

**Local Responses to Development Pressures  
Conflictual Politics of Sprawl and Environmental Conservation**  
**Réponses locales aux pressions du développement urbain  
Politiques conflictuelles d'étalement urbain et conservation  
environnementale**

Liette Gilbert, Gerda R. Wekerle et L. Anders Sandberg

Volume 49, numéro 138, décembre 2005

Conflits, Proximité, Coopération

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/012563ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/012563ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Gilbert, L., Wekerle, G. R. & Sandberg, L. A. (2005). Local Responses to Development Pressures: Conflictual Politics of Sprawl and Environmental Conservation. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 49(138), 377–392. <https://doi.org/10.7202/012563ar>

Résumé de l'article

L'envahissement des terres agricoles et des milieux naturels par des lotissements et des infrastructures résidentiels suscite de plus en plus d'opposition. Il en résulte des tensions et des contradictions entre les pratiques d'urbanisation et les politiques de conservation de l'environnement. Cet article compare la gestion à des fins de conservation de la moraine Oak Ridges à Richmond Hill et Caledon (deux municipalités de la région métropolitaine de Toronto). Il est constaté que la culture politique locale, la géographie, la densité et l'influence politique des mouvements sociaux peuvent avoir à l'échelle locale un impact sur les pratiques d'urbanisation. Il reste que les mobilisations environnementales dans les deux municipalités deviennent, malgré tout, subjuguées par des objectifs de croissance.

# Local Responses to Development Pressures Conflictual Politics of Sprawl and Environmental Conservation

**Liette Gilbert, Gerda R. Wekerle and L. Anders Sandberg**

York University

[gilbertL@yorku.ca](mailto:gilbertL@yorku.ca)

[gwekerle@yorku.ca](mailto:gwekerle@yorku.ca)

[sandberg@yorku.ca](mailto:sandberg@yorku.ca)

## Abstract

There is an increasing opposition to the absorption of farmland and natural habitats by housing subdivisions and infrastructure, a symptom of urban sprawl. Through an analysis of these challenges at a regional scale, we address the contradictions and tensions in the politics of sprawl and environmental conservation. This article compares environmental conservation on the Oak Ridges Moraine in Richmond Hill and Caledon (two towns in the Greater Toronto Area) and argues that local political cultures, geography, and the density and political influence of citizens and social movements can have an impact on local responses to pressures of development. In the end, however, environmental activism in both towns is subjected to and shaped by an overall growth agenda.

**Keywords:** urban sprawl, exurban development, environmental conflicts, environmental conservation, environmentalism, Oak Ridges Moraine, greenbelt

## Résumé

**Réponses locales aux pressions du développement urbain. Politiques conflictuelles d'étalement urbain et conservation environnementale**

L'envahissement des terres agricoles et des milieux naturels par des lotissements et des infrastructures résidentiels suscite de plus en plus d'opposition. Il en résulte des tensions et des contradictions entre les pratiques d'urbanisation et les politiques de conservation de l'environnement. Cet article compare la gestion à des fins de conservation de la moraine Oak Ridges à Richmond Hill et Caledon (deux municipalités de la région métropolitaine de Toronto). Il est constaté que la culture politique locale, la géographie, la densité et l'influence politique des mouvements sociaux peuvent avoir à l'échelle locale un impact sur les pratiques d'urbanisation. Il reste que les mobilisations environnementales dans les deux municipalités deviennent, malgré tout, subjuguées par des objectifs de croissance.

**Mots-clés:** étalement urbain, développement périurbain, conflits environnementaux, conservation environnementale, environnementalisme, Moraine Oak Ridges, ceinture de verdure

---

The desire to protect nature and history and the seemingly innocent pleasure derived from natural landscapes has a complex cultural and political history (Duncan and Duncan 2004: 7).

It is in the proximity of cities, in exurban regions, that conflicts over land use are attracting political and popular attention. These conflicts are often posed as tensions between the private and the public in the form of development and conservation. In the exurban regions of the Greater Toronto Area, where suburban subdivisions, family farms, small towns, large estates, ecologically sensitive areas and natural resource productions are juxtaposed, such conflicts have surfaced recently in proposals and responses to a Greenbelt Protection Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe in Southern Ontario (see Figure 1). They also underlie the very public debates on the future of the Oak Ridges Moraine and the consultations leading up to the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act and Plan*. The Moraine, a 160-km stretch of glacial sediments, hills and kettle lakes that filters and contains the largest concentration of headwater streams and groundwater recharge in the metropolitan region, crosses 34 municipalities and the three administrative regions of Peel, York and Durham. Approximately 65 percent of the Moraine lies in the Greater Toronto Area. Located just north of Toronto, the Moraine's rich sand and gravel deposits have also been a main source of aggregates for building the urban core and the metropolitan urban fabric.

The conflicts over the development or protection of sensitive, resource-rich, and scenic landscape features such as the Moraine are revealed in the discourses on urban sprawl and environmental conservation that have engaged the media, environmental groups, planners, politicians and concerned citizens over the past years. The conflicts over land bring together key actors and interests (co)operating at multiple and overlapping scales: First Nations, family and industrial farmers, environmental non-governmental organizations, long-term rural residents, recent exurban and suburban property owners, industries, recreational corporations and users, multinational land holders, local, regional and provincial governments, and city residents. Both conflict and cooperation politics involving various actors are framed around a dual discourse of nature (or ecology) as a critique of capitalism's domination or degradation of nature and as a catalyst for environmentalism as an appreciation or defence of nature.

This article presents the particular environmental conflicts and political environmental cooperation structures of two towns on the periphery of Toronto that have resisted the pressures of urban sprawl.<sup>1</sup> We explore the mediating technocratic and ecocentric approaches to nature and the nature of development and conservation on the Oak Ridges Moraine in Richmond Hill and Caledon. We suggest that their respective political cultural responses are not only determined by formal governmental policies but are also contingent on the social practices, natural resources, and environmental histories of each place. In examining these local responses to development pressures and environmental conservation efforts (which by no means depict the sum of all exurban struggles in the Greater Toronto Area), we rely on what Forsyth (2003: 23) appropriately calls the "co-production of environmental knowledge and political activism" in the face of suburban and exurban development. Through the conflictual and collaborative debates of development

---

and conservation, we address the agency of municipalities, planning institutions and residents, thus challenging both the notions of sprawl as an inevitable force and of conservation as inherently natural.

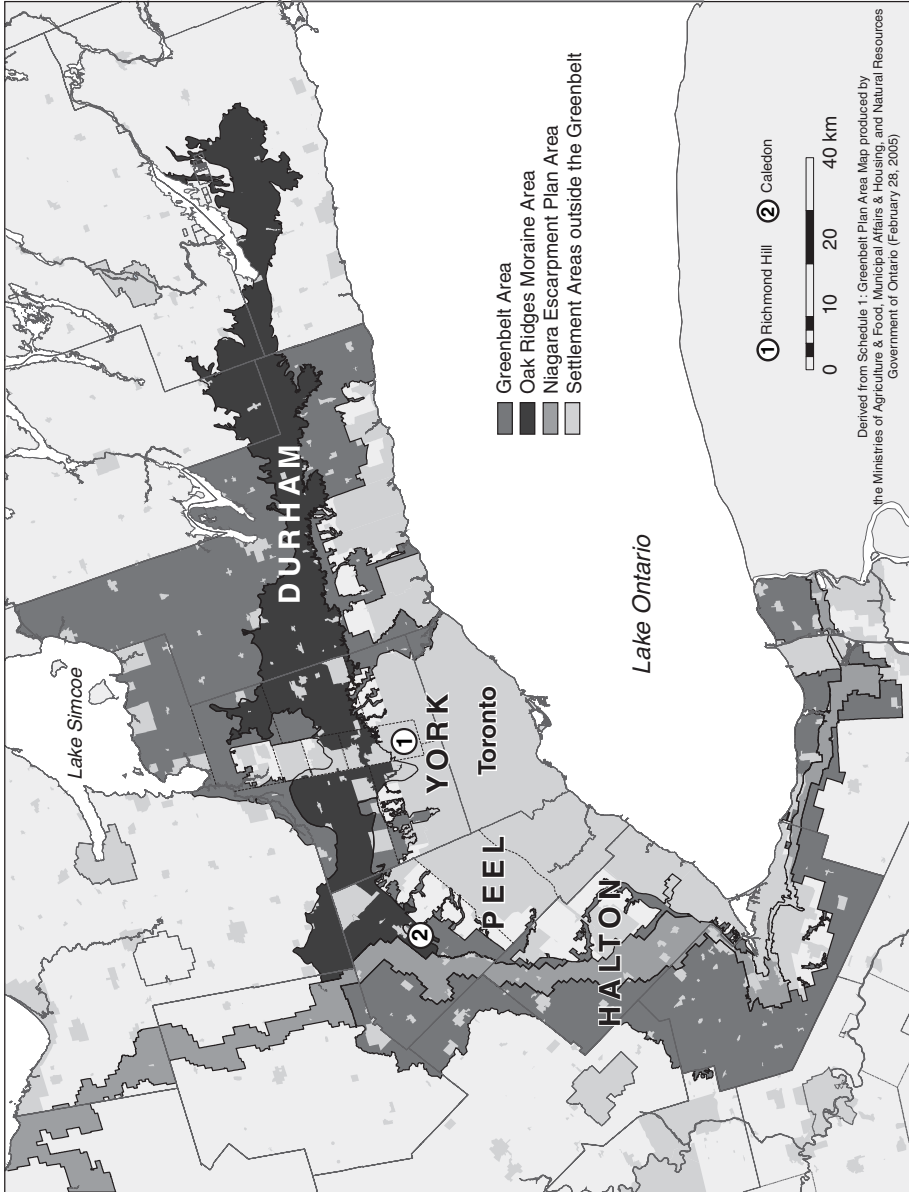
We first examine the “nature” of the tensions and contradictions between development and conservation in general, and more particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. We then turn to Richmond Hill and Caledon and analyse their respective political environmental cultures in the face of recent development struggles. In both towns, the merging of environmental activism and science led to a reframing of local environmental discourses and values, and active engagement in the reformulation of regional and provincial environmental policy and conservation legislation. Yet we also note the powerful development narrative and the impacts that constrain conservation efforts.

## THE “NATURE” OF DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

A landscape, according to Cosgrove, “represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature” (1998: 150). The signified and imagined relationships with nature, we suggest, are well expressed in the suburban and exurban landscapes where urban sprawl swallows greenspace, farmlands and natural resources, creating “conflicts between competing forms of rural capitalism, conflicts over property rights and social control, and cultural frictions” (Walker and Fortmann, 2003: 470).

On the one hand, housing subdivisions, highways and service roads, megamalls, big box retail stores and strip malls are economic and demographic manifestations that rationalize the consuming of exurban and rural areas. Such sub/ex urban expansion often cuts across political jurisdictions to secure the collaboration of city, county, regional, state and federal governments in seeking to develop policies to “manage” sprawl. Since 1961, the urbanised area expanded at a rate roughly 30 percent faster than population growth (Bourne et al., 2003; Filion, 2003), resulting in the loss of rural and natural lands to the expansion of housing, employment growth and recreational amenities. Provincial funding for infrastructure such as highways, water and waste treatment, and pressures for intensification (with attendant gentrification) of the centres of major cities funnelled family households and new immigrants to low density settlement areas on the periphery of cities. At the same time, lower property taxes lured employers and consumers attracted by the suburban promise of homeownership and space. In Canada, federal mortgage insurance supported and benefited the new methods of construction and the land subdivisions of corporate suburbanization brought under the control of local planning boards and municipalities (Harris, 2004). While suburbs have come to express “a belief in the primacy of *laissez-faire* development, individualism, the right to property, the virtue of private domesticity” (Harris, 2004: 33), and a commitment to action on local issues, their growth also had unintended and undesired effects.

**Figure 1 Protected Areas of the Golden Horseshoe**



---

Sprawl threatens farmlands, wildlife habitats and ecosystems, contributes to deforestation and soil erosion, worsens air and water pollution, and increases health and safety risks. In the United States, sprawl intensifies urban decline, racial and economic polarization, disparities in public education and other services, and access to affordable housing and transportation (Bullard et al., 2000). According to Harris, "Canadians generally have not chosen to define suburbs in terms of class [but they] have consistently emphasized the importance of location, at, or near, the developing urban fringe" (2004: 24). While suburbs promoted privacy and a household-centered way of life, from the early 1960s to the present, the defence of property ownership has been associated with the rise of environmental movements at the local level (Rome, 2001). Yet, paradoxically, suburban and exurban residents' opposition to any type of development that could potentially threaten property values, their financial investments or neighborhood safety, led both to social segregation and to local political mobilization.

The idea of preservation of quality of life is one of the many elements inscribed in a sub/exurban landscape that is transformed from "'traditional' resource-based production to a 'new' economy and culture of aesthetic landscape 'consumption'" (Walker and Fortmann, 2003: 470). Duncan and Duncan refer to such a landscape "as communicative of identities and community values" and "symbolizing—and even inculcating—political and moral values, as well as creating and conveying social distinctions" (2004: 8). Robbins (2004) further suggests that land should never be seen as destroyed or protected but as produced. All landscapes, even protected ones, can be seen as produced by various institutional and individual actors. Networks of interaction between land, ecological processes, and land producers provide the key to understanding land conflicts.

Urban sprawl and growth management strategies thus generate their own landscape stories and land claims that are contested, that collide and that are fought over. They are juxtaposed with ecosystem management strategies and ecocentric narratives that are also hotly challenged, as they posit a reframing of public responsibilities and private rights. Blomley (2004) suggests that property rights may be a central element in these conflicts as they are contingently constructed and produced by social, economic and environmental values. Environmental activism, often caught between the invocation by farmers of land rights based on productive use and developers' claims of private property rights, contributes to a charged debate on rights, property, land and nature. This is because such activism "can now huddle under the cloak of environmental responsibility" (Harris, 2004: 37), generating, as we shall see, "unlikely" alliances of environmentalists and homeowners intent on preserving the mutual benefits of both natural environments and property rights. Environmental justice movements have addressed issues of civil rights and disenfranchised people of colour, indigenous land rights movements, and public health and safety (Faber and McCarthy, 2003). Particular urban movements have addressed a range of issues from pollution and toxic sites to the need for social housing. However, most urban environmental movements have paid little attention to the conservation of "nature". Environmental movements operating on the peri-urban areas have the potential to connect groups that defend place, often from a conservative perspective, and more progressive movements focused on ecological justice.

---

Increasingly, growth management legislation not only seeks to control urban sprawl and prevent haphazard development but also to preserve environmentally sensitive areas and farmlands. But such growth management represents more than the bureaucratic technicalities of land use designations; they are struggles over competing values, claims and production regimes. For suburbanites and exurbanites seeking closeness to “pristine” nature, aesthetic consumption-based rural capitalism such as tourism, recreation and real estate, seem preferable to many of the natural resource based productions whose sounds and smells might not always be compatible with “quality of life”. The irony of suburban and exurban development is that residents in their quests for “pristine” nature may become more exclusive, as well as agents who threaten ecological integrity at the same time as their vigilance enables environmental conservation.

## DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

In the last fifty years, the population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has tripled from 1.5 to 4.7 million. The majority of the population in the GTA now lives in the suburban regions of Peel, Halton, Durham and York, compared to 48 percent who reside in the City of Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2003). This unprecedented pattern of population settlement has led to a reframing of exurban and urban politics expressed in terms of 905 and 416 politics (in reference to local phone area codes). Suburban cities like Markham, Brampton, Vaughan and Richmond Hill are amongst the fastest growing and most diverse municipalities in the GTA and in Canada (Carey, 2003). The economic mobility of earlier European migrations moving out of the city and the arrivals of highly-skilled newcomers (targeted by the Canadian immigration policy) predominantly account for this phenomenon of suburbanization of immigration in the GTA. Over the last fifty years, the urbanized fabric of the Toronto region grew six to seven times as a result of a suburbanization process driven by increases in income, land consumption per capita, and pro-development agendas (Bourne, 2000). Such a process has inevitably reached the greenfields and environmentally sensitive areas of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

As housing subdivisions and commercial strips replace fields and creeks, the movements to preserve the Moraine and challenge sprawl have gained visibility, changed the representations of the Moraine, and impacted governmental policies and planning processes. The fifteen-year long battle to preserve the Oak Ridges Moraine from development has brought issues of conservation to the fore and has highlighted the role of planning in mediating different interests. This prolonged conflict over land use, which culminated in the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act* (2001) and *Plan* (2002), also served to raise public awareness concerning the tensions between development and conservation. It soon became apparent in the public debates about the future of development and the protection of natural habitats on the Moraine that local communities took very different stances with different political outcomes.

In this paper, we contrast the development practices and environmental actions of two municipalities on the Moraine: Richmond Hill (in York Region) and Caledon (in Peel Region). These two municipalities have diverged in terms of development practices, planning responses and emphasis on environmental conservation. They

---

illustrate the ways in which development pressures are mediated by location, local political cultures, and the strength of environmental networks. What they have in common, however, is their fast growth rate—three times faster than the rest of the Greater Toronto Area and seven times faster than the City of Toronto (and Canada as a whole). Richmond Hill (population 132 030, land area 100.89 sq. km) and Caledon (population 50 595, land area 687.04 sq. km) also show higher household incomes than their urban and regional counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Given its middle to upper class characteristic, environmental activism in these localities has certainly not been about livelihood struggles but rather about the defence of quality of life. At the same time, the emergence of movements that challenge growth and sprawl in the exurban 905 areas of the metropolitan region, areas that have traditionally been strong supporters of the Conservative party in provincial elections, challenges some of our assumptions that associate progressive-left ideologies with environmental mobilizations and with the urban core.

## RESISTING GROWTH IN RICHMOND HILL

Richmond Hill has long been a focal point of regional growth, but its more recent development has galvanized it as the epicenter of the tensions between suburban sprawl and environmental conservation. Challenges to massive development proposals came from homeowners concerned with maintaining a quality of life, albeit framed in terms of protection of cherished landscapes and endangered nature. At the same time, opposition to continued sprawl also mobilized interventions by national and international environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy and stimulated the emergence of regional coalitions of environmental non-governmental organizations.

Since its incorporation as a village in 1872, Richmond Hill developed because of its proximity to Toronto. In the words of Stamp, “[w]ith Yonge Street and because of Yonge Street, Richmond Hill developed from the status of tiny farm settlement to major stagecoach stopping place, then from sleepy Victorian village of the late nineteenth century to a dynamic community poised at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The history of Richmond Hill begins with the creation of Yonge Street” (1991: on line). Development in Richmond Hill has historically been dictated by Yonge Street as a transportation corridor also equipped with sewage–water infrastructures (connected to Lake Ontario). Richmond Hill’s struggles pitting land use development and citizen mobilization started in the 1980s during a first high-density development controversy. Limited municipal powers in Ontario and poor regional coordination provided a developer-friendly climate. With the election of a Progressive Conservative government in the province in 1995, municipalities felt an increasing pressure to approve development applications in the face of downloaded fiscal responsibilities. By the late 1990s, development applications on the Oak Ridges Moraine lands soared, and Richmond Hill’s planning department had become a development “approval treadmill” (Sewell, 2000: 14). Resident groups urged Council to take a more critical and proactive role (Hoeffelner, 2002). However, local officials defended their subordinated jurisdiction and argued that it was impossible to interfere with the Ontario Municipal Board, the provincially appointed body conducting land development hearings (Bell, 2002), which circumvented the local democratic process (Hogg, 2002).



---

The ongoing struggles to preserve the Moraine in Richmond Hill therefore shed some light on local governmental practices and its close ties to the development industry. Such was the case in early 2000 when the Town of Richmond Hill filed an application to amend its official plan in order to upzone 2800 acres of agricultural lands for housing development. Following local and provincial legislation, the approval of such amendments was subject to public meetings. Reflecting local anger at the idea that the Town was inviting development to proceed on the Oak Ridges Moraine, there was record-breaking attendance of more than a thousand people at a Richmond Hill Council meeting to protest the amendment. Central to this new form of land use activism were citizen claims for the protection of geological and biological features, and demands for the creation of a land acquisition fund, as well as for the implementation of a development freeze on the Moraine pending a comprehensive conservation strategy.

Faced with such vocal opposition by its ratepayers and persistent vilification in GTA newspapers, the Town of Richmond Hill rejected the proposed development encroaching on protected lands. However, developers circumvented local council and appealed directly to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), a provincially appointed body that rules on land use appeals. Developers argued that the Moraine is not a fragile environment and that water and wildlife resources could easily co-exist with housing, so long as provision were made for the installation of appropriate technological fixes (such as catchment areas for storm water and wildlife corridors). This hearing also provided a public forum for environmental groups to challenge the science and planning assumptions of experts appearing on behalf of both developers and the province. Some of these groups were funded by the City of Toronto, which had been denied standing at the OMB hearing on the grounds that it was outside the political jurisdiction, despite its arguments that it suffered the downstream impacts of development in the watershed.

Richmond Hill's residents, who had so far been only marginally vocal on land use issues and development projects, mobilized to protect their amenity space and in defence of ecologically sensitive habitats and landscapes threatened by urban sprawl. Citizens articulated their claims for environmental conservation by using environmental science to argue for the protection of kettle lakes and wetlands that had been virtually encircled with development, woodlots such as the Jefferson Forest that had been significantly reduced, and endangered species such as the Jefferson salamander, which suddenly became the symbol of local environmental resistance. A coalition of middle-class homeowners and environmental activists joined forces to create a new kind of suburban environmentalism for the defence of local ecosystems and groundwater resources (Wekerle, 2000). The Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition, a non-profit organization founded in 1989 to promote legislative protection of the entire Moraine through public education and outreach, led the campaign, along with other environmentalist organizations such as Save The Rouge Valley System, Earthroots, Federation of Ontario Naturalists and Richmond Hill Naturalists.

A critical shift in environmental strategy was the way in which environmental groups used the planning system as a tool to preserve the environment. According to Natalie Helferty (2004), conservation biologist and member of the Richmond

---

Hill Naturalists, the naturalist club's mandate "is still engaging the public in trying to protect their own environment and educating them about wildlife and species, and water resources... [but there is now] this added responsibility which we have taken on to ensure that planning is done well in our communities." This merging of environmentalism and planning was particularly important in Richmond Hill, as development along Yonge Street threatened to sever ecological connectivity by dividing the eastern and western parts of the Moraine. Environmental groups hired their own scientists, called for larger regional and even continental "science-based planning" (Noss, 2001), and collected their own data on amphibian species and the loss of wetlands. Here environmental science was used by the residents and activists to make a case for local ecological vulnerability framed in terms of a bioregional irremediable lost narrative.

In response to months of public outcry and daily media coverage of citizen resistance to development on the Moraine, the provincial government passed a law in May 2001 freezing all development on the entire Moraine for a period of six months, except for development projects already in the final stages. This development moratorium represented a victory for citizens and environmental organizations and attracted media and politicians' attention to bioregional environmental conservation issues. In 2001, the Government of Ontario enacted the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act prohibiting development on 92 percent of the Moraine for the next ten years and allocating \$15 million for the acquisition of sensitive lands (Immen, 2001).

Although fought locally, land use activism in Richmond Hill had far broader implications. At first, residents reacted to the material destruction of natural areas destroyed by the bulldozers—as if nature were condemned to survive only conceptually on promotional signs advertising new subdivision developments. Citizens highlighted the local implications of ecological destruction and the (bio)regional consequences on water, air and species habitats. To an unprecedented conflict over land use and development, citizens reacted with an equally unprecedented cooperation with environmental organizations, which captured media attention, challenged multiple levels of political powers and initiated environmental conservation legislation. Such legislation was quickly purported to be "the strongest environmental land use plan in Canada" as it protected water quality, ecosystems, agriculture, and a vision of "continuous landscape" (Riley, 2001). By 2003, environmentalist discourses concerning the Moraine, especially those focused on ecosystem management and habitat connectivity, pervaded many planning and political institutions. Further more, leaders of the various environmental groups who had mobilized around Moraine conservation went on to sit on provincial advisory panels, land trusts, and city councils.

But just as residents and environmentalists have sought to produce a rural and naturally preserved landscape, so has the development industry endeavoured to co-produce a landscape of tract house subdivisions. While the Oak Ridges Moraine Act sought to stop municipalities from approving, and developers from submitting, any development proposals involving land on the Moraine, a provincial advisory panel was appointed to negotiate with developers whose projects were already underway and had been stopped in Richmond Hill. This advisory group, headed by

---

David Crombie, a former mayor of Toronto and former Conservative member of Parliament, proposed, and had accepted by the provincial government, a contentious swap of publicly owned land on the eastern part of the Moraine as compensation to developers for the many development projects already approved that would not be built. The land swap was proposed in exchange for 440 hectares of land to the east and west of Yonge Street designated for a park and wildlife corridor in Richmond Hill where the Moraine was most threatened by fragmentation. Although many critics argued that the government was not obligated to compensate builders for the full development value of the land because it was zoned agricultural and not residential (the difference in value results in millions of dollars), the land swap was resisted (but ultimately accepted) by developers who insisted on getting land of "equal value" knowing that land along Yonge Street is highly valued.

Despite the rhetoric of preserving the Moraine, development in Richmond Hill continued almost on a business as usual basis with the provincial Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing issuing a zoning order (permitted under the new conservation law) giving developers the automatic right to build thousands of homes on a section of the Oak Ridges Moraine that was supposed to be protected (Immen, 2002). When a newly elected (Liberal) provincial government threatened to block housing development completely on the ecologically sensitive Oak Ridges Moraine in order to honor an election promise, developers rushed to grade projected subdivision sites and strip the land of topsoil. More subdivisions, ironically themed according to the local ecology of creeks, ravines, meadows and forests destroyed in the building process, displayed site plans and models in sales and presentation centers. Developers held grand openings for new developments on the Moraine while being picketed by local activists waving *Save It, Don't Pave It* and *Reclaim the Moraine* signs. These activists also urged the provincial Liberal government to honour its election promises to stop Moraine development. However, after its election, the Liberal government argued that blocking construction of developments on the Moraine that had already received approval would result in costly lawsuits that the government could ill afford to face, thereby generating accusations of Liberal "broken promises" and betrayal of the public trust.

## EMBRACING GREEN IN CALEDON

Caledon's approach to conservation and development stands in contrast with that of Richmond Hill. Caledon prides itself on having been named the greenest town in Ontario<sup>3</sup> and argues that its 'environment first' philosophy is reflected in its land use planning. Located in Peel Region, Caledon is defined by three significant landforms: the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Niagara Escarpment (designated a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in 1990), and the Peel Plain (recognized as some of the best agricultural lands in Canada). While these landforms have been very important for agricultural production and natural resources exploitation (particularly aggregates), they are also recognized for their scenic beauty and environmental quality and fragility. Since the arrival of the first Europeans in the 1820s, Caledon has been a settlement of mills along the Credit River, of limestone and gravel quarries, and of farming activities. From the early 1900s, the area's natural beauty was attracting many weekend visitors from Toronto and it developed as a major center of summer retreats and estates. The area is well known for its numerous

---

local and regional hiking trails, and its “antique trail” linking antique stores and general store-like retail outlets selling local and imported gastronomic products. Caledon is also well known for its horse farms and equestrian activities.

Residents of Caledon are well aware of the richness of its environment. The town sees itself as a rural community that should be protected and supported in order to secure its recreation and tourism base. Although the Town and its residents have a deep attachment to the land, most no longer live “off the land” and instead commute to the city for work. Such attachment is, however, carefully cultivated. In the words of Nicola Ross (2004), local resident, environmentalist and writer, “[i]f we can just keep building up this reputation [of being green], people will start living the life.”

Against the pressure of development, environmentalists frame the debate in terms of maintaining the natural heritage by protecting biodiversity, connectivity, and ecological integrity through conservation and preservation planning, policy, and legislation. Environmental activism in Caledon quickly took institutionalized forms, with environmental organizations working collaboratively with local, regional and provincial governments. In the words of Debbie Crandall (2004), resident and Executive Director of Save the Oak Ridges Moraine, “Caledon does not need Save the Oak Ridges Moraine Coalition” because environmental science and protection were already included in the Town’s official plans. The plan is exceptionally articulated around the preservation, protection and enhancement of natural physical features and biological communities, as well as and cultural heritage resources. In addition to its reliance on environmental science, the plan also contains a comprehensive cultural heritage policy that recognizes that much of “the cultural history involves the use of natural resources and the modification of the natural environment” and therefore seeks to “conserve and promote cultural heritage, as well as the contribution it makes to the character, civic pride, tourism potential, economic benefit and historical appreciation of the community” (Town of Caledon, 2002). So while both natural and cultural heritage policies are used to promote and maintain a particular place identity based on its early industrial glory and resource-based history, they also serve to reinforce collective memories, community narratives and environmental identities. For example, Caledon Countryside Alliance, an environmental organization founded to raise awareness about the value of the countryside “works more closely with government, not opposing government so much, and we can partner with different groups and we are not getting tarred so much with a one-issue brush, which in some ways is kind of liberating” (Ross, 2004). Environmentalism in Caledon has also benefited from political connections and economic influence. Two former premiers of the province live in the town. Another environmental activist group, the Coalition of Concerned Citizens of Caledon (with 5000 members) has actively opposed the expansion of a large limestone quarry by fundraising more than \$625 000 to hire legal and environmental experts. Both the Countryside Alliance and the Coalition of Concerned Citizens have made extensive use and promotion of environmental science as a way to bridge environmental activism and support conservationist policy and planning as a strategy to resist land development pressures.

---

But despite its green aspirations and achievements, the Town of Caledon, just like Richmond Hill, faces the forces favouring the production of development landscapes. Land use conflicts in Caledon have opposed policymakers, developers, farmers, environmentalists, aggregate producers, etc. on the question of land exploitation, profitability and protection. The Town of Caledon is under intense pressure from pro-development forces. From 1976 to 1996, Caledon lost about 15 percent of its farmlands to urban development. Population growth has created ground and surface water problems due to a dependence on septic systems and wells.

The Official Plan of the Region of Peel forecasts that Caledon's current population of 51 000 will grow to 84 000 by 2021. Due to growth policies at the regional and provincial levels, the Town of Caledon is being pressured to take on its "fair share" of regional growth, which so far has been concentrated in the neighboring municipalities of Mississauga and Brampton. In order to limit the impacts of growth on its ecosystems and environmental character, the Town has developed a tri-nodal strategy, designating three "rural service centers" (Caledon, Bolton and the proposed Mayfield West) as the focus of urban development. These locations have been designated so as to strategically avoid the ecologically sensitive areas of the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment, concentrating growth on the town's greenfields along the southern boundaries with Brampton. The irony of the long-term commitment of the Town of Caledon and its citizen groups to environmentalism is that the province's new Greenbelt Plan does not protect Caledon. As Caledon's mayor and the mayors of other rural communities pointed out at the Greenbelt consultations in 2004, freezing development lands on the greenbelt puts even greater pressures on local councils as developers push to rezone agricultural lands for development outside the existing boundaries of the greenbelt.

As remaining farmlands are being developed, protecting agriculture becomes even more important, since agriculture continues to be a large sector in the regional economy (Walton, 2003), and local food systems that are not dependent on long distance transportation gain attention from policymakers. Yet the farming community increasingly considers planning legislation designed to preserve nature and put a greenbelt around the GTA as a threat to their livelihood and lifestyle and an erosion of their autonomy and agency. This is exacerbated by the tensions that arise from the conflicts between residential development and agricultural activities (manure management, dust, pesticide use, odors, etc.). As clearly voiced in the recent Greenbelt consultations, farming is seriously threatened by urban sprawl. Yet, at the same time, farmers feel that the cost of preserving land should not rest only on the shoulders of rural landowners who often see environmental protection as restricting their selling options and benefits and who therefore have been (unsuccessfully) lobbying for compensation. Farmers and environmentalists have attempted to work collaboratively on a land stewardship agenda, particularly on Caledon's pesticide bylaw, but the collaboration was seen as "the kiss of death in terms of the two groups coming together" (Ross, 2004), as farmers feared the eventual extension of the bylaw from lawns to agricultural lands. This resulted in the election of more farmers to town council and the dilution of its green focus. Meanwhile, smaller farmers continue to struggle, and their operations are giving way to agri-tourism or agri-tainment activities for the urban leisure class (e.g. farmers markets, "pick your own fresh produce", country inns, etc.).

---

The City of Caledon and local environmentalists also confronted major industrial and institutional resistances in fighting against aggregate production and policy. The Provincial Policy Statement requires that municipalities protect aggregate resources for potential future extraction. According to Todd Salter (2004), planner for the Town of Caledon, "that policy direction has been treated almost like, by the province and aggregate producers, an overarching policy direction that all other policy direction has to conform to." While some areas have been identified as "high potential mineral resource areas" designating extraction and reserve deposits, the rehabilitation of the aggregate excavation sites has been increasingly considered for resort development, passive and active tourism and, sport fishing, often while allowing continuing aggregate resource removal. The challenge for Caledon has been to address the pressures and potential conflicts of development while preserving rural landscapes perceived as contributing to a higher quality of life.

## CONCLUSION

There are serious limitations to environmental conservation in suburban and exurban development, particularly given its capitalist premise and the intimate relationship between developers and buyers/residents. The merging of environmental knowledge and science, political activism and participatory planning nevertheless shows that individual and institutional environmental values are constructed, though they differ across time and space according to specific local practices and circumstances (Hajer, 1995).

Challenges to sprawl have taken different forms on the periphery of the Greater Toronto Area: in Richmond Hill this has been characterized by a mix of direct action and legislative strategies brought by coalitions of local and regional environmental non-governmental organizations and the interventions of national and international organizations. In contrast, environmental groups in Caledon have deepened long-standing local networks and worked in partnership with a "green" town council and planners. An emphasis on the protection of natural and cultural heritage has been partially deflecting the current pressures of development.

Development in the two towns is typically expressed in a growth discourse that narrates goals of economic prosperity, regional competitiveness, job creation and demographic projections. In such a discourse, conservation is typically subordinated to a growth management strategy that seeks to reduce the degradation of land and resource use in order to enhance sustainability and quality of life. However, such a view of conservation often becomes compromised and/or a coercive "ecologized" façade of development rather than a defence of ecological integrity, biodiversity, and a more balanced human-nonhuman relationship. Geisler and Benford (1998: 140) have noted that the emergence of ecosystem planning and its reliance on environmental science, requiring large reserves at both a regional and broader scale, challenges traditional forms of land use development and tenure. They write that "urban sprawl and conservation sprawl collide" in proximity to large metropolitan areas. Contested constructions of nature underlie these conflicts, challenging us to investigate whose nature is privileged and how land and property rights are socially constructed and shifting.

---

In Richmond Hill and Caledon, the overall provincial growth agenda for housing and the supply of building aggregates is clearly overriding the green aspirations of their citizens. Meanwhile, the public conservation agenda is tightly linked to the maintenance of private property values and rights, constructing a socially exclusive landscape. In both towns, the cost of real estate is among the highest in the Greater Toronto Area, while farming in Caledon is either threatened by development or transformed into agri-tainment operations for the urban visitor. While some predict that rural and urban tensions are likely to become “Canada’s next culture war” (Gillis, 2004: 51), development and conservation, for all their productive and recreational values, invested and contested meanings and conflictual and cooperative practices, will continue to shape landscapes that, in turn, will reshape politics. This article has sought to demonstrate that development is not inevitable but rather negotiated differently according to local political cultures and environmental identities. By the same token, however, environmental conservation is not particularly “neutral” or “natural” but rather is power-laden. And representations of nature remain diverse, changing and contingent on cultural practices and political narratives.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on our ongoing collaborative SSHRC-funded research project entitled “Unlikely Allies: Citizen Planning and Environmentalism on the Oak Ridges Moraine” (410-2002-1483). A shorter version of this text was presented by Liette Gilbert at the Symposium *Les trois sources de la ville-campagne*, in Cerisy, France, November 2004, and published in a forthcoming book edited by Augustin Berque, Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin and Philippe Bonnin. Special thanks to Teresa Abbruzzesse, Lucrezia Iandoli, Hajo Beeckman, Rajiv Rawat, and graduate students of the Bioregional Planning Workshop, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Summer 2004.

#### NOTES

- 1 Our joint research on environmentalist challenges and citizen planning on the Oak Ridges Moraine draws upon diverse sources: newspaper archives, the Environmental Bill of Rights registry, deputations to Richmond Hill Council, our own participant observation at council meetings in Richmond Hill, public consultation meetings organized by the Oak Ridges Moraine Advisory Panel, participation in workshops held by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute, interviews with environmental activists, planners and politicians, interviews conducted while teaching a graduate bioregional workshop focused on the Town of Caledon, and a panel of key Oak Ridges activists held at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. We also attended public meetings on the Greenbelt and Growth Management Plans.
- 2 In Richmond Hill, the average household income is \$87 636 and in Caledon, it reaches \$98 043 (in contrast to \$69 125 in the City of Toronto). Average values of dwelling are \$312 071 in Richmond Hill and \$295 583 in Caledon (\$282 715 in the City of Toronto) (Statistics Canada, 2003).
- 3 Caledon won first place (tied with Orillia) in TVO Studio 2’s Greenest Town contest in June 2003. Caledon was recognized for its comprehensive environmental planning, its efforts to protect the “natural” landscapes from development, and its regulations on quarry activities and pesticide use (Town of Caledon, 2003).

---

## REFERENCES

- BELL, William F. (2002) Mayor of Richmond Hill, Richmond Hill Council Meeting, November 18.
- BLOMLEY, Nicholas (2004) *Unsettling the City. Urban Land and the Politics of Property*. New York, Routledge.
- BOURNE, Larry (2000) Urban Canada in Transition to the Twenty-First Century: Trends, Issues and Visions. In T. Bunting and P. Filion, eds. *Canada Cities in Transition*, by New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 26-59.
- BOURNE, Larry S., BUNCE, Michael, TAYLOR, Laura, LUKA, Nik and MAURER, J. (2003) Contested Ground: The Dynamics of Peri-Urban Growth in the Toronto Region. *Canadian Journal of Regional Science*, vol. 26, n<sup>os</sup> 1-2, pp. 251-273.
- BULLARD, Robert D. et al. (2000) *Sprawl City. Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta*. Washington (DC), Island Press.
- CAREY, Elaine (2003) Census shows 905 home to more immigrants. *Toronto Star*, February 11, [On line]. <http://www.thestar.com>.
- COSGROVE, Denis E. (1998) *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press.
- CRANDALL, Debbe (2004) Save the Oak Ridges Moraine Coalition, Interview, Bioregional Workshop. April.
- DUNCAN, James S. and DUNCAN, Nancy G. (2004) *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb*. New York, Routledge.
- FABER, Daniel R. and McCARTY, Deborah (2003) Neo-liberalism, Globalization and the Struggle for Ecological Democracy: Sustainability and Environmental Justice. In R. D. Agyeman, Bullard and B. Evans, eds. *Development in an Unequal World*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, pp. 38-63.
- FILION, Pierre (2003) Towards Smart Growth? The Difficult Implementation of Alternatives to Urban Dispersion. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, vol. 12, n<sup>o</sup> 1, pp. 48-70.
- FORSYTH, Tim (2003) *Critical Political Ecology: The Politics of Environmental Science*. London, Routledge.
- GEISLER, Charles C. and BEDFORD Barbara L. (1998) Ecosystem Management. Who's Entitled? In H. Jacobs, ed. *Who Owns America? Social Conflict Over Property Rights* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 131-156.
- GILLIS, Charlie (2004) The War between Town and Country. *Macleans*, November 29, pp. 50-59.
- HAJER, Martin (1995) *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*. Oxford, Clarendon.
- HARRIS, Richard (2004) *Creeping Conformity. How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- HOEFFELNER, Carrie (2002) Director, Jefferson Forest Residents Association, Richmond Hill Council Meeting, November 18.
- HELFERTY, Natalie (2004) Richmond Hill Naturalists, Interview with Lucrezia Iandoli. May.
- HOGG, Brenda (2002) Richmond Hill's local and regional councillor, Richmond Hill Council Meeting, November 18.



- 
- IMMEN, Wallace (2001) Tories table bill to save most of moraine. *The Globe and Mail*, November 2, p. A18.
- IMMEN, Wallace (2002) Construction on moraine sparks anger. *The Globe and Mail*, March 17, p. A14.
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2005) *Greenbelt Protection Plan 2005*. Toronto, Queen's Printer.
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2002) *Oak Ridges Moraine Protection Plan 2002*. Toronto, Queen's Printer.
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2001) *Oak Ridges Moraine Protection Act 2001*. Toronto, Queen's Printer.
- NOSS, Reed (2001) Conservation Science Inc., Presentation at Richmond Hill Council on behalf of Save the Rouge Valley Systems. January 18.
- RILEY, John (2001) Nature Conservancy of Canada, City of Toronto Moraine Meeting, Toronto, October 3.
- ROBBINS, Paul (2004) *Political Ecology*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- ROME, Adam (2001) *The Bulldozer in the Countryside. Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- ROSS, Nicola (2004) Caledon Countryside Alliance, Interview Bioregional Workshop. April.
- SALTER, Todd (2004) Planner, Town of Caledon, Interview Bioregional Workshop. April.
- SEWELL, John (2000) Upstream, downstream: Will Richmond Hill Council ruin our rivers? *Eye*, January 27, p. 14.
- STAMP, Robert M. (1991) *Early Days in Richmond Hill. A History of the Community to 1930*. Town of Richmond Hill Public Library Board. [On line]. <http://www.edrh.rhpl.richmondhill.on.ca>.
- Statistics Canada (2003) *2001 Census Data*. [On line] <http://www.statscan.ca>.
- Town of Caledon (2002) *Amendment n° 173 to the Official Plan for the Town of Caledon Planning Area*.
- Town of Caledon (2003) Caledon, Orillia, and Waterloo winners in Studio 2's Greenest Town Contest. June 18. [On line]. <http://www.caledon.on.ca/cnews.asp?id=175>.
- WALKER, Peter and FORTMANN, Louise (2003) Whose Landscape? A Political Ecology of the "Exurban" Sierra. *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 10, pp. 469-491.
- WALTON, Margaret (2003) *Agriculture in the Central Ontario Zone*. Toronto, Neptis Foundation.
- WEKERLE, Gerda R. (2000) Civil Society: A Challenge to Planners. *Planners Network*, vol. 14, n° 3, pp. 16-17.