



**POLICY NAME: LAND STEWARDSHIP**

| Date                        | Action   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| April 30, 2007              | Approved by the Board of Directors   |
| September 2021 – April 2022 | Reviewed and revised; incorporated Stewardship Budgeting and Funding and Volunteer Property Management Teams Policies; formatted to current template |
| April 11, 2022              | Approved by the Board of Directors   |
|                             |  |

**SCOPE**

This policy applies to The Couchiching Conservancy (CC) Board of Directors (the Board), staff, contractors, volunteers, and the general public.

**DEFINITIONS**

**Community Science:** (also known as Citizen Science) the practice of members of the general public voluntarily participating in the collection of scientific data relating to the natural world, typically as part of a collaborative project.

**Conservation Easement Lands:** properties in private or municipal ownership on which CC holds a legal interest through a conservation easement agreement registered on the property title.

**Conservation Goals:** documented in the property management plan, based on conservation targets for the nature reserve, which may include restoration, restricted use, planting, removal of invasive species, etc.

**Conservation Targets:** the most significant elements of biodiversity where conservation action should be focused. These targets are often associated with the features that triggered acquisition of the land.

**Contingency Plan:** a plan that names a backup non-profit organization(s) to take over the nature reserves in the exceptional event of a land trust ceasing to exist or where they can no longer own or manage them.

**Management Activities:** includes any activity documented in a property management plan for the restoration or preservation of nature reserves, or for the control of public uses on nature reserves.

**Management Agreement Lands:** properties owned by another organization or agency and managed under agreement by CC.

**Nature Reserves:** properties owned by CC for long term conservation of their ecological values.

**Property Management Plan:** a written document created by staff, contractors and/or volunteers which identifies conservation targets, action plans and ecological attributes on the nature reserve.

## **GENERAL STANDARDS**

1. This policy supersedes all previous CC policies related to the stewardship of CC owned nature reserves, which are now considered to be rescinded.
2. This policy will comply with all applicable legislation related to land stewardship, as well as applicable Indigenous treaties. CC will also comply with the Canadian Land Trust Alliance's *Canadian Land Trust Standards & Practices (2019)* and utilize Ontario Land Trust Alliance's resource library and best practices guidance.
3. This policy applies to CC nature reserves only. It does not apply to management agreement lands or conservation easement lands, which are managed according to the principles described in their individual agreements.
4. Land stewardship goals are to:
  - a. preserve, protect and support the integrity and biodiversity of natural ecosystems on nature reserves;
  - b. restore nature reserves where necessary to overcome degraded conditions and combat climate change;
  - c. provide appropriate access to nature reserves for public education, personal renewal, passive recreation, and research; and
  - d. minimize or mitigate conflict with land uses on adjacent nature reserves.
5. All management activities must ensure, to the best of CC capabilities, the long-term survival of representative natural community types and native species, especially those identified as conservation targets.
6. Land stewardship for CC has always included the process of working collaboratively with all landowners (ranchers, residents, commercial operators, etc.) making people a part of the landscape, in addition to the flora and fauna. CC is also committed to engage with Indigenous communities in the Couchiching-Severn region to better understand their way of knowing, and how that knowledge should be reflected in the stewardship of CC nature reserves.

## **POLICY**

### **1. LAND STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES**

- 1.1. Spurred on by the climate emergency, CC is accelerating the pace of acquisition and protection to the extent of its capacity using the current natural heritage strategy as a guide (i.e., *CC Conservation Priorities, 2020*). The focus on capacity to steward protected nature reserves at the highest standard remains important, but it is subordinate to the imperative to bring threatened land under ownership.
- 1.2. The immediate management implications of each nature reserve acquisition or contractual stewardship commitment will be determined and documented in the property management plan, and the immediate and long-term financial implications (e.g., land management, stewardship and enforcement) will be estimated and tracked.
- 1.3. Dedicated funding to provide for maintenance of CC nature reserves is based on a target of 15% of the value of the land at acquisition, and assessed by the Executive Director on a case-by-case basis. This is to ensure preservation of ecological values, protection from liability and capacity to respond to contraventions of permitted uses. In the case of a crucial acquisition, however, acquiring the property quickly may be more important than having the stewardship funds on hand at transfer time.
- 1.4. CC is prepared to use all available legal tools to protect CC nature reserves or adjacent lands as the situation demands, as per our *Advocacy Policy*. Accessible stewardship funds will be maintained to defend against property incursions and provide capacity to respond to detrimental impacts.

### **2. MANAGEMENT OF NATURE RESERVES**

- 2.1. Each nature reserve will have a written property management plan based on current science, as well as an ecological survey and stewardship activities that are appropriate to sustain or enhance the natural heritage features of the nature reserve.
- 2.2. New nature reserves will have a draft property management plan within the first 12 months of acquisition. All property management plans will be reviewed every five years to update activities and status.
- 2.3. Prior to or immediately after CC nature reserves are acquired, a baseline report will be prepared to identify conservation targets and factors relevant to future management of each nature reserve.
- 2.4. All property management plans and activities will make use of the best and most current available science to meet the management needs of conservation targets.

- 2.5. By 2025, all CC nature reserves will have active volunteer components of Community Science and other engagement programs to ensure effective monitoring and maintenance of nature reserves with staff oversight in accordance with property management plans.
- 2.6. As required, and in accordance with its property management plan, nature reserves will be monitored for their ecological health and biodiversity and adaptively managed by staff and trained volunteers in the Community Science Program.
- 2.7. Management priorities will be outlined in the property management plan or interim stewardship statement prior to any undertaking.
- 2.8. The property management plan may authorize staff or volunteers to use tools or activities for management purposes beyond those generally permitted to visitors (e.g., ATV use, vehicular access, removal of invasive species).
- 2.9. Management activities will incorporate appropriate steps to minimize safety risks to staff, visitors and volunteers on nature reserves. Refer to *Guidelines for The Couchiching Conservancy Staff in the Field* for more information.
- 2.10. Management problems, such as encroachments, trespass and other ownership challenges, will be addressed in an appropriate and timely manner and the actions taken will be documented.
- 2.11. For lands that have been certified as an ecological gift, detected changes or impacts to the natural features of the nature reserve will be reported to Environment and Climate Change Canada.
- 2.12. As directed by the *Canadian Land Trust Standards & Practices (2019)* document, a contingency plan for all nature reserves will be developed to prepare for the unlikely event CC ceases to exist or can no longer own or manage them.
- 2.13. If a nature reserve is threatened with expropriation, CC will work diligently to avoid a net loss to conservation values, document the actions taken and provide prompt notification to relevant parties.
- 2.14. All foot paths and trails will be developed and managed in accordance with Appendix 1.

### **3. USES OF NATURE RESERVES**

- 3.1. Nature reserves will generally be accessible to the public for a range of permitted uses as shown in Table 1, with specific uses to be determined on a case-by-case basis through the property management plan.
- 3.2. Where permitted uses could conflict with the achievement of conservation goals, the protection of the ecological integrity of the nature reserve will take priority.

- 3.3. Exceptions to generally permitted and generally prohibited uses of nature reserve (Table 1) can be considered by staff or the Board, provided that the proposed uses do not negatively impact the conservation goals or targets for the nature reserve.
- 3.4. Special permission for certain uses may be required on an individual “one-time” basis, as specified in a property management plan or for the continuation of historic uses in advance of a property management plan being developed.
- 3.5. Nature reserve access points will be appropriately signed to show permitted and prohibited land uses.
- 3.6. Permitted uses shall be low impact and low intensity that are compatible with the conservation of natural ecosystems and protection of biodiversity and native species. In cases where a nature reserve contains sensitive ecosystems, species or features, some or all of the generally permitted uses may not be allowed. In specific cases with compelling circumstances, exceptions to the generally prohibited uses may be considered. The rationale for these exceptions will be described in each specific property management plan.
- 3.7. When deciding whether to approve a generally prohibited use within a property management plan, staff or the Board decisions will be based on:
  - the best available science and nature reserve specific information;
  - an analysis of whether the use will be consistent with the conservation targets identified for the nature reserve;
  - consideration of any safety issues;
  - neighbourhood or public support or opposition;
  - land donor views, if known; and
  - the history of the land.

**TABLE 1: PERMITTED, PROHIBITED AND CASE-BY-CASE USES OF NATURE RESERVES**

| <b>Generally Permitted Uses</b>  | <b>Generally Prohibited Uses</b> | <b>Uses Considered Case-by-Case</b>                                       |
|--|----------------------------------|---|
| Nature appreciation  | Paintball                        | On leash dogs   |
| Photography  | Off leash dogs                   | Geocaching  |
| Hiking   | Feeding wildlife                 | Large group visits  |
| Cross country skiing   | Removal of wood, fossils, etc.   | Snowmobiles on trails   |
| Snowshoeing  | ATVs/off-road vehicles           | Picnicking  |
| Birdwatching   | Mountain biking                  | Erecting nest boxes or nesting platforms                                  |
| Biodiversity monitoring by trained volunteers authorized by the Coordinator of the Community Science Program | Shelters and stands              | Hunting and harvesting (plant/animal), provided biodiversity is protected |
| Canoeing/Kayaking  | Camping                          | Feeding birds   |
|  | Personal use fires               | Research  |
|  | Motorized boating                | Educational field trips   |
|  | Horseback riding                 | Seed collection   |

## APPENDIX 1: GUIDELINES FOR LOCATING AND BUILDING FOOT PATHS AND TRAILS

The decision to offer a public foot path and/or trail on a CC nature reserve is made on a case-by-case basis. Factors influencing that decision should include:

- inventories of the nature reserve's flora and fauna;
- sensitivity of the ecosystem (e.g., species at risk, condition of the terrain: including poorly drained areas, vernal pools, wetlands, and riparian areas);
- whether or not there are pre-existing foot paths or trails;
- ability to monitor and adaptively manage any negative impacts;
- wishes of the donor; and
- Canada's Ecological Gifts Program's rules.

The following are some guidelines to consider when locating and building foot paths and trails (herein known as trails):

1. Build trails through areas that will have the least impact on flora and fauna.
2. Minimize the density of trails.
3. Minimize fragmentation of habitat.
4. Avoid special or exemplary habitats.
5. Keep trails out of the water, and water out of the trails.
6. Protect tree root systems from erosion.
7. Mark trails using paint blazes or other low-impact methods.
8. Consider spring closures to allow for undisturbed breeding and fledging.

Further points to consider:

- A trail has a "zone of influence" on wildlife. Research shows that influence approximately extends:
  - 20 metres for reptiles and amphibians;
  - 50 metres for most breeding birds; 300 metres for colonial nesting birds; and
  - 120 metres for mammals.
- Paint blazes are a good alternative to plastic or wooden markers affixed with screws or nails because they reduce damage to the tree, keep plastics out of the environment, and do not pose a safety hazard to maintenance crews clearing trees with a chainsaw.

### REFERENCES

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