



# **WaterScape III**

## **Resilient Landscapes and Healthy Waters in South-central Ontario**

# **Summary, Recommendations, and Next Steps**

### Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Project Description	2
Excerpts from Slide Decks	4
Consensus from Discussions	5
Recent Government Trends	6
Final Recommendations	7
Next Steps	8
Appendix A: Other Priority Issues	9

**September 1, 2020**

WaterScape III, a project of the Ontario Headwaters Institute,  
was delivered in partnership with other organizations.



## Introduction

Formed in 2003 and granted charitable status in 2004, the original mandate of the Ontario Headwaters Institute was depicted by its name: to protect small streams and the upstream areas and wetlands where they begin.

As all water is connected and connects all living things, the OHI soon found itself increasingly involved in issues addressing biodiversity, land use planning, and watershed management. As a result, we sought and received amended letters patent to expand our mandate to full watersheds, their natural heritage, and receiving waters.

This mandate is delivered primarily through three portfolios: Research, Education, and Civic Engagement. While we often seek to engage other organizations in our efforts, the Civic Engagement portfolio is a bit unique in that actions in this portfolio require collaboration with partners.

Each of the three WaterScape projects to date were delivered through the civic engagement model, and would not have been possible without the amazing support of many partners.

In February of 2018, WaterScape I had thirteen partners, conducted six meetings and one webinar, and involved over 150 participants in commenting on a provincial initiative called Protecting Water for Future Generations: Growing the Greenbelt in the Outer Ring. The proceedings demonstrate widespread concerns about flawed mapping, narrow constraints on expanding the Greenbelt, and inadequate protections for water both in the study area and elsewhere. More than 140 people signed a submission with recommendations to address these issues.

WaterScape II, delivered over the summer of 2019 with about ten publicity partners, consisted of a survey with questions on various aspects of sustainable land use planning. Over 30% of 400 surveys were returned, indicating a high consensus in the environmental stewardship community in favour of both a more sustainable approach to planning and deep concerns about the priorities and direction of a government elected in June 2018.

Both the proceedings and submission from WaterScape I as well as the report on the survey from WaterScape II are available at [www.ontarioheadwaters.ca/waterscape](http://www.ontarioheadwaters.ca/waterscape).

Since the provincial election of June 2018 and throughout WaterScape III, the Ontario government has consistently articulated that it wants to make the province open for business, open for development, and that it sees environmental protection as red tape.

Over the same period, it has cut resources for agencies and advisory groups, curtailed public consultation, and used omnibus bills as well as time limits in the legislature, on more than one occasion, to restrict democratic norms.

**Rather than be dismayed at the government's direction, the OHI felt that it was fundamentally important to touch base once again with Ontario's community stewardship organizations in south-central Ontario, through this project, to add context to past expressions of concern as well as their vision for resilient landscapes and healthy waters.**

We were greatly impressed with the thoughtful contributions of our partners and the participants in WaterScape III, and we thank them all.

We hope this report and the recommendations are helpful and we look forward to continued collaboration in the evolution of WaterScape, as described in Next Steps.

## Project Description

WaterScape III was launched in February 2020 with the release of a comprehensive discussion document. Based on the two previous projects described in the introduction, its mission was

**To develop a renewed policy framework to ensure resilient landscapes  
and healthy water in South-central Ontario.**

Two broad policy recommendations and 22 suggested priority actions were offered in the Discussion Document. The two draft policy recommendations were:

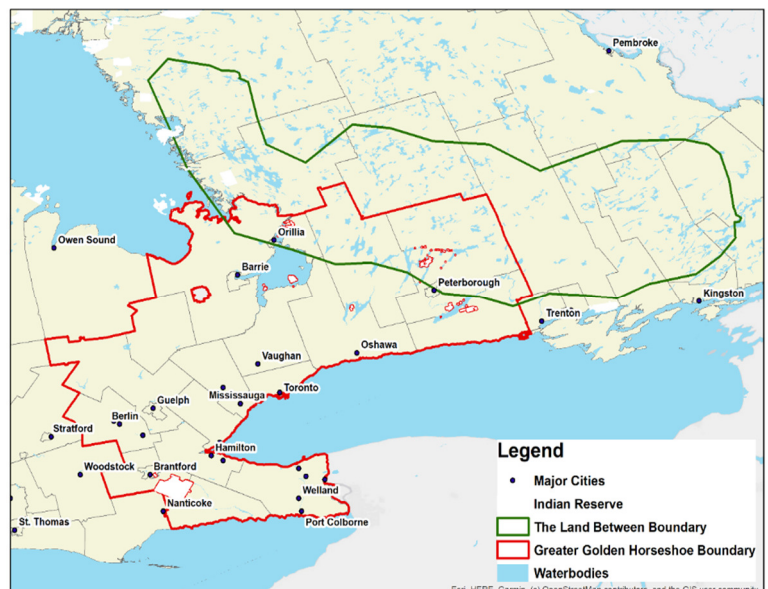
- Resilient Landscapes -** Entrepreneurial and publicly-funded development in Ontario should aspire to sustainable land use planning and management in order to provide for resilient landscapes across South-central Ontario. A sustainability lens for land use planning should be based on watershed and sub-watershed health; complete communities with sustainable buildings and green infrastructure; and ensure a level playing field for public engagement and legal recourse.
- Healthy Waters -** Ontario should perform a comprehensive review of and integrate all aspects of its water protection and management framework in order to ensure protection for both biodiversity and human needs for drinking water, irrigation, and other uses in a changing climate. This should include both protection and conservation measures and include the Great Lakes, other surface waters, groundwater, and wetlands.

Concept development and early outreach for WaterScape III were funded by a donation from the Edward Bronfman Memorial Legacy Fund at the Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto.

The project was initially designed to facilitate discussion at 8 – 12 public meetings, leading to a second draft and then a final sign-on document in a year-long process, with support for publicity from the Ontario Environment Network.

The scope of the project was similarly ambitious, defining South-central Ontario as the Greater Golden Horseshoe and The Land Between, a unique eco-tone between the Canadian Shield and the Great Lakes Ecoregion, as shown.

The Land Between, a charity working to protect this important area, supported WaterScape as a valued implementation partner, providing resources, contacts, and funding for community engagement.



*Drawing by Daniel Grenon of The Land Between*



The first public gathering unfortunately coincided with the Ontario declaration on the Covid-19 pandemic, after which public meetings were impossible. Several of the organizations with which we were to partner for in-person discussions found that reduced office hours, staff time, and the need to focus on the delivery of existing programs, as well as home schooling, made even the staging of webinars more difficult than in normal times.

In spite of the challenges, we were able to stage 5 webinars after the first public meeting, and had a total of about 165 participants. These discussions were local in nature and included:

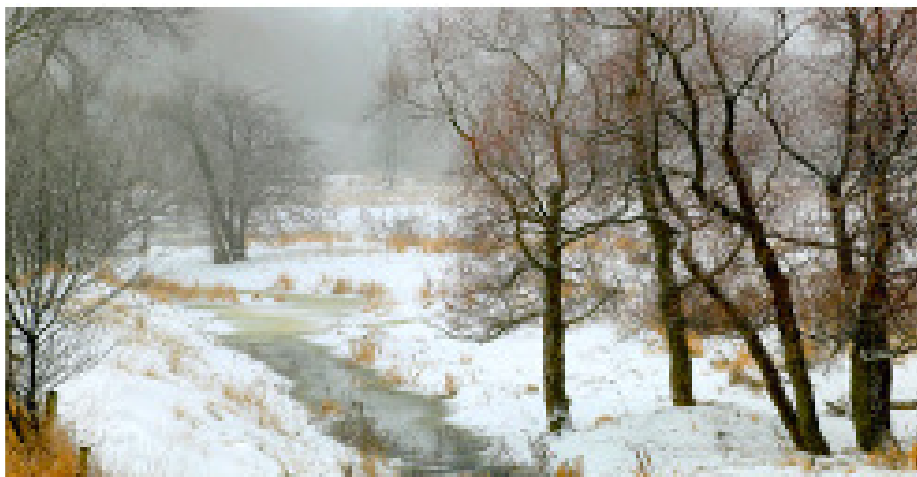
- March 19 Green Durham Association, Regional Municipality of Durham – about 60 participants
- March 27 The Land Between and Scales Nature Park, Orillia and area– about 20 participants
- April 23 Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition, Simcoe County – about 15 participants
- May 5 Land Over Landings, Pickering and area – about 20 participants
- May 24 Gravel Watch Ontario, aggregate extraction - about 30 participants
- June 3 Muskoka Watershed Council, Muskoka – about 20 participants

We thank all of the funders, partners, and participants.

Slide decks presented to stimulate discussion at each gathering sought to provide a significant volume of information on both land use planning and managing water. As described overleaf, each deck stressed the historic strengths of many of Ontario’s initiatives, described traditional tensions, and characterized reductions in environmental protection under the current Ontario government as recent slights. The decks also provided both the two draft high-level policy recommendations and the 22 suggested priority actions from the Discussion Document.

Rather than pursue the two high-level policy recommendations and the 22 priority actions separately, participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the issues and sought to weave them together, along with their own concerns. As a result, the original policy recommendations were amended from two to nine, and biodiversity was elevated to equal importance alongside land use planning and healthy waters, as per page 7.

**In addition, participants clearly articulated the need for an on-going WaterScape program to help coordinate efforts to maintain and/or restore Ontario’s commitment to environmental protection and democratic norms. Future efforts in that regard are described in Next Steps, on page 8, and we will be announcing specific initiatives with or shortly after the release of this report.**



*Watersheds connect land, water, and all living things. Photo by David McCammon*

**Excerpts from slide decks presented at the webinars**

**Land Use Planning**

**Protecting Water**

<b>Historic Strengths</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act</li> <li>✓ Planning Act</li> <li>✓ Provincial Policy Statement</li> <li>✓ Oak Ridges Moraine Act</li> <li>✓ Greenbelt Act</li> </ul> <p>Plus the Ontario Natural Heritage Reference Manual, Ontario Biodiversity Strategy, the Endangered Species Act, Agricultural and Natural Heritage System Mapping, etc</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conservation Authorities Act</li> <li>✓ Environmental Protection Act</li> <li>✓ Ontario Water Resources Act</li> <li>✓ Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act</li> <li>✓ Provincial Policy Statement</li> <li>✓ Clean Water Act</li> </ul> <p>Plus the Nutrient Management Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, Canada-Ontario Agreement, Provincial Water Quality Monitoring Objectives, Water Quality &amp; Quantity Reports, etc</p>
<b>Traditional Tensions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggregate Resources Act</li> <li>• Lack of resources and implementation plans</li> <li>• Lack of oversight / OMB / LPATs</li> </ul> <p>Plus density and distance vs cost; highways versus public transportation; the housing mix vs complete communities; free market vs sustainable planning and sustainable buildings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drainage Act</li> <li>• Water Quality for First Nations</li> <li>• Effluent permitting in general</li> <li>• Permits to Take Water</li> <li>• Low Water Response Plans</li> </ul> <p>Plus federal / provincial jurisdiction; lack of resources and implementation plans; absence of data; lack of cumulative monitoring; lack of oversight / conflicts of interest</p>
<b>Recent Sights</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Omnibus Bills and lack of consultation</li> <li>▪ General Threats to the Greenbelt</li> <li>▪ Bill 66</li> <li>▪ Species at Risk amendment – Pay to Slay</li> <li>▪ PPS amendments – eg: low risk development</li> <li>▪ Housing Action Plan, from should to shall to maybe</li> <li>▪ Cancelled support for various advisory councils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Omnibus Bills and lack of consultation</li> <li>▪ Removed conservation of lands from Conservation Authorities Act and raised uncertainty about the on-going delivery of watershed management services*</li> <li>▪ Almost no prevention in response to flood report</li> <li>▪ Great Lakes Protection Act – few council meetings</li> <li>▪ Wither Source Water Protection Committees?</li> <li>▪ Revoked municipal permitting for aggregates below the water table</li> <li>▪ Wetland protection plan has been archived</li> <li>▪ Will watershed report cards and data survive?</li> </ul> <p><i>*Edited for clarity after the webinars</i></p>
<b>Original WaterScape Policy Recommendations</b>	
<p>Entrepreneurial and publicly-funded development in Ontario should aspire to sustainable land use planning and management in order to provide for resilient landscapes across South-central Ontario. A sustainability lens for land use planning should be based on watershed and sub-watershed health; complete communities with sustainable buildings and green infrastructure; and ensure a level playing field for public engagement and legal recourse.</p>	<p>Ontario should perform a comprehensive review of and integrate all aspects of its water protection and management framework in order to ensure protection for both biodiversity and human needs for drinking water, irrigation, and other uses in a changing climate. This should include both protection and conservation measures and include the Great Lakes, other surface waters, groundwater, and wetlands.</p>

## Consensus from Discussions

Regardless of the shift from meetings to webinars caused by Covid-19, participants valued the information provided in the Discussion Document and slide decks and provided knowledgeable and detailed concerns about Ontario's environmental protection regime and recent changes to it.

Consensus from discussions included that:

- While there were numerous discussions on specific issues such as aggregates, agriculture, conservation authorities, and the housing action plan, there was significant consensus on one over-arching perspective: participants wanted high-level commitments from the Ontario government to integrate environmental, social, and economic decision-making to move Ontario toward sustainability across all sectors;
- Participants further articulated a strong preference to integrate their own observations with the suggested recommendations and priority actions in the Discussion Document into a single set of recommendations;
- **This preference melded local observations with the 2 recommendations and 22 priority actions from the Discussion Document into 9 high-level recommendations. It also elevated biodiversity to the same level of importance as land use planning and healthy waters in our final recommendations on page 7;**
- On biodiversity, there were deep concerns about the impact of excessive development, in a weakened permitting regime, on South-central Ontario's regional biodiversity and agricultural well-being;
- On land use planning, participants were concerned that a new atmosphere of expedited approvals for development might not only harm ecosystems but also be both environmentally and financially unsustainable, and expressed support for a sustainability lens for development in Ontario.
- Participants also expressed detailed awareness about:
  - The large number of government initiatives to make development and aggregate extraction "easier", often at the expense of environmental protection;
  - The lack of evidence to support many of the government's environmental reduction initiatives, such as on the housing action plan and the review of the Provincial Policy Statement; and,
  - The lack of consultation and the use of omnibus bills to restrict democratic engagement.
- On protecting water, participants expressed great interest in retaining and improving Ontario's watershed management framework, including cumulative monitoring and adaptive management. with a strong, on-going role for conservation authorities.
- There was also significant interest in the OHI's suggestion about creating regional water boards to review and assess the cumulative effectiveness of Ontario's numerous watershed and water protection programs, from wetland protection and low water advisories through permits to take water, groundwater protection and flood prevention to watershed management, water pollution, and drinking water protection; and,
- Overall, participants expressed appreciation for the Discussion Document, slide decks, and draft recommendations, and wanted the Headwaters Institute to refine them, increase outreach, and recruit more organizations and the public to an on-going WaterScape initiative.



## Recent Government Trends

Before we provide final recommendations and next steps, it is worth noting that while WaterScape III was being delivered, the Ontario government continued and indeed accelerated its retrenchment of existing environmental protection, as well as its curtailment of democratic norms.

Actions on this front included proposed Amendment 1 to A Place to Grow, the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe; a proposed framework for water quantity that in fact narrowly focused on permits to take water; a fondness for Ministerial Zoning Orders in place of normal permitting and consultation processes; and Bill 197, now passed as the Covid-19 Economic Recovery Act. Yet another omnibus bill that sought to amend numerous existing acts, Bill 197 was subjected to time limits and passed with no consultation and no legislative committee meetings, for which it is now the object of court action for violating the Environmental Bill of Rights.

These and other actions over the last few years paint an unflattering picture of government trends. First, while the government repeatedly refers to environmental red tape and duplication, it has preferred to seek input from the business community on how to eliminate environmental protection rather than hold a broader discussion on how to improve administrative processes while safeguarding environmental protection.

Second, in many of its initiatives, the government uses grandiose language to both cast aspersions on past environmental initiatives, such as referring to the Province's "outdated environmental assessment process" (as if it has no responsibility for such) and/or to suggest its actions will result in admirable if vague outcomes such as "the most effective and affordable ways to protect our environment". The OHI urges the government to cease the use of grandiose titles for narrow initiatives and to rely more on science and less on marketing claims.

Third, both of the above contradict the guiding principle on Trust and Transparency in the Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan. We urge the government to formally adopt the plan, issue a decision notice to the environmental registry, and make greater efforts to deliver on trust and transparency.

Perhaps the most disturbing example of a lack of trust and transparency is the Covid-19 Economic Recovery Act mentioned above. While governments around the world have benchmarked the need to link a post-pandemic recovery to sustainable actions and a greener economy, such as the European Union's €750 billion initiative, the Ontario government appears to have stuck a label on an act that does little for a broad recovery and had no debate while, in the words of one of our sister organizations, sending environmental oversight back to the 1970s.

**Given the trends in the current government's actions, WaterScape and other initiatives designed to protect the environment and encourage the transition to sustainable development may have a difficult road ahead.**

**Regardless, we hold out hope that the final recommendations and next steps overleaf might help stimulate a more balanced approach to integrate Ontario's environmental, economic, and social decision-making.**



*Photo by David McCammon*

## Final Recommendations

The list below reflects, to the best of our ability, a consensus of opinion from 6 meetings involving 165 participants to merge the content of the Discussion Document and their own perceptions into one set of high-level recommendations. To ensure some semblance to reality, we vetted a draft of this report through each of our partner organizations.

We admit to taking a few liberties with the text. For example, we polished some wording, such as adding reference to the Ontario Biodiversity Strategy to recommendation 1 when it had been omitted from one of the 22 priority actions. We also linked concerns about the housing action plan and the Province's abandonment of public consultation and other democratic norms to widespread concerns about the Province's population and employment projections, an issue that emerged only in June under proposed Amendment 1 to A Place to Grow.

**That stated, we believe that this list melds the 2 suggested policies and the 22 priority actions from the Discussion Document with the concerns of the participants into 9 reasonable and practical recommendations to better protect Ontario's biodiversity, landscapes, and waters.**

### Preserve Ontario's Biodiversity

1. Ontario should protect biodiversity by updating the Ontario Biodiversity Strategy and *Biodiversity: It's in Our Nature*, in conjunction with the anticipated 2021 conference of the Convention on Biological Diversity;
2. Ontario should establish natural heritage targets similar to those in "How Much Habitat is Enough?"; and,
3. Natural heritage system planning should be required in municipal official plans across Ontario.

### Maintain Resilient Landscapes

4. Ontario should ensure the application of section 2.2.1.a. of the Provincial Policy Statement, which requires planning authorities to use the watershed as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning. This should apply to all uses, including aggregates, agriculture, forestry, and urban areas;
5. Given deep concerns on the housing action plan, the absence of meaningful consultations, the use of omnibus bills, and the general unreliability of provincial population and employment projections, the Province needs to re-evaluate the implementation of its housing action plan; and,
6. To support the transition to sustainable development, Ontario should develop and implement a sustainability lens for land use planning and management, providing guidance on sustainable planning and operating practices, complete communities, sustainable buildings, and public engagement.

### Protect Healthy Waters

7. Ontario should perform a comprehensive review of all aspects of its watershed management and water protection regimes toward the goal of transitioning to Integrated Watershed Management (IWM), including cumulative monitoring and adaptive management;
8. Conservation authorities should have a strong, on-going role in watershed management and the transition to IWM. For areas without conservation authorities, the review recommended above should identify how new or similar bodies could be mandated to implement integrated watershed management; and,
9. To help improve inter-agency and public collaboration on water, the Province should consider creating or supporting the creation of Regional Water Boards to help identify ways to improve the delivery of integrated watershed management, and to enhance public engagement, stewardship, transparency, and accountability.



Photo by David McCammon



## Next Steps

The OHI was pleased to act as the facilitator for the community discussions held during WaterScape III, with the collaboration of so many partners, and with the nature and extent of the thoughtful observations and recommendations made by participants.

We commit ourselves to building on the success to date with the following next steps.

- A. The OHI will transition WaterScape from a project into an on-going program under its Civic Engagement portfolio; pursue the Recommendations and Next Steps in this report; continue to recruit partners for specific projects; and, as requested by participants in WaterScape III, we will increase outreach and recruit support for on-going WaterScape initiatives.

**Update:** *We have changed WaterScape from a series of projects into a standing OHI program, as reflected on our websites [www.ontarioheadwaters.ca](http://www.ontarioheadwaters.ca) and [www.waterscape.ca](http://www.waterscape.ca). In addition, we will be launching a series of outreach initiatives to engage more organizations and people in WaterScape. The first, to be released September 1 with this report, will solicit support for a Declaration to Preserve Ontario's Ecological Integrity. Support for the Declaration will be open through August 2021.*

- B. Having delivered WaterScape III on a regional basis across South-central Ontario, the OHI will seek to facilitate broader discussion on the three themes of the project's recommendations: Biodiversity, Resilient Landscapes, and Healthy Waters.

**Update:** *We are already working on these discussions; can confirm that the first one will be on biodiversity; and will provide more information soon.*

- C. The OHI will develop a more fulsome description of and seek to facilitate discussions about the proposed Regional Water Boards.

**Update:** *The OHI will prepare a concept note on Regional Water Boards: their purpose, core objectives, and how they might function. For example, RWBs could receive and review water and watershed reports from relevant local sources, assess the cumulative effectiveness of numerous programs, and recommend ways to improve (integrated) watershed management. They could also help establish priorities for watershed restoration actions that cross-jurisdictional boundaries. In some areas, it may be feasible to transition Source Protection Committees into Regional Water Boards. For these and areas without Source Protection Committees, there were clear desires that future work on RWBs scope out governance and funding models, include Indigenous Traditional Knowledge, increase public engagement and stewardship, and address transparency and accountability.*

We look forward to further collaboration with existing and future partners - downstream, as we like to say.

*Andrew McCammon*

Executive Director  
Ontario Headwaters Institute

## **Appendix A: Other Priority Issues** – Items amended from the original 22 suggested priority actions and noted here for possible future discussion

### **For Resilient Landscapes**

#### Natural Heritage

- L1. The provincial government should establish provincial natural heritage targets for South-central Ontario similar to the federal guideline “How Much Habitat is Enough”, including targets for percentages of watersheds to be retained in natural heritage, wetlands, and natural heritage buffers along stream edges. This new vision should be harmonized to the Natural Heritage Reference Manual and set direction on how to identify and prioritize restoration where needed and provide provincial over-sight for implementation. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- L2. Strengthen requirements for planning authorities to implement section 2.1 of the Provincial Policy Statement with respect to natural heritage. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- L3. Ensure the development and implementation of the cumulative reporting mentioned in the PPS.
- L4. Ensure that any reviews of the PPS are informed by reports on the PPS’ efficacy, to be made available to the public at the outset of any PPS review.
- L5. Implement Ontario’s Biodiversity Strategy (2011) and strengthen protection and recovery plans for species at risk. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- L6. Ensure the continued inclusion of the indicator for forest conditions in watershed report cards.
- L7. Require natural heritage system planning in municipal official plans across Ontario. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- L8. Identify mechanisms to expand the existing Greenbelt and create similar areas where needed, perhaps on thresholds based on urban growth in a municipality.

#### Aggregates and Agriculture

- L9. Access to aggregates is fundamental to Ontario’s construction industry, but current permitting conditions for extraction, operations, monitoring, transportation, and rehabilitation are out of sync with their impact on local communities and natural heritage, thereby externalizing costs. We need a new approach.
- L10. Establish stronger programs to protect agricultural lands, including mechanisms to keep such lands in agriculture and encourage farm succession.
- L11. Encourage a transition to sustainable agriculture, including increased support for agricultural land trusts and conservancies, using creative financial incentives as may be needed.

#### Municipal Planning

- L12. Create a complementary document to the Provincial Policy Statement, or a section within it, providing direction to planning authorities and municipalities on sustainable planning and sustainable buildings.
- L13. Embrace green infrastructure in land use planning as a way to protect, conserve, and manage both landscapes and water.

#### Public Engagement

- L14. Develop educational material, for both the public and specific sectors, about the inter-connections between natural systems, the economy, and social wellbeing identifying how pressures such as habitat loss, over-exploitation, and climate change may impact local ecological integrity.

**For Healthy Waters**

- W1. Ontario should develop a comprehensive framework to address all aspects of its water protection and management regime. This framework should:
- Designate a lead ministry to co-ordinate all aspects of the protection and management of water and aquatic species across the province;
  - Support the evolution of the province toward integrated watershed management, cumulative monitoring, and adaptive management; and,
  - Provide a road map on the roles of different ministries regarding water and ensure collaboration where needed. This must include responsibilities for aggregates, agriculture, drinking water, forest management, the Great Lakes, permits to take water, surface water conditions, and urban development. There should also be a co-ordinated vision for research, cumulative monitoring, water conservation, and similar issues. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- W2. The Province should harmonize definitions in all regulations, permit application procedures, permit conditions, and the provision of adequate implementation and monitoring support for Ontario's water.
- W3. Ontario should establish thresholds for action when monitoring results indicate that the Provincial Water Quality Objectives or permit conditions have been exceeded.
- W4. Ontario should retain the role of conservation authorities in watershed planning and management, the conservation of land, and flood management, and establish thresholds for establishing new conservation authorities where development warrants their creation. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- W5. Identify and support an on-going role for Source Water Protection Committees. One such role could be to transition them into Regional Watershed Advisory Boards to receive and review relevant local reports and to recommend actions. *(Incorporated into the final recommendations)*
- W6. Abolish the Great Lakes Guardian Council and replace it with biannual public meetings of the chairs of the Regional Watershed Advisory Boards recommended above.
- W7. Incorporate water reporting required under environmental compliance agreements into provincial databases and reports, and ensure that all water data is made available to the public in a timely manner.
- W8. Establish meaningful education and engagement programs on the value of Ontario's water and the need for both increased stewardship and conservation.