AUSABLE BAYFIELD CONSERVATION

CREATING AWARENESS | TAKING ACTION

Conservation Lands Strategy

Approved by Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Board of Directors: November 21, 2024

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Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority acknowledges the original stewards of this land, the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. We recognize the Huron Tract Treaty signed in 1827. We recognize this territory was subject to the Dish with One Spoon wampum, under which multiple nations agreed to care for the land and resources, including plants and animals, in peace. As shared stewards of this land and water, ABCA is grateful to work in this territory.

AUSABLE BAYFIELD CONSERVATION
CREATING AWARENESS | TAKING ACTION

Conservation ONTARIO
Natural Champions

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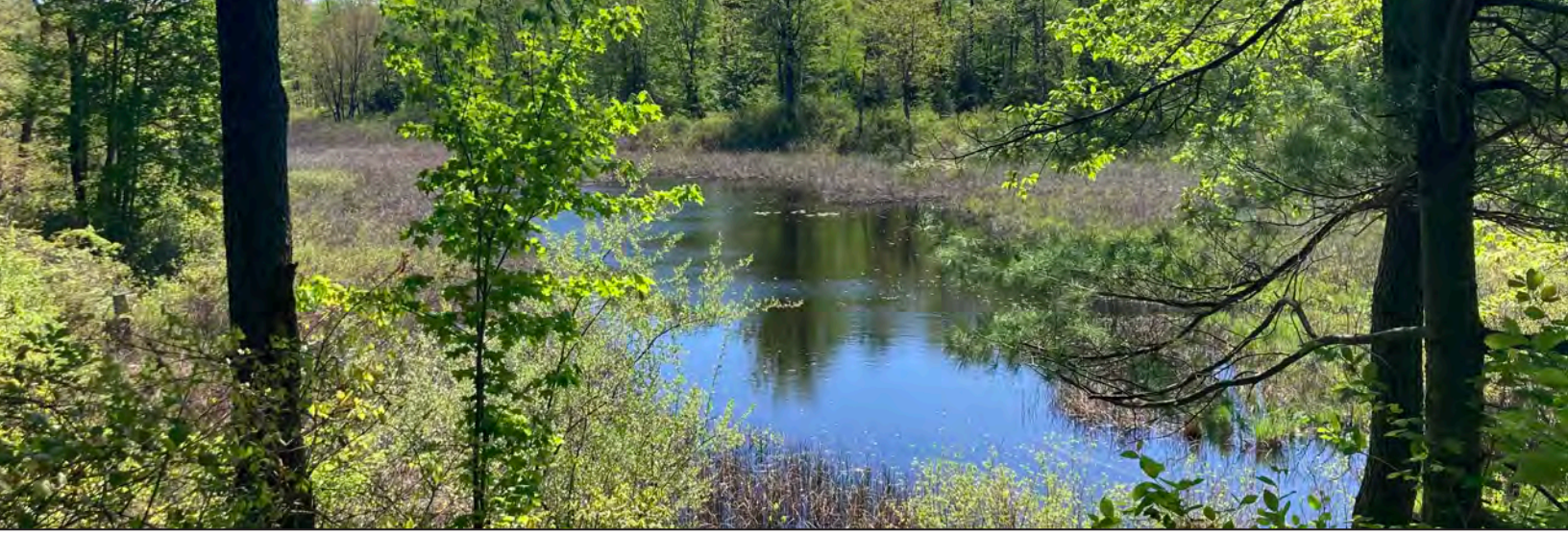


Conservation Lands Strategy
Background and Purpose

The Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) *Conservation Lands Strategy* (CLS) establishes priorities for managing ABCA-owned property. The CLS balances community needs and environmental needs. ABCA engaged with the community and stakeholders for the preparation of the CLS. To learn more about community engagement, please visit *What We Heard – Engagement Summary* on Page 2.

Mission
Protect, improve, conserve and restore the watershed in partnership with the community

Vision
Healthy watersheds where our needs and the needs of the natural environment are in balance

Management plans were prepared for conservation areas in the 1980s, and as additional properties were acquired; these plans were updated in 2004. Management areas are guided by a forest management plan. The *Forest Management Plan* was updated in 2017. The CLS is an overarching strategy to guide future management. Conservation Area Management Plans and the *Forest Management Plan* will contain site-level management information, guided by the CLS. The CLS has been developed to fulfill the requirements of section 10(1) of *Ontario Regulation 686/21* of the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CA Act).

Legislative Requirements

Section 10(1) of *Ontario Regulation 686/21* under *CA Act* requires all conservation authorities to prepare a conservation area strategy as a required component of the Conservation and Management of Lands mandatory program and service. The CLS has been developed to fulfill this requirement. Please review *Ontario Regulation 686/21: Mandatory Programs and Services* under *CA Act* for a complete list of components that are required within the strategy.

What We Heard – Engagement Summary

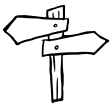
Conservation Lands Program Priorities

Respondents recommend:

1. Ecological protection and restoration
2. Acquiring more conservation land
3. Enforcement of conservation area rules

Community Use

50% of respondents visit an ABCA property at least once per week



Conservation areas help people find adventure, enjoy family time and experience solitude

Hiking, nature appreciation, and dog walking are the most common activities

> *"Fishing finally got my son off screen time"*

92% of respondents identified conservation lands as very important for watershed health

Connecting with the Community

The community expressed interest in participating in more events hosted at conservation areas.

> *"I really like the way ABCA partners with like-minded community groups and volunteers..."*

The community learns about conservation through:

- Collaborations with community groups
- Social media and ABCA's website
- Conservation area entry signage

Conservation Lands Experience

The visiting experience may be enhanced by:

- Improved infrastructure
- Creating more trails
- Providing conservation education resources
- Maintaining conservation areas during the winter

Introduction

Ausable Bayfield Watershed Characteristics

The watersheds of the ABCA area are situated along Lake Huron's southeast shore. The ABCA area is comprised of the Ausable River, Bayfield River, Mud Creek, Old Ausable Channel, Parkhill Creek and more than 40 watercourses that flow directly into Lake Huron, often referred to as the Lake Huron tributaries consisting of the Bayfield North and South Gullies watersheds. The ABCA area is 2,428 km² with the municipalities of Adelaide Metcalfe; Bluewater; Central Huron; Huron East; Lambton Shores; Lucan Biddulph; Middlesex Centre; North Middlesex; Perth South; South Huron; Warwick; and West Perth. These watersheds comprise one of the most agriculturally productive regions in Canada. The landscape is growing, including expanding urban development and changing agricultural practices, leading to increased pressure on water, forests, and the need for publicly available greenspaces. Please refer to the *Watershed Report Cards* for more information on forest cover and water quality.

Historical photo of students planting trees at Hay Swamp.

History of ABCA Property Acquisition and Management

The Ausable River Conservation Authority (ARCA) was formed in 1946 under the *CA Act*, as a partnership between the municipalities, in the Ausable River and Parkhill Creek watersheds, and the Province of Ontario. The purpose was to address local environmental issues of flooding and erosion and the need for wildlife habitat.

The 1949 *Ausable Valley Conservation Report*, prepared by the provincial Department of Planning and Development, recommended ARCA acquire land for conservation purposes. Supported by provincial grants through the Agreement Forest Program, the Authority began a program of property acquisition in strategic areas. By 1950, the Authority had acquired 120 hectares (300 acres) of land. That number increased to more than 647 hectares (1,600 acres) by 1955. Most of ABCA's current land holding was acquired in the three decades following the *Ausable Valley Conservation Report 1949*.

To capture the magnitude of progress, it is noteworthy that in 1946, the year the Conservation Authority was established, there was no land in public ownership in the watershed. The ABCA now owns more than 3,600 hectares (8,895 acres) of land and is the largest single owner of forests in the region.

It is a common misconception that ABCA owns watercourses and river valleys. This is only true where the ABCA has a deed to the property. The *CA Act* guides the regulation of development within hazard areas, but does not affect property ownership.

The properties were acquired for environmental protection and water management projects. ABCA owns more than 810 hectares (2,000 acres) for flood and erosion control projects. The Parkhill Dam and associated flood mitigation reservoir is an example of a flood control project on ABCA lands. It is important to recognize that, although not all properties contain flood and erosion control infrastructure, their natural features, including forest and wetland cover, contribute towards flood and erosion control.

The properties have important secondary benefits of community green space, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, and education. Partnerships with community groups help to enhance the nature-based recreation opportunities that are available for the community to experience.

ABCA continues to acquire environmentally significant properties through donations or fee-simple purchases. Land acquisition is guided by ABCA's *Land Acquisition Strategy* (2022).

Programs and Services on Conservation Lands

The *CA Act* includes categories of mandatory and non-mandatory programs and services. Conservation Authority lands contribute to and support several ABCA programs and services for watershed health and the community. An individual property may provide multiple programs and services within the categories as prescribed by the *CA Act*.

Category 1: Mandatory programs and services where municipal funding could be used without an agreement.

Program	Funding Source(s)
Natural Hazards Management Program	Municipal, Provincial, Self-Generated
Provincial Water Quality and Quantity Monitoring	Municipal, Self-Generated
Passive recreation on conservation authority land	Self-Generated

Category 3: Non-mandatory programs and services a CA determines are advisable which may use municipal funding through a Cost Apportionment Agreement.

Program	Funding Source(s)
Conservation Education	Municipal, Self-Generated
Monitoring and Research	Self-Generated

It is important to recognize land conservation as an integral part of integrated watershed management and supporting resilient watershed conditions. Conservation lands provide areas for ecological and hydrological function, including flood water attenuation and retention, supporting the core mandate of conservation authorities: protecting people and property from flooding and other natural hazards.

Snow course surveys, of snow depth and water equivalent in the snow, are taken at properties including conservation lands. The data collected provides important information that helps protect life and property through Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority's flood forecasting and warning program.

Conservation lands provide areas to support hydrological functions by storing flood waters, acting as natural water reservoirs. The hydrological benefits support conservation authority mandates, and programming, by protecting people and property from flooding and other natural hazards.

Land Use Categories

The primary function of all ABCA-owned properties is protecting ecological and hydrological function, to support resilient watersheds. Therefore, the main considerations for determining land use categories are secondary uses (e.g. nature-based public use) and management. The properties are divided into three broad land use categories: Conservation Areas; Management Areas; and Administration Buildings. ABCA maintains a land inventory that identifies the land use categories that apply to each individual parcel; the land inventory has been developed to fulfill the requirements of section 11 of *Ontario Regulation 686/21* of the *CA Act*. If property management changes from its current regime, it may require the applicable parcels land use category to be amended in the land inventory.

Conservation Area Passive Recreation

Conservation areas are open to the public within permitted areas (i.e., authorized trails and recreational features) and have defined access points; and provide amenities and infrastructure that support nature-based public use and outdoor education. Amenities and infrastructure may include parking areas, managed trail networks, educational kiosks and signage, washroom facilities and more.

Properties may support additional uses, programs, and services, such as the flood mitigation reservoir and dam at Parkhill Conservation Area (PCA).

Management Areas

Management areas typically do not have facilities or maintained access points. If trails exist, they are minimal in nature relative to conservation area trails, or are trails maintained by partnering organizations (e.g., Lambton Shores Nature Trails; Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs). Public access may be prohibited at some Management Area properties.

These areas also include agricultural lands as well as lands that support stewardship projects, such as the butternut seed orchard at Triebner Tract.

Administration Buildings

Administration buildings are buildings that are primarily used for administrative, or operational purposes. Administration buildings support the delivery of services to member municipalities, residents, visitors, and partners. The administration buildings located at, and adjacent to, Morrison Dam Conservation Area (MDCA), and the workshop located adjacent to Parkhill Conservation Area are the only administration buildings owned by ABCA.

A sign at the ABCA Administration Centre building at Morrison Dam Conservation Area.

Management Considerations – Conservation Designations and Natural Heritage Features

ABCA recognizes the important role it has as steward of natural heritage features and systems. The watershed model recognizes the interconnectivity between land and water, and the contributions that sound land management can make to the health of aquatic ecosystems. The Conservation Lands program protects, restores and enhances natural heritage features by conserving its current lands and acquiring additional conservation lands. The Conservation Lands program is an important component of integrated watershed management.

Properties with a conservation designation will be managed to protect, restore, and enhance the ecological and hydrological features that the property supports.

Forestry activities may be permitted in some areas if the primary goal of the management activities is for overall forest health improvement and does not degrade the significant ecological or hydrological features or systems. An example of management may include forest health improvement activities that promote increased diversity for ecosystem resilience, or promote the conversion of plantation forests to natural forests; and invasive species management and activities that promote species at risk (SAR) habitat. If revenue is realized from forest health improvement activities, it will support property management.

Recognizing the importance of balancing ecological needs, with the needs of the community, nature-based public use is permitted in conservation areas. All best management practices (BMPs) related to trail maintenance, and nature-based recreation will be adhered to. If new recreation-based amenities (e.g., trails, signage, etc.) are proposed in areas with a provincial conservation designation, a thorough review of potential ecological impacts, and public engagement, may be completed. To conserve significant ecological and hydrological features, nature-based public use may be prohibited in areas, and some parcels may not be displayed on public-facing mapping services.

Conservation area management plans, and the forest management plan, identify the designations at an individual property level, and outline applicable management. This section outlines some of the conservation designations and ecological management considerations.

Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI)

ANSIs are areas of land and water that are scientifically identified as containing unique natural landscapes or features. There are several Provincial ANSI identified within the watershed, including the Ausable River Valley ANSI; Hay Swamp ANSI; Pinery Provincial Park; Earth and Life ANSI; and Staffa Kame Complex ANSI. Properties within an ANSI include, but are not limited to: L-Lake Management Area; Rock Glen Conservation Area (RGCA); and many conservation lands properties.

Wetlands

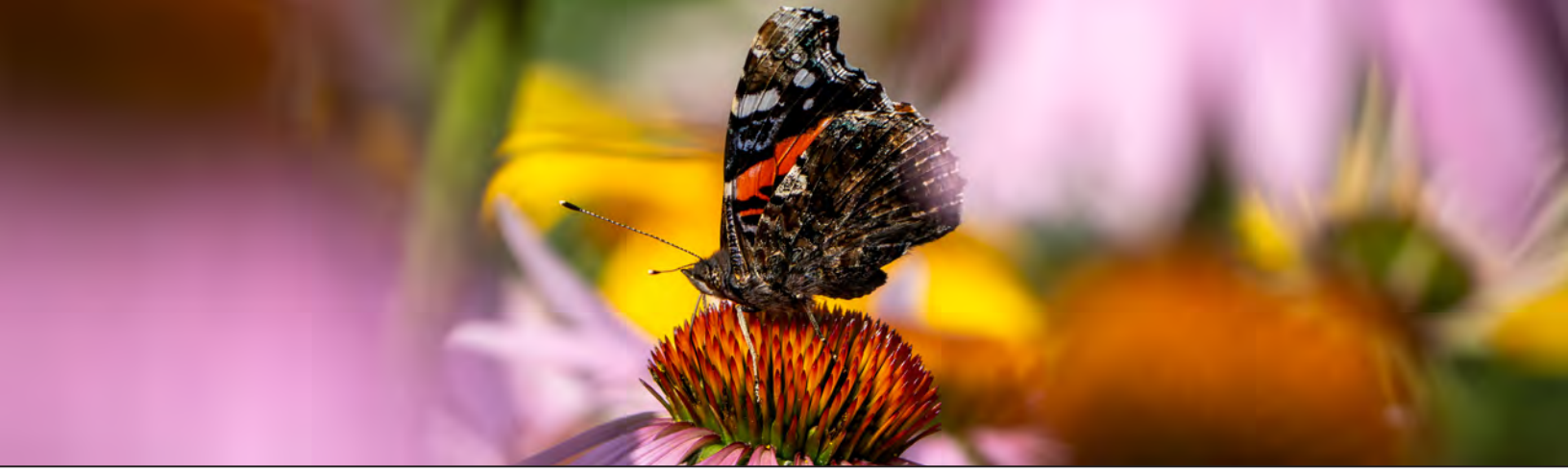
Wetlands have important ecological and hydrological functions, supporting both water quality and quantity. There are several Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSW) and Locally Significant Wetlands (LSW) identified on ABCA-owned land, including the Ausable River PSW; Hay Swamp PSW; Port Franks PSW; Bannockburn Wetland Complex LSW; and MacDonald Marsh LSW. Properties within a PSW include, but are not limited to: Parkhill Conservation Area (PCA); Klopp Management Area; and several management area properties.

Locally Significant Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs)

In 1984, ABCA identified locally significant ESAs across the watershed. This effort recognized the significance of remaining wetlands and the critical role that they have in regulating seasonal water flow, providing wildlife habitat, and offering educational and scientific opportunities (ABCA, 1984). The study classified much of the ABCA-owned property as locally significant ESA. The designation and accompanying description highlighting significant natural heritage features will be considered during conservation area, and forest management planning and operations.

Carolinian Life Zone

The Carolinian Life Zone contains a rich biodiversity of plant and animal species that are not found anywhere else in Canada. Approximately the southern one-third of the Ausable Bayfield watershed area is within the Carolinian Life Zone. A significant component of ABCA's overall landholding is within the Carolinian Life Zone. Special consideration should be made for these species and habitats. ABCA recognizes that species associated with the Carolinian Life Zone may extend beyond the current delineation of the zone; management considerations will promote species diversity.



Special Wildlife Habitat Features

Several important wildlife habitat features are found within the properties. The habitat features include: interior forest, seasonal concentration areas such as vernal pools, migration stopover areas, wild turkey winter range, and winter deer yards; wildlife trees such as mast-producing, cavity, or super canopy trees; and other forest-habitat considerations such as trees with stick nests present, and downed woody debris. Wildlife habitat features are identified during forest stand inventory and analysis. If management is planned in or near special wildlife habitat features, management will follow recommendations in *A Silvicultural Guide to Managing Southern Ontario Forests* (OMNR, 2004) and guidelines within the *Ontario Tree Marking Guide* (OMNR, 2004).

Significant Flora and Fauna

The habitat diversity across the watershed, and proximity to and within the Carolinian Life Zone, provides the habitat for many rare flora and fauna species. Many of these are federally recognized species at risk (SAR) are known to inhabit ABCA properties. Where habitat for SAR is known to exist or where it is encountered during forest inventory, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) will be consulted to determine appropriate buffers and/or modifications for property management and visitor use. Where appropriate, ABCA will work with the OMNR; Forest Gene Conservation Association (FGCA); and other agencies on SAR recovery. Species inventories are completed periodically and when projects are proposed.

Old Growth Forest

Old growth forest habitat is extremely rare in southern Ontario. Characteristics of old growth forests in southern Ontario include pit and mound topography, age class diversity including veterans of at least 150 years old, large standing dead trees, large rotting logs, and cavity trees. Old growth forest habitat is the preferred habitat of at least 28 birds and 18 mammals in southern Ontario (OMNR, 1999). Old growth forests are also recognized for cultural and spiritual values.

Forests that were never ploughed and only lightly cut or pastured prior to purchase by ABCA have the opportunity, given time, to develop old growth characteristics. These forests are often in areas where steep topography, wetland features, or other factors prevented historic land clearing. These same features limit the feasibility of conventional forestry activities today. The forest management plan will identify areas managed accordingly. Candidate properties include Bannockburn Conservation Area (BCA); Mystery Falls Management Area; Walden Tract; Waun Tract; and other conservation lands.

Management Considerations – Social and Cultural Values

ABCA recognizes the important role that the conservation and management of land has, and its relation to watershed community and nature-based public use. Social and cultural values vary across the watershed, and by property. This section outlines management considerations that are applicable to all properties. Additional social and cultural values may be considered through individual property management plan updates.

Passive Recreation Opportunities

Passive recreation is an important secondary benefit of ABCA properties. In southwestern Ontario, conservation authorities are the major landowners where members of the public may enter the land for a variety of nature-based public use activities. The watershed community identified conservation lands as being very important for supporting their, and their family's, physical and mental health. Preliminary CLS community engagement found that more than 90 per cent of respondents use ABCA properties at least monthly, with many community members using ABCA lands on a weekly or daily basis. The primary users of conservation lands are local but it is common to have people visit the watershed area to visit conservation lands for recreation opportunities, supporting eco-tourism across the watershed.

The number of visitors that utilize the properties iterates the importance to maintain a high level of property standards, ensuring a safe and enjoyable visitor experience that represents the organization in a positive manner to the community. The ABCA *Risk Management Policy* (2017) outlines a framework for inspecting properties; it is important to adhere to this policy and address any identified concerns in a timely manner. Conservation area rules promote a safe, enjoyable visitor experience. It is important to educate visitors about rules, through staff presence, brochures and signage. Educating visitors is the priority of conservation lands staff, but there may be circumstances where staff who are trained and appointed as Provincial Offences Officers must enforce applicable legislation to ensure visitor safety, protect sensitive ecological areas, and maintain a high level of property standards.

Passive Recreation Opportunities (continued)

Through *CLS* community engagement, the most common nature-based public uses that were identified include walking and running; connecting to, relaxing in, and appreciating nature; canoeing and kayaking; picnicking, bicycling, and fishing. Snowshoeing, hunting, participating in education programs, geocaching and photography were also activities that community specified that they use conservation lands for. Through management plans, ABCA identifies areas that are conducive to permitted recreational activities to balance the uses across its land holdings. This balance considers ecological management considerations, visitor use levels and mitigating potential conflicts amongst user-groups. ABCA communicates this information with the community through entrance and educational signage, as well as on its website.

Public engagement identified that outdoor recreation enhancements and infrastructure improvements are the priorities that are the most important to the community for ABCA to invest in on conservation lands. The community further identified enhancing washroom facilities, increasing the number of trails, maintaining trails and facilities during the winter; increasing the number of education programs and signage; and improving directional signage as important actions when considering how to enhance recreation and infrastructure on conservation lands. Through management plans, funding opportunities, financial forecasting, and annual budgets, the ABCA continues to address outdoor recreation enhancements and infrastructure improvements. It is important to note that connecting recreation opportunities on ABCA lands, to opportunities on lands owned by municipalities and other groups, is an effective way to collaboratively enhance recreation opportunities. The ABCA values its partnerships with community groups that help to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities and infrastructure and will continue to support community partners in aligning initiatives.

Research and Monitoring

Studies undertaken by educational and research institutions and organizations is encouraged on conservation lands. This increases the scientific knowledge base and understanding of the institution and the ABCA. Research may be short, or long-term, initiatives, and are generally permitted through a 'Special Use Permit' which identifies considerations of ABCA (e.g., property access, timing, insurance requirements, etc.). For organizational knowledge, it is important to document long-term studies, the partners that are involved as well as any information that has been shared with ABCA regarding the research. Citizen science is also encouraged on conservation lands. This helps to improve the scientific knowledge base and increase environmental awareness and appreciation amongst the community. Citizen science may be further supported through educational signage, and connecting visitors to a citizen science resource (e.g., iNaturalist).

Conservation Education

Conservation education is a program that is often hosted at conservation areas across the watershed area. Education may be delivered by staff through programming (e.g., school trips, or summer day camps) or be passive in nature through signage, and other educational resources for visitors to view. Programs are delivered by staff at several conservation areas, hosting approximately 2,500 people per year. Partnerships with local non-profit groups, and municipal programming, such as local libraries, has helped to expand the education programs and initiatives (e.g., storyboard trails at conservation areas) across the watershed. Most conservation areas have some form of passive education resource, such as the tree identification plaques, or SAR awareness signage. The strong conservation education participant levels highlight the importance of demonstrating sound management and stewardship practices on the properties.

During preliminary CLS engagement, the community identified conservation education as the second highest priority that they would like ABCA to invest in, on its properties. Further identifying educational signage, self-guided, and ABCA-led hikes are other important actions to support increased conservation education opportunities. Reviewing infrastructure across all conservation areas, as it relates to conservation education programs, is the first step in identifying gaps, and subsequently, how they may be addressed to expand conservation education opportunities to the watershed community.

Conservation properties provide an excellent means to connect with the watershed community, to increase awareness and foster environmental appreciation, iterating the importance of the close working relation between ABCA's conservation lands, and conservation education departments.

External Agreements and Uses of ABCA Property

ABCA often receives enquiries from individuals, community groups, academic institutions, businesses, and stakeholders for the use of its properties for research, events, as well as more complex agreements. The requests are often for community-based initiatives; ABCA has experienced positive outcomes when involved in these initiatives, fostering positive community relations.

Requests may be for activities that align with ABCA's Special Events policy and are permitted through a Special Use Permit. Alternatively, requests may be for complex agreements, business ventures, or for activities that ABCA is not familiar with. ABCA may not be familiar with a land use activity if it is not a common practice; has not been previously completed on ABCA property or within the watershed; or is an emerging land use activity with limited history and supporting information. Consulting with professionals, other organizations who may have experience with the activity, as well as the public, are important steps when considering complex land use activities.

Each request presents unique considerations; however, the potential of the request to have a negative ecological impact is the primary determining factor for whether ABCA may permit a request or enter into an agreement. It is critical that the ecological impact to the property, as well as to the watershed are both considered.

Management Challenges

Issues on ABCA properties may be short-term and easily addressed, or long-term, or a result of factors beyond the control of ABCA. The following are management challenges that impact the health of the watershed, and ability to provide areas for people to experience nature. The *CLS* outlines overall goals, objectives and actions that strive to address these challenges across the properties. Individual management plans identify the challenges, and respective management at the individual property level.

Visitor Use

The opportunity to participate in nature-based public use, by visiting conservation lands, is valued by the watershed community. Conservation authorities across the province saw a dramatic increase in conservation area use during the COVID-19 pandemic. These levels remain elevated above pre-pandemic conservation area use.

The primary function of conservation lands is protecting ecological and hydrological function, to support resilient watersheds. However, providing the community with the opportunity to experience conservation lands increases environmental awareness, and appreciation amongst visitors. ABCA recognizes the increased demand, and anticipates further use of conservation areas as the community grows. Balancing visitor use and the needs of the community, with the needs of the environment, will be considered through property management planning.

Ageing Infrastructure

Many conservation authorities are faced with ageing and insufficient infrastructure at conservation areas. For the purposes of the *CLS*, ageing infrastructure refers only to infrastructure that supports nature-based public use on ABCA properties (e.g., entrances, parking areas, boardwalks, bridges, trails, etc.).

To support safe, and enjoyable nature-based public use, it is important to consider infrastructure updates through asset management, and property management planning. Property management plans will employ an integrated approach, including considerations for existing, and new infrastructure to help address both ageing, and insufficient infrastructure.

The priority is to be proactive by identifying and addressing infrastructure maintenance, before further degradation poses a safety concern, and repairing the structure becomes a more expensive undertaking. Due to the age of infrastructure at conservation areas, maintenance may not be a feasible approach, and it may be necessary to replace the infrastructure. When maintaining or replacing infrastructure it is important to implement any updates to accessibility, and risk mitigation to the new structure. Infrastructure may also be considered an end-of-life asset when changing visitor use no longer supports the need to have the structure. Infrastructure may also be considered end-of-life when property management plans identify the need to further balance recreation opportunities and ecological protection.

Employing ABCA's *Capital Asset Management Plan* (2024) as it relates to conservation land improvements is important for maintaining current infrastructure for a safe, enjoyable visiting experience.

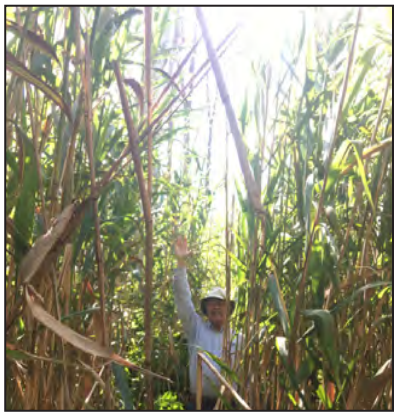
Climate Change

The impacts of climate change may have a wide-ranging impact on conservation lands, including changing weather events and patterns; increased ecosystem stress and susceptibility to pests and invasive species; and increased visitor use. However, conservation lands have an important role in climate change mitigation and adaption through nature-based solutions including carbon sequestration, mitigating natural hazards caused by flooding and erosion through water attenuation and retention, and low flow augmentation. These benefits may be further enhanced by implementing stewardship practices, including tree planting and wetland restoration and conservation.

Threats to Ecosystem Health

Environmental issues upstream and in surrounding areas can have a negative impact on conservation lands. For example, point and non-point source impacts to water quality may negatively affect nature-based public use at downstream conservation areas. Similarly, water quantity can affect streamflow, erosion and sedimentation. It is important that the organization integrates its programs and services to share information, and employ best management practices on properties, so conservation lands contribute to integrated watershed management.

Invasive species have a negative impact on ecological health across the watershed. Recent examples of invasive species affecting the watershed, and conservation lands include Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), Beech Bark Disease (BBD), invasive *Phragmites*, and Giant Hogweed. It is critical that the *Invasive Species Strategy* (2013) be up-to-date, relevant, and outline a framework for employing Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR), which is the widely accepted framework for effectively controlling invasive species spread. It is important that conservation lands staff be trained to identify known, and potential invasive species, and that funding to support EDRR on conservation lands be maintained. ABCA also plays a role in supporting the watershed community's ability to identify invasive species presence.



Invasive *Phragmites* is an aggressive plant that spreads quickly, forming dense monocultures. The dense monocultures formed by invasive *Phragmites* negatively affects ecological function, including native plant and wildlife habitat.

Funding

Many conservation authorities are faced with limited funding for conservation lands management. Currently, ABCA manages conservation lands on a 'cost-recovery' basis supported by self-generated revenue, primarily through user fees, rental agreements, and forest health improvement activities. The amount of self-generated revenue realized through user fees, and funding opportunities, may fluctuate over time, highlighting the importance of utilizing these revenue sources for current and future conservation land management needs. It is important for staff to consider operational expenses and efficiencies, while maintaining or enhancing community opportunities and ecological protection. Financial forecasting, annual budget preparation, and community partnerships are critical to responsible financial management.

Unauthorized Use

The goal is to deter unauthorized access and use through community outreach (e.g., ABCA website and social media, educational signage, and delineated property boundaries). Property boundaries are delineated in accordance with the *Trespass to Property Act* (TPA). When ABCA staff encounter property visitors engaging in prohibited activities, educating the property visitors about rules and regulations is the priority but enforcement, by staff trained and appointed as Provincial Offences Officers, may be necessary. ABCA may use the *TPA* to bar and ban repeat offenders from its properties for a specified time period. Off-road vehicle (ORV) use, including but not limited to all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), utility vehicles (UTVs), and dirt bikes presents the greatest challenge in terms of unauthorized use. Prior to 2014, an agreement with a former ORV club permitted trails in select properties. Due to declining membership and trail maintenance; and increased trespassing and ecological concerns, the agreement ceased to exist. ORV use is no longer permitted on any ABCA properties, as it causes significant ecological damage and creates an increased level of conflict with other property users and with neighbouring landowners.

Staff work to ensure property boundaries are clearly delineated and that access by ORVs is restricted. Snowmobile use is only permitted on Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) trails at select properties. The local snowmobile clubs are responsible for trail maintenance, liability insurance and administering a memorandum of understanding for the applicable trail.

It is important to note that unauthorized use may include an activity that is permitted at some properties, but not others (e.g., hunting and bicycling). Property-specific permitted uses are considered through management plans and communicated to the public through entrance and educational signage, ABCA's website, and other applicable means of communication.

Through *CLS* engagement, several enquiries were made about permitting activities that are currently prohibited on ABCA lands (e.g., horseback riding). Through collaborative partnerships with community groups, activities with a low ecological impact may be considered at select properties. Prior to changing permitted uses, it is important to note that considerations must be made for ecological impacts, risk exposure and mitigation; as well as financial impacts and long-term viability of the activity. ABCA staff will consult other conservation authorities and municipalities on their experience permitting the activity; and may complete public engagement, depending on the nature of the activity. This approach also applies to new and emerging recreational activities.

Most trail users, like the ones in this photo at Parkhill Scenic Lookout, follow the rules and keep their dogs on leashes and we thank them. Keeping pets on a leash protects one's pet; other pets; people; and wildlife. This also prevents someone from getting a fine. Unfortunately, there are some people, from time to time, who don't respect their fellow trail users and break the rules. In those cases, education and enforcement are needed.

Encroachment

Encroachment is a management challenge that may vary in scale and complexity. ABCA works to deter encroachment by ensuring that property boundaries are delineated in accordance with the TPA. Examples of encroachment that is minor and easier to address include mowing activities extending into ABCA property, or unauthorized access points and trails. Progressed, and more difficult encroachment challenges include the presence of structures on ABCA property. Staff will manage encroachment on a case-by-case basis, working with the neighbouring property owner to develop a solution with a goal of restoring the area, and any ecological impacts were caused, while preserving or building neighbour relations and communications. Encroachment challenges may require a property boundary survey to be completed by ABCA or require ABCA to seek legal advice.

Management Goals and Objectives

Plan for Balanced Conservation Lands Use

Goal: To integrate ABCA properties as part of a sustainable watershed, supporting a balance between the demand for public use and need for protecting ecological function.

Objectives:

1. To balance nature-based public use, and environmental protection across the properties.
2. To engage community and stakeholders when planning for balanced conservation lands use.
3. To utilize this strategy to support municipal partners with strategic planning, as it relates to recreational development and natural areas.
4. To collaborate with municipal partners and other groups for opportunities to augment natural areas, guided by ABCA's Land Acquisition Policy and Plan.
5. To use CA lands to help implement recommendations of strategic plans as it relates to integrated watershed management and nature-based public use.

Support Integrated Watershed Management

Goal: To support resilient watershed conditions and climate change mitigation and adaptation through integrated watershed management.

Objectives:

1. To protect, improve, conserve and restore ecosystem health, biodiversity, habitats and ecological function.
2. To protect, improve, conserve and restore water quality and hydrological function for human health including drinking water resources, and passive recreation opportunities.
3. To recognize the watershed model, and the correlation between land management and water quality and quantity.
4. To utilize conservation lands for delivering programs and services of ABCA.

Mitigate Natural Hazards

Goal: To protect life and property from natural hazards.

Objectives:

1. To protect and restore hydrological function on the properties: to provide areas for water retention, attenuation and infiltration, to mitigate the impacts of natural hazards within the watershed.
2. To engage ABCA's Planning and Regulations department when considering nature-based public use within regulated areas.

Restore and Enhance

Goal: To implement and demonstrate stewardship practices that restore and enhance the properties.

Objectives:

1. To implement projects and practices to protect, improve, conserve and restore the properties.
2. To support integrated watershed management, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and mitigating natural hazards by implementing nature-based solutions.
3. To provide demonstration and knowledge-sharing opportunities about stewardship practices, undertaken on the properties, to the public.

Provide Nature-Based Public Use

Goal: To encourage healthy living by providing access to natural areas for safe, enjoyable and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities.

Objectives:

1. Plan and manage outdoor nature-based recreation in a manner that integrates ecological health and societal benefits.
2. To provide public access to natural areas.
3. To balance permitted uses across the properties to provide passive recreation opportunities while mitigating user conflict.
4. To maintain a high level of property standards for a safe, enjoyable visiting experience that reflects the organization positively.
5. To partner with community groups and stakeholders to develop and enhance recreation opportunities that integrate with other publicly accessible recreation opportunities.

Conservation Education and Community Outreach

Goal: To foster environmental appreciation amongst the watershed community through conservation education.

Objectives:

1. To provide passive learning opportunities (e.g., educational signage) to property visitors.
2. To provide conservation education programs and events to the watershed community.
3. To collaborate with service clubs and volunteers to provide an opportunity for citizens to use their skills and passion for conservation.
4. To foster and continue building working relationships with the community and stakeholders.

Cultural Heritage Resources

Goal: To celebrate the diverse cultural heritage of the ABCA region and CA lands by protecting, conserving and interpreting archaeological and historic features.

Objectives:

1. To protect and conserve archaeological sites and cultural landscapes.
2. To promote the cultural heritage features.
3. To partner with community groups, and stakeholders to support cultural heritage initiatives.

Financial Management

Goal: To manage conservation authority properties in a financially sustainable manner with a variety of funding mechanisms.

Objectives:

1. To generate revenue from user fees and product sales in a sustainable manner to offset the costs of property ownership and restoration activities.
2. To consider future nature-based public use to identify opportunities to address these needs, and sustainable funding mechanisms to support growth.
3. To collaborate with the community, and local foundations, to encourage philanthropy as it relates to land conservation and nature-based public use.
4. To include conservation authority properties in asset management planning, financial forecasts, and annual budgets.
5. To consider and apply for funding to support projects and programs.

Implementation

The *CLS* outlines a framework to guide property management that protects ecological and hydrological function while balancing the needs of the community. The *CLS* accomplishes this framework by setting goals and objectives, while identifying management considerations. To effectively implement the framework, it is important to outline targets and actions that support the goals and objectives. This section is meant to guide overall management planning and priorities for *CLS* implementation; it does not outline a comprehensive list of conservation lands operations.

Input received from *CLS* engagement has been considered and incorporated within the development of the actions and targets. Input will be further incorporated into property management plans.

- Update existing management plans in accordance with the goals, objectives, and the ecological, social, and cultural management considerations outlined in the *CLS*. Public and stakeholder engagement will be completed during management plan updates.
    - Update all Conservation Area Management Plans prior to 2030. Prioritize the updates beginning with properties that have an active community partner, and by levels of visitor use.
    - Update the *Forest Management Plan* prior to 2028.
- Develop a new management plan for all management areas that have a hiking trail, or other defined recreational feature, prior to 2030. Develop the plans in accordance with the goals, objectives, and the ecological, social, and cultural management considerations outlined in the *CLS*. Public and stakeholder engagement will be completed for developing new management plans.
- Conservation lands staff will provide input during external engagement opportunities, as it relates to connecting ABCA properties, to properties owned and managed by municipalities, and other organizations.
- Review, and update web-based Property and Recreation resources to ensure accuracy, relevancy, and accessibility.
- Review and update the *Invasive Species Strategy* (2013) recognizing lessons learned, community partnerships, new invasive species and current BMPs. Implement priority areas, species, and targets for effective implementation of the strategy.
- Review and update the agricultural lease agreement to promote the use of conservation agriculture BMPs on ABCA's agricultural land holdings. Incorporate targets (e.g., maintain over-winter cover on ABCA's agricultural lands a minimum of two out of three years) to guide BMP implementation in a working relationship between the tenant farmer and ABCA.
- Host stewardship and environmental monitoring programs and projects in partnership with other organizations (e.g., Butternut Seed Orchard in partnership with the Forest Gene Conservation Association; tree planting and forestry knowledge sharing tours).
- Review the Programs and Services on Conservation Lands section of the *CLS* and identify opportunities to provide educational resources to the community about how ABCA integrates programs and services to support watershed management.

Implementation (continued)

- Work with the community and stakeholders to host nature-based public use opportunities where gaps may be identified by the community.
- Review infrastructure (e.g., pavilions; washrooms; signage) on the properties as it relates to conservation education programs, and identify areas where programs may be expanded by addressing infrastructure gaps.
- Expand conservation education to two conservation areas, where educational programming does not occur on a regular basis currently.
- Engage with The Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation to further collaboration and knowledge-sharing opportunities; including the creation of a Collaborative Learning Space.
- Engage the community and stakeholders to provide conservation education opportunities by hosting a minimum of one public tour, or volunteer event, per year. Provide the opportunity at various properties throughout the watershed to engage the watershed community.
- Recognize the valued community partnerships that support conservation lands and nature-based public use by providing the opportunity for at least one recognition and appreciation event per year.
- Employ the asset condition rating system identified in ABCA's Capital Asset Management Plan to identify the condition of assets on conservation lands. Deriving asset condition will support financial forecasting and annual budget preparation.

Conservation Lands Strategy Review

To ensure this strategy remains current, a review and update will be conducted every five years. If changes are required during the term of the strategy, the Board of Directors may approve updates accordingly.

The Board of Directors will guide the public engagement process that is completed for the review of the strategy based on the scope of the updates recommended by staff.


BRUCE
GREY
DUFFE
HURON
WELLINGTON
Lake Huron
PERTH
WATERLOO
OXFORD
U.S.A.
LAMBTON
MIDDLESEX
HALDIM NORF
ELGIN
KENT
Lake Erie
ESSEX
0 40 80 km
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CENTRAL HURON
CLINTON
HURON EAST
BAYFIELD
SEAFORTH
BRUCEFIELD
BLUEWATER
HENSALL
ZURICH
WEST PERTH
DASHWOOD
EXETER
Lake Huron
GRAND BEND
HURON PARK
SOUTH HURON
CENTRALIA
PERTH SOUTH
PORT FRANKS
NORTH MIDDLESEX
LUCAN BIDDULPH
LUCAN
THEDFORD
LAMBTON SHORES
PARKHILL
AILSA CRAIG
FOREST
ILDERTON
ARKONA
ADELAIDE METCALFE
MIDDLESEX CENTRE
WARWICK
STRATHROY
N
0 5 10 20 km
ABCA
County boundary
Municipal boundary
Conservation Area
Major watercourse
Major watershed
Ausable River
Bayfield River
Lakeshore
Parkhil Creek
Mud Creek