

Ontario Climbing Access Coalition (OAC) Feedback for the 2015 Co-ordinated Review

The Ontario Climbing Access Coalition (OAC) is a volunteer, not-for-profit group that works with the climbing community, land owners, conservation authorities and property managers to keep climbing and bouldering areas open in an environmentally responsible manner. **The purpose of our feedback is: 1) to advocate for the development of climbing management policy supported by a climbing management guideline within the Niagara Escarpment Plan; 2) to highlight the relevance of protecting access to climbing environments along the Niagara Escarpment as it relates to the broader co-ordinated review.** We will show how climbing is managed sustainably in Ontario, from both recreational and environmental perspectives, and give recommendations for future action.

What does the OAC hope for as a result of the co-ordinated review?

The OAC proposes that climbing and bouldering activities should be generally accepted on Niagara Escarpment Plan lands (where appropriate). The OAC believes that climbing management policy needs to be developed and supported by a climbing management guideline within the Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP). The OAC has extensive experience developing climbing management guidelines on Niagara Escarpment lands with the province. As a key stakeholder, the OAC would appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with the province on developing a climbing management guideline to be included within the Niagara Escarpment Plan. Acknowledging climbing as a historic, current, and acceptable recreational activity along the Niagara Escarpment (where appropriate) and providing a guideline for that activity will both facilitate public access to recreational areas as well as provide protection to natural environments.

Specifically, the OAC supports the proposed policy options identified in the **Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) Niagara Escarpment Plan Review 2015 Discussion Paper – Phase 1, Topic #14 Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System (NEPOSS), published in 2013 at:** http://www.escarpment.org/files/file.php?fileid=fileJwIQrJrYHY&filename=file_NEPOSS_DiscussionPaper_Phase1_Oct16.pdf

From herein, the document cited above will be identified as “NEPOSS (2013).” Direct quotations from NEPOSS (2013) will appear *italicized*.

Background of NEPOSS and Objectives:

The Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System is comprised of 143 parks and open spaces on public land acquired to protect natural and cultural heritage within the Niagara Escarpment United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Biosphere Reserve. This System forms an integral part of the NEP. In addition to protecting significant features and landforms, the System provides opportunities for recreation, public access and appreciation of the Escarpment’s natural beauty and outstanding landscape. The System concept is based on the idea that managing publicly owned Escarpment lands in a consistent way will ensure protection of the Escarpment’s natural and cultural environment over the long-term.

The nine objectives of NEPOSS are as follows:

- 1. To protect unique ecological and historical areas;*
- 2. To provide adequate opportunities for outdoor education and recreation;*
- 3. To provide for adequate public access to the Niagara Escarpment;*
- 4. To complete a public system of major parks and open space through additional land acquisition and park and open space planning;*
- 5. To secure a route for the Bruce Trail;*
- 6. To maintain and enhance the natural environment of the Niagara Escarpment;*
- 7. To support tourism by providing opportunities on public land for discovery and enjoyment by Ontario's residents and visitors;*
- 8. To provide a common understanding and appreciation of the Niagara Escarpment; and*
- 9. To show leadership in supporting and promoting the principles of the Niagara Escarpment’s UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Designation through sustainable park planning, ecological management, community involvement, environmental monitoring, research and education.” (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 1).*

The OAC supports the following practice and policy options identified in NEPOSS (2013) - *Recreational Uses in the Parks and Open Space System (Section 4.2) - Rock Climbing (Section 4.2.1)* - beginning on page 26.

Note: Text shown in **red** indicates options for policy or wording change to update or refine existing policy or to add new policy to the NEP. **Bolded red** distinguishes where policy differs from the previous option (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 19).

Note: CERG stands for Cliff Ecology Research Group.

Policy Options and Strategies Identified in NEPOSS (2013) Followed by OAC Comments

- *Some of the options presented recommend the use of permanent anchors (bolts) to direct rock climbers away from sensitive vegetation. However, this type of infrastructure is not intended for bouldering. To assist with policy interpretation, it would be beneficial to include a definition of “rock climbing” in the NEP to make this distinction (see Appendix C)(NEPOSS, 2013, p. 26).*

OAC Comments: The OAC agrees with this recommendation and supports the use of permanent anchors (bolts). Further, the OAC agrees that distinguishing between “rock climbing” and “bouldering” in the NEP will help avoid confusion and will clarify tolerated activities.

- *As an additional policy option, consideration could also be given to directing climbing activities away from private property so that the use is confined to public land where activities can be carefully managed and monitored. The majority of the cliff face where climbing would occur is included in the Escarpment Natural Area designation of the NEP; therefore changes could be made to the Permitted Uses in Part 1.3 to only allow rock climbing in the Escarpment Natural Area if within NEPOSS subject to Part 3.1.4.1 (see Option (a)). (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 26).
“**Option (a):** Option (a) can be combined with Options 1, 2, 3 or 4. Option (a) would modify the Permitted Uses for the Escarpment Natural Area to restrict climbing to public land in NEPOSS. This policy would be subject to Part 3.1.4.1 if Options 2, 3 or 4 are endorsed. Note that renumbering in Part 1.3 would be required as a housekeeping change to accommodate this new policy.*

1.3 Escarpment Natural Area

Permitted uses

New#. *Rock climbing if within the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System and subject to Part 3.1.4.1. (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 28).*

OAC Comments: The OAC agrees with the recommendation to add rock climbing as a permitted use for Escarpment Natural Areas.

- *New policy specific to rock climbing in NEPOSS could be added under Part 3.1.4.1.” (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 26).*

Option 1: *No policy change to the NEP. The NEC would continue to deal with rock climbing proposals on a case-by-case basis through the management planning process, guided by the recommendations provided in the latest cliff ecology research.*

Option 2: *New policy specific to rock climbing in NEPOSS could be added under Part 3.1.4.1. Option 2 is the least prescriptive of the policy options presented. Additional recommendations made by the researchers would be encouraged through the management planning process, similar to Option 1. The policy in Option 2 aims to prohibit new climbing areas in Nature Reserves (which aligns with the approach used by Ontario Parks), while maintaining (i.e. not decommissioning) existing climbing areas as recommended by CERG.*

3.1.4.1 Recreation and Commercial Uses in Parks and Open Space

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5. *Notwithstanding existing climbing areas, rock climbing activities shall not be permitted in Nature Reserves.*

6. *Rock climbing shall not be permitted in other park classes unless part of an approved Master/Management Plan that addresses environmental impacts including impacts on sensitive vegetation.*

Option 3: Option 3 builds on Option 2 but includes some of the other recommendations provided by CERG.

3.1.4.1 Recreation and Commercial Uses in Parks and Open Space

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5. Notwithstanding existing climbing areas, rock climbing activities shall not be permitted in Nature Reserves.

6. Rock climbing shall not be permitted in other park classes unless part of an approved Master/Management Plan that addresses environmental impacts including impacts on sensitive vegetation. In addition:

a) The use of permanent anchors (bolts) will be encouraged to direct climbers away from sensitive vegetation; and

b) Top rope climbing and rappelling will not be supported.

Option 4: Option 3 builds on Option 2 but incorporates all of the specific recommendations made by CERG. It is the most prescriptive of the policy options presented. A definition of “Yosemite Decimal System” and “sport climbing” could be added to the NEP if this option is supported.

3.1.4.1 Recreation and Commercial Uses in Parks and Open Space

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5. Notwithstanding existing climbing areas, rock climbing activities shall not be permitted in Nature Reserves.

6. Rock climbing shall not be permitted in other park classes unless part of an approved Master/Management Plan that addresses environmental impacts including impacts on sensitive vegetation. In addition:

c) The use of permanent anchors (bolts) and the use of sport climbing routes graded 5.10 or greater on the Yosemite Decimal System will be encouraged to direct climbers away from sensitive vegetation; and

d) Top rope climbing and rappelling will not be supported.

OAC Comments: The OAC has reviewed the four options outlined in NEPOSS (2013). As a key stakeholder, the OAC would appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with the province on the proposed policy options. The OAC agrees with the assessment of the CERG described in NEPOSS (2013). The OAC would also strongly encourage the use of the latest research results from the 2014-2015 environmental assessment of Kolapore Uplands, independently conducted by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, once those results become available to inform policy options and direction.

- *It would be beneficial to have a documented inventory of the extent of all of the climbing activities that exist along the Escarpment to track where they are occurring. (NEPOSS, 2013, p. 26).*

OAC Comments: The OAC recently helped facilitate an inventory of Kolapore Uplands with MNRF and is in a position to continue to help.

Additional Comments about Policy Options and Direction from the OAC

The OAC believes that climbing should be used more intentionally and extensively in tourism promotion as a means to branding the Niagara Escarpment as a sustainable recreational resource that benefits individuals, communities, and the natural world. There is strong evidence for how climbing benefits local economies and we believe climbing should be further recognized and leveraged as a productive tourism generator in Ontario and this should be taken into consideration with policy development. Further, the OAC believes that climbing should be a celebrated part of the Niagara Escarpment community and should be discussed within policy documents not only in the context of managing impacts but also in the spirit of the positive benefits it provides the public. Niagara Escarpment climbing areas are increasingly featured in international publications and other media and are an important part of the Biosphere Reserve identity. Indeed, one of the most famous bouldering areas in the world (Fontainebleau, France) sits inside a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. At the recent NEBR network discussions, with the Niagara Escarpment Commission, some individuals suggested that climbing along the Niagara Escarpment should be framed similar to Fontainebleau, where climbing is a welcomed and celebrated part of the landscape.

How is rock climbing managed sustainably in Ontario?

Currently, there are a variety of approaches to sustainable climbing management in southern Ontario. A thorough and accurate history of rock climbing research and management efforts in Ontario can be found in the **Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) Niagara Escarpment Plan Review 2015 Discussion Paper – Phase 1, Topic #14 Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System (NEPOSS), published in 2013 at:** http://www.escarpment.org/files/file.php?fileid=fileJwIQrJrYHY&filename=file_NEPOSS_DiscussionPaper_Phase1_Oct16.pdf

The activities and goals of the OAC are consistent with the NEPOSS objectives. Here are some examples to illustrate how they align.

To protect ecological and unique historical areas. The OAC encourages and educates others about minimum impact recreational practices and policy. These practices and policy translate directly into protecting fragile natural areas along the Niagara Escarpment. Some examples include:

1. The no “top out” policy (co-created by the OAC and the Niagara Parks Commission) at the Niagara Glen Nature Reserve, where climbers refrain from climbing on the tops of boulders (where safely possible) to avoid trampling fragile vegetation.
2. Co-facilitating a wildflower inventory at the Niagara Glen Nature Reserve to help park naturalists catalog fragile species in vertical terrain.
3. Consulting with Conservation Halton to install permanent top rope site anchors at Rattlesnake Point (one of the few areas where top rope climbing and guiding is allowed) to avoid the use of trees at the tops of the cliff face, protecting trees and the surrounding landscape from damage.
4. Leading annual garlic mustard removal volunteer days (with a typical turnout of 50 to 100 volunteers) with Conservation Halton to rid fragile Niagara Escarpment areas of invasive species.
5. Leading the anchor replacement initiative at Old Baldy (Grey Sauble Conservation Authority) to discourage top rope climbing and maintain the recreational resource.
6. Co-developing guidelines and designated open and closed areas with Parks Canada staff to create a sustainable bouldering plan including the creation of a bouldering ambassador program at Halfway Log Dump on the Bruce Peninsula.

To provide adequate opportunities for outdoor education and recreation. The OAC provides opportunities for outdoor education through its outreach initiatives with the local climbing community and other area stakeholders. Communicating the best minimum impact approaches to rock climbers helps this recreational user group understand the natural history and the vulnerability of the areas where they enjoy their activities. Further, collaborative efforts have brought together climbers with protected area employees and policymakers, who exchange information and learn a great deal from one another about recreation and the natural environment. This knowledge transfer carries forward to other groups. The OAC provides opportunities for outdoor recreation through its core mission of working to keep climbing and bouldering areas open in an environmentally responsible manner. Maintaining access to climbing areas provides the public with a range of recreational opportunities to be physically active in nature while increasing environmental awareness of all of those involved.

To provide for adequate public access to the Niagara Escarpment; To complete a public system of major parks and open space through additional land acquisition and parks and open space planning; To secure a route for the Bruce Trail. We grouped together these three objectives to showcase how one of the OAC’s recent initiatives aligns with all three. On October 8, 2014, the OAC presented the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority (GSCA) with a cheque for \$130,000 to be used towards the purchase of a land parcel located at the base of Old Baldy Conservation Area in Kimberley, Ontario. This action initiates the OAC as stewards of the land conservancy movement and marks the culmination of a two year fundraising campaign to purchase the land. The partnership between the OAC and the GSCA addresses climbing access to Old Baldy and ensures its protection for future generations of recreational land use. Old Baldy, the birthplace of the modern style of bolt-protected sport climbing in Ontario, is a historically significant climbing area for climbers. With over 100 rock climbs from beginner to expert, the area has been enjoyed by climbers for over 40 years. It affords expansive views for climbers and hikers over the lands of the Beaver Valley.

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), The Alpine Club of Canada – Toronto Section, OntarioClimbing.com and The Alpine Club of Canada National demonstrated significant leadership in the community by supporting the OAC regarding this project. Their funding, with the additional support of numerous individual donors from the climbing community, was crucial in raising the necessary funds to make this OAC initiative a reality.

Major funding was provided by:

- MEC — \$100,000
- The Alpine Club of Canada Toronto Section — \$10,000 (plus \$1,410 from members)
- Ontarioclimbing.com — \$6,000
- The Alpine Club of Canada National — \$5,000

Additional Partners with the OAC and GSCA who supplied critical funds to finalize this initiative are as follows:

- The Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC) donated \$25,000. The BTC is a consistent champion of protecting the Niagara Escarpment and has been instrumental in working towards its environmental protection. Only fifty percent of the 890km Bruce Trail is safe from development; year after year, the BTC raises millions towards conservation.
- The Nature League donated \$2,000. Several years ago the Nature League funded the current parking area for Old Baldy Conservation Area and continues to show support through their donation.

The OAC plans to maintain partnerships with the BTC and the Nature League in a continued effort to preserve Escarpment lands from development. The Old Baldy purchase demonstrates that climber-led groups are capable of raising significant capital to preserve access to Ontario climbing areas, a model that the OAC will continue to adopt. This community-led approach is consistent with an evolving access strategy model that sees access groups purchasing property to preserve lands and make them available for public recreation.

To support tourism by providing opportunities on public land for discovery and enjoyment by Ontario's residents and visitors. Rock climbing makes a substantial contribution to the tourism industry on the Niagara Escarpment. We estimate that each year, 2400 Ontarians and visitors participate in climbing-related tourism on the Escarpment. Our survey indicates that many of them are seeking a connection to nature and to travel to new places. This low-impact activity gives climbers an opportunity to discover sites on the Escarpment that would otherwise be inaccessible. We also estimate that climbers spend \$150,000 on their climbing trips each year. Climbers represent a key demographic for conservation authorities to engage. A majority (65%) of climbers are in the 18-35 age range. Climbers also report incomes above the Ontario average. The growth of indoor climbing facilities in Ontario has been astounding and we expect that outdoor climbing's popularity will increase accordingly.

To provide a common understanding and appreciation of the Niagara Escarpment. The OAC was invited (March 2015) by the Niagara Escarpment Commission to participate in the planning and leadership of a Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve (NEBR) network with other NEBR practitioners. These discussions led to a common understanding that every NEBR practitioner shares the goal of connecting people to the benefits of the biosphere and aim to make the benefits visible, enable better choices and decisions, and share stories of success. The OAC is excited to contribute to the evolving NEBR network in the spirit of providing a common understanding and appreciation of the Niagara Escarpment. Future meetings are scheduled for the summer of 2015.

To show leadership in supporting and promoting the principles of the Niagara Escarpment's UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Designation through sustainable park planning, ecological management, community involvement, environmental monitoring, research and education.

Previous examples of OAC initiatives showcase contributions that align with many aspects of this objective. One more area is the facilitation of environmental research. The OAC raised over \$6000 to contribute to an independent environmental assessment of the Kolapore Uplands during 2013-2014. This research project was led by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF). OAC funding supported a Masters level graduate student from University of Toronto's Faculty of Forestry who helped lead the project. The climbing community also helped with site orientation, data collection, and provided context about climbing activities in Kolapore. The results of this collaborative effort are still being analyzed by MNRF. Reports indicate that the collaborative approach was a positive

and productive experience and demonstrates the OAC's commitment to supporting and promoting the principles of the Niagara Escarpment's UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Designation.

How does rock climbing relate to the broader co-ordinated review?

While our main focus is to advocate for climbing management policy to be included in the Niagara Escarpment Plan, climbing contributes to three of the goals outlined in the **Discussion Document for the 2015 Co-ordinated review** (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2015). Specifically, climbing in Ontario plays a key role in protecting agricultural land, water and natural areas (Goal #1), fostering healthy, livable and inclusive communities (Goal #3), and addressing climate change and building resilient communities (Goal #5).

Protecting agricultural land, water and natural areas: As a form of human-powered recreation, rock climbing is a nature-based activity that occurs in outdoor recreation settings, helping facilitate protection of those settings. Research has shown that forming attachment to outdoor recreation settings can inspire actions of care not only toward those specific environments, but to nature as a whole, for both adults and children (Beery & Wolf-Watz, 2014; Cheng & Monroe, 2010; Halpenny, 2010). Many examples of climbing environment stewardship in Ontario can be found on the Ontario Climbing Access Coalition website (www.ontarioaccesscoalition.com) and elsewhere in this document. In short, they include clean-up initiatives, invasive species removal, permit development, tree planting, and acquisition of land for conservation and recreational purposes (among others). While the body of research on nature connection and pro-environmental behaviour continues to evolve, there is strong empirical evidence within various professional disciplines (including land use planning) that protecting natural areas for recreation improves both human and environmental qualities of life. Improving and protecting human and environmental quality of life will help grow and strengthen the region's network of open spaces and will provide for sustainable recreational opportunities.

Fostering healthy, livable and inclusive communities. Rock climbing can help foster healthy, livable and inclusive communities by bringing together physical activity motivated by being in the natural world. Dustin, Bricker, and Schwab (2009) summarize the numerous beneficial health outcomes of outdoor recreation and propose an ecological model of health promotion. Their approach highlights the interconnections between maintaining the health of parks, people, communities, and the planet. Dustin and colleagues point out that a lack of contact with nature has negative effects on individual and community health, potentially contributing to higher healthcare costs. Like many outdoor recreational pursuits, climbing is a goal-oriented activity based on intrinsic motivation where effort and enjoyment blend together. Access to rock climbing helps get people physically active in the out-of-doors and helps create a healthy lifestyle of being in nature on a regular basis with friends, family and community.

Addressing climate change and building resilient communities. Rock climbers are known to be environmentally minded and many believe them to symbolize environmental sensitivity. For example, the Obama administration recently reached out to professional rock climbers to lead advocacy for climate action (Sheppard, 2015; Wright, 2015). Rock climbing demands respect for one's natural surroundings, humility, focus, and self-sufficiency. These values and skills are the same as those needed to address climate change and the building of resilient communities, especially with youth. Rock climbers are in a unique position to observe change in fragile environments and will advocate for new policy approaches to land use that reduce the development pressures on natural areas.

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