

Conservation Areas Active Recreation

Conservation Areas-Active Recreation refers to lands which provide natural habitat protection and/or flood/erosion protection while remaining accessible and open to the public. These lands are well promoted and may contain managed trail networks, parking lots, signage, and facilities. The Authority may actively encourage and facilitate active recreation and have staffed buildings. Typically, these lands include fee for use (rather than fee for parking), supervised swimming, camping, rentals, and/or education. The lands are distinguished from passive recreation lands by the level of development and the intensity of use.

These properties are identified as Category 3 under Ontario Regulation 686/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* for Mandatory Programs and Services. Category 3 programs and services are those that the conservation authority determines are advisable to provide, to further the purposes of the Act. These lands provide active recreation in the form of seasonal and transient campsites supervised swimming and outdoor education opportunities. Additional facilities and programs are on site to serve the needs of visitors to these properties. Financing for these lands is provided through the revenue generated on the property (i.e., camping fees, day-use fees, education program fees, and/or donations, etc.).

Properties in this category include:

- A.W. Campbell CA
- L.C. Henderson CA
- Warwick CA

Leased Conservation Lands

In some instances, Active Recreation Conservation Areas are subject to a long or short-term lease agreement between the SCRCA and an individual, a corporation, or a municipality. Through the terms of the lease agreement, the Lessee is typically responsible for the management of these lands, however, these lands may still include public access and active recreation opportunities.

Properties in this category include:

- Shetland CA

The three regional campgrounds owned and operated by the SCRCA boast a combined total of 500 campsites including 420 seasonal sites. The camping season runs from May until October, annually.

Objectives

The objectives of these properties are:

- Pursue research and monitoring opportunities, identify gaps, and strengthen the knowledge of the natural heritage system, to better determine appropriate management actions for these properties.
- Ensure ecological integrity and biological diversity of the natural heritage systems are maintained long-term through naturalization or wildlife habitat enhancement or maintenance.
- Ensure all new properties acquired have a management and/or master plan developed.
- Ensure management plans are reviewed when significant changes in management are proposed to address public concerns or to remain current with evolving legislations and standards.
- Ensure that future revisions or development of management plans are informed by the public, agencies, or any group that may have interest in the property.
- Identify permitted and prohibited uses.
- Identify future needs of the conservation areas to expand or enhance opportunities for active recreation and increase revenue to ensure sustainability of these areas for public use.
- Identify additional areas or natural heritage systems that will expand education programming for all ages and improve knowledge of these systems and/or concepts.
- Ensure all infrastructure meets current accessibility and safety standards including facilities and trails.
- Ensure all SCRCA lands information on the website is AODA compliant and provides valuable and meaningful information to the public regarding facilities, properties, and hazards.
- Ensure all service disruptions are communicated to the public in an easily accessed and efficient manner.
- Ensure all present and future SCRCA land holdings contribute to the goals and objectives of the CA.
- Prioritize land acquisitions where a connected natural heritage system can be maintained or enhanced.
- Ensure properties generate revenue while balancing protection of natural heritage features and maintaining public access.
- Ensure the establishment and spread of invasive species is managed through site appropriate control methods.

Conservation Areas Passive Recreation

Conservation Areas-Passive recreation refers to lands which provide habitat protection and/or flood/erosion protection while permitting public access on a passive basis. These lands include signage, trails, parking lots, and may have facilities such as washrooms. These lands typically are not staffed, but rather visited by staff for maintenance and inspection.

These properties are identified as Category 2 under Ontario Regulation 686/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* for Mandatory Programs and Services, as the lands are provided at the request of the municipality or through an agreement with the municipality. Funding for these lands is provided from the municipality through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or agreement. The McKeough Dam is funded annually by the Province.

Properties in this category include five day-use properties and three McKeough Upstream Lands:

- Coldstream CA
- Peers Wetland CA
- Strathroy CA
- Strathroy Wetlands Marsh Walk
- Wawanosh CA
- Property 2/3 McKeough Dam and public use area
- Property 55 Boat Ramp
- Property 56 Nicholls Memorial Forest Area

Leased Conservation Lands

In some instances, some day-use Conservation Areas are subject to a long or short-term lease agreement between the SCRCA and an individual, a corporation, or a municipality. Through the terms of the lease agreement, the Lessee is typically responsible for the management of these lands, however, these lands may still include public access and passive recreation opportunities.

Properties in this category include:

- Bridgeview CA
- Crothers CA
- Esli Dodge CA
- Tony Stranak CA
- Strathroy Parklands

Objectives

The objectives of these properties are:

- Pursue research and monitoring opportunities, identify gaps, and strengthen the knowledge of the natural heritage system, to better determine appropriate management actions for these properties.
- Ensure ecological integrity and biological diversity of the natural heritage systems are maintained long-term through naturalization or wildlife habitat enhancement or maintenance.
- Ensure all new properties acquired have a management and/or master plan developed.
- Ensure management plans are reviewed when significant changes in management are proposed to address public concerns or to remain current with evolving legislations and standards.
- Ensure that future revisions or development of management plans are informed by the public, agencies, or any group that may have interest in the property.
- Identify permitted and prohibited uses.
- Identify future needs of the conservation areas to expand or enhance opportunities for active recreation and increase revenue to ensure sustainability of these areas for public use.
- Identify additional areas or natural heritage systems that will expand education programming for all ages and improve knowledge of these systems and/or concepts.
- Ensure all infrastructure meets current accessibility and safety standards including facilities and trails.
- Ensure all SCRCA lands information on the website is AODA compliant and provides valuable and meaningful information to the public regarding facilities, properties, and hazards.
- Ensure all service disruptions are communicated to the public in an easily accessed and efficient manner.
- Ensure all present and future SCRCA land holdings contribute to the goals and objectives of the CA.
- Prioritize land acquisitions where a connected natural heritage system can be maintained or enhanced.
- Ensure properties generate revenue while balancing protection of natural heritage features and maintaining public access.
- Ensure the establishment and spread of invasive species is managed through site appropriate control methods.

Management Areas

Management Areas refer to lands where public access is prohibited and/or are generally not managed for public access. These lands may serve as resource management areas, agricultural fields, and potential flood lands during McKeough dam operation, etc. These areas typically do not have facilities and/or parking lots. Trail networks, if existing, are simple, minimal, and/or unmaintained.

These properties are identified as Category 1 under Ontario Regulation 686/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* for Mandatory Programs and Services, which are lands owned or controlled by the Authority for conservation and management. Expenses associated with these properties are funded through agricultural lease revenue or logging operations. The McKeough floodway is funded annually through the province.

Properties in this category include three historic Managed Forest Agreement Tracts, 32 properties acquired for the operation of the W. Darcy McKeough Dam and Diversion Floodway, and 19 urban floodplain acquisition properties:

- W. Darcy McKeough Floodway – channel and berms, includes Flood Easements
- W. Darcy McKeough Floodway Upstream properties includes agricultural lands
- Dresden Floodplain acquisitions
- Camden Conservation Area
- McPhail Tract
- Chontos Tract
- McAlpine Tract

Objectives

The objectives of these properties are:

- Pursue research and monitoring opportunities, identify gaps, and strengthen the knowledge of the natural heritage system, to better determine appropriate management actions for these properties.
- Ensure ecological integrity and biological diversity of the natural heritage systems are maintained long-term through naturalization or wildlife habitat enhancement or maintenance.
- Ensure all new properties acquired have a management and/or master plan developed.
- Ensure management plans are reviewed when significant changes in management are proposed to address public concerns or to remain current with evolving legislations and standards.
- Ensure that future revisions or development of management plans are informed by the public, agencies, or any group that may have interest in the property.
- Identify permitted and prohibited uses.
- Ensure all present and future SCRCA land holdings contribute to the goals and objectives of the CA.
- Prioritize land acquisitions where a connected natural heritage system can be maintained or enhanced.
- Ensure the establishment and spread of invasive species is managed through site appropriate control methods.

Administration Areas

Only one property owned by the SCRCA falls under Administration Areas, which is the property that contains the administration building for the Authority. Located adjacent to the Strathroy Conservation Area, this property supplements the delivery of services to our residents, visitors, stakeholders, and partners. Most staff are based at this location.

This property falls under Category 1 under Ontario Regulation 686/21 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* for Mandatory Programs and Services.

Objectives

The objectives of these properties are:

- Ensure all infrastructure meets current accessibility and safety standards including facilities.
- Ensure management plans are reviewed when significant changes in management are proposed to address public concerns or to remain current with evolving legislations and standards.
- Ensure that future revisions or development of management plans are informed by the public, agencies, or any group that may have interest in the property.
- Ensure all SCRCA lands information on the website is AODA compliant and provides valuable and meaningful information to the public regarding facilities, properties, and hazards.
- Ensure all service disruptions are communicated to the public in an easily accessed and efficient manner.
- Ensure properties generate revenue while balancing protection of natural heritage features and maintaining public access.

Conservation Lands Strategy Review:

To ensure this document remains current, a review of the Strategy will be conducted every 5 years. The Strategy will be updated, and public consultation required, when major changes are made to the overall objectives and goals of the Authority, or when new land is acquired. If the Strategy is deemed to be current and accurate the Board of Directors may approve the Strategy as is for the next 5-year cycle. If updates are necessary, the Board of Directors determine whether public consultation is required as part of the update process.

St. Clair Conservation

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