



Linking Natural Capital and Land Use in the Muskoka River Watershed

This article is part of the Ripple Article Series. Every other week, an article will be posted on the Engage Muskoka website that dives deeper into one of the twelve technical projects in the **Making Waves: Integrated Watershed Management initiative**.

The natural capital of the Muskoka River Watershed is rich in stock of water, forests, wetlands, rock barren, and the diversity of species that call these ecosystems home. These natural features provide goods and services to the community, called ecosystem services. In Muskoka, ecosystem services translate to economic prosperity through activities like forestry, hydro generation, and tourism. With 68 percent of the Muskoka River Watershed covered in forest and 17 percent covered by water, it's easy to overlook these ecosystem services because they seem so abundant.

However, the abundance of natural capital in the watershed and the ecosystem and economic services it provides is exactly why they need to be managed. Effective natural capital management occurs at the watershed scale and requires consistent land-use practices across the Muskoka River Watershed to balance community development and protection of natural features.



The Muskoka River Watershed is divided into thirteen lower-tier and three upper-tier municipalities and has pockets of land owned by federal and provincial agencies throughout. Some of these organizations have different land-use policies, which presents a challenge to natural capital management because land-use decisions in one area may impact another. For example, a wetland may be a common feature in one municipality, so it is valued as vacant and developable. In another municipality downstream, wetlands may be rare, so they are protected from development for ecosystem services such as flood mitigation. If the upstream municipality protected or enhanced its wetlands, the downstream municipality could be better protected from floods. A coordinated approach to land-use planning across the watershed would ensure natural capital is managed and the ecosystem services are sustained.

The District of Muskoka has launched a land use policy review project to work towards an environment-first and consistent approach to land use planning for the Muskoka River Watershed. This review will identify how natural capital could be managed across the entire watershed to sustain ecosystem services for the community and economy. This project will review current land use priorities and policies while highlighting consistencies and inconsistencies between municipal policies related to development and environmental protection. The outcomes of this project could identify how land-use policies across all jurisdictions in the Muskoka River Watershed can be coordinated to address issues that negatively affect natural capital like flooding, habitat loss, and degrading water quality. The outcomes of this project will support the different jurisdictions throughout the Muskoka River Watershed in their local environmental, societal, and economic goals.

The land use policy review of the Muskoka River Watershed will be completed in Fall 2022. The results of this review will be published on the District of Muskoka's Engage Muskoka webpage. The information collected as part of this project will help to inform future natural heritage policies, land use planning, and conservation actions in the Muskoka River Watershed.

There are 12 technical projects in the Making Waves initiative. Completing a review of land use policies across organizations that have jurisdiction in the Muskoka River Watershed is just one of the projects that will inform Integrated Watershed Management. To learn more about Integrated Watershed Management and the other projects under Making Waves, be sure to check out the Engage Muskoka page for project updates.