

Background Briefing

Parks (Conservation areas)

December 2014

The GRCA operates the oldest and one of the largest networks of parks (conservation areas) in the province.

There are 11 parks, often called "active conservation areas," offering a wide range of activities including camping, hiking, boating, swimming, fishing and picnicking. (The Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area is sometimes considered a 12th park, although it offers a different, and more limited, range of activities.)

Admission, camping and other fees cover operating costs, meaning no tax dollars are used. In some years, the parks will generate a small surplus which can be set aside for future park needs or used to help finance other current GRCA initiatives.

Many of the parks are important parts of the recreational infrastructure of their communities, providing locations for events ranging from the multi-day Hillside Festival at Guelph Lake to corporate and family picnics.

The parks can be important parts of the local economy, paying property taxes and hiring local staff. Some are major tourism draws, making them important economic drivers. The bulk of customers come from across Southwestern Ontario and nearby states.

History

Spectators flocked to witness construction of the Grand Valley (now Shand) Dam when work started in 1939. After the dam was complete in 1942 a small day-use area was created.

Shand (Belwood Lake), Luther (1952) and Conestogo (1958) dams were projects of the former Grand River Conservation Commission, and recreation was considered a secondary benefit.

However, development of parkland was a primary goal of the Grand Valley Conservation



Tubing in Elora Gorge



Camping at a GRCA park.

Authority when it was created in 1948. It soon began acquiring environmentally significant properties for two purposes – to protect their unique qualities and to develop recreational areas: Elora Gorge (1954), the kettle lake and Carolinian forest of Pinehurst Lake (1955), the Carolinian forest and wetlands at Byng Island (1960) and the limestone cliffs and potholes of Rockwood (1964).

Following the merger of the commission and the authority in 1966, several more conservation areas were developed. The construction of new dams led to the creation of three areas: Laurel Creek in Waterloo (1970), Shade's Mills in Cambridge (1972) and Guelph Lake (1979). Brant opened in 1971 to host a 7,000 vehicle convention of the National Campers and Hikers Association. The Elora Quarry park opened in 1977.

Operations

For 10 parks, the season runs from about May 1 to Thanksgiving weekend. Elora Quarry usually opens June 1, depending on the weather.

Belwood Lake and Conestogo Lake, plus Luther Marsh, offer hunting in the fall.

Four parks open for winter activities: Belwood Lake, Laurel Creek, Shade's Mills and Pinehurst Lake. They offer different mixes of ice fishing, skiing, snowshoeing and skating.

Each park has one or two permanent employees. In addition to managing the parks, they also maintain other properties, control dams, conduct flood watches and perform duties for other parts of the GRCA operation.

During the summer season, about 215 students are hired to staff gatehouses, cut grass, collect garbage and do other maintenance duties.

Attendance at the parks generally exceeds one million paid visits each year. (For example, a family of four camping for five nights would be 20 “paid visits.”)

Admission fees and other rates are usually set in November. An effort is made to make them consistent with rates charged by other providers, such as Ontario Parks or local tourist attractions.

Park revenues are weather dependent; a warm, dry summer will produce a surplus while cold, wet years may result in revenues under budget. Park revenues were about \$6.7 million in 2014.

Camping

Eight of the parks offer camping: Conestogo Lake, Elora Gorge, Guelph Lake, Rockwood, Laurel Creek, Pinehurst, Brant and Byng Island. Combined, they have about 2,500 campsites, making the GRCA operation the second largest network of campgrounds in the province, second only to Ontario Parks.

Campers make up about two-thirds of park customers.

All of the camping parks except Rockwood offer seasonal camping. Water, electricity and sometimes sewer hookups are available.

The unofficial start of the overnight camping season is the Victoria Day weekend. The campgrounds are generally full most weekends until Labour Day. Campers can reserve sites through the GRCA website or a call centre.

Alcohol bans are in place at all campgrounds on the Victoria Day and Labour Day weekends. Several parks have extended spring bans, while Elora Gorge is alcohol-free all year.

Day use

Day-use customers make up about one-third of park visitors. Many day-use customers are local residents visiting



Fishing at Byng Island.



The Hillside Festival at Guelph Lake

the park to swim, picnic, bird-watch, fish or canoe.

Two of the largest swimming pools in Ontario are at Brant (1.25 acres) and Byng Island (two acres).

Visitors to Elora Gorge can tube through the rapids, an extremely popular and profitable activity. Kids can also enjoy a new splash pad.

Day-use visitors can purchase a season pass, which allows them unlimited entry to all parks for all occupants of a vehicle.

Parks are also popular locations for family, group and corporate picnics, which take advantage of picnic shelters in all of the parks. Some shelters provide cooking facilities.

Special events and other activities

GRCA parks are home to a great variety of community and other special events. For the most part, these events are organized by outside organizations, which pay a fee for park use.

- The annual Hillside Festival at Guelph Lake has built a national reputation as a premiere music event. The stage, built in part with donations from the festival, is also available for other events.
- Charities hold fund-raising events in several parks.
- Some parks are home to major athletic events such as triathlons (Guelph Lake) and the 50-kilometre Run for the Toad (Pinehurst Lake).
- Sailing clubs operate at Conestogo Lake, Belwood Lake and Guelph Lake. A rowing club operates at Guelph Lake.
- Because of the unique features of some parks, they have become popular locations for movies, catalogue shoots, television shows and commercials. Several major films and television shows have been filmed at Rockwood, while Elora Gorge, Elora Quarry, Belwood Lake and Pinehurst have also been featured.