

Where the Wild Things Aren't:
How High Park's VSP is Safeguarding the Black Oak Savannah's Ecosystem

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Preface:

This article was written for a University of Toronto seminar on Community Resilience. The group in focus, High Park's Volunteer Stewardship Program (VSP), exemplifies a city-community partnership to safeguard High Park's natural ecosystem. Ultimately, I chose to write about High Park Stewards because unlike any other group in the City of Toronto they best represent the ideal of community mobilization and working with limited resources to achieve an objective beneficial for the entire community. As a child, my parents often took me to High Park. Fast forward to the present day and my warm sentiment to the Park has not faltered. Yet, High Park's Volunteer Stewardship Program cannot manage the park alone, even with help from Toronto's Urban Forestry department. I hope this article raises awareness, not just about the work of High Park Stewards, but the need for a wider discussion concerning the protection this Park from invasive plant species but also damaging human activity. Special mention goes to Sharon Lovett for her cooperation in this undertaking.

Throughout this course, understanding resilience has been linked not to the concept of bouncing back but the concept of bouncing forward. An overwhelming majority of cities today represent humanity's ability to carve a world of our own from this planet. Yet the price of this so-called progress has come at the cost of the natural environment, which many of these cities have literally transplanted to smaller areas designated as forests or parkland. Consequently, these last refuges of nature occupy a fraction of their pre-industrial space. In the city of Toronto, the parkland known today as High Park survived the city's industrialization efforts by remaining the private property of John Howard until he transferred the land to the city for public use in 1873. A century later, Toronto came to realize "that the natural environment of the Park represented a key asset and began to reduce mowing in order to encourage and preserve the Oak savannah" (Harris, 1999). It is against this backdrop that Toronto's High Park emerged as a wilderness jewel in the city's crown. The custodians tasked with polishing this jewel are under the umbrella of Toronto's Urban Forestry department (City of Toronto, 2013) which maintains jurisdiction over High Park. Known to the initiated as High Park Stewards, these park protectors represent an effort by the City of Toronto to engage with the local High Park Community by having these Stewards assist Urban Forestry through their specialized knowledge of High Park. They were originally recruited from the Natural Environment Sub-Committee, an initiative of the High Park Citizen's Advisory Committee (HPCAC) established in 1992 (Harris, 1999). Their evolution since conception in 1996 is a testament to the influence of citizen mobilization.

While the origin story of High Park's VSP is unlikely to be played out in theatres anytime soon, their objectives are nothing short of daring. First and foremost, High Park Stewards pursue the principle of fostering resilience in the High Park ecological system. The need for this resilience comes from the threat posed by invasive species suffocating

the original wildlife. Left to their own development, invasive plants like European Buckthorn and Himalayan Balsam (Dean and Stairs, 2012) compete with the native vegetation through their abundant growth and lack of natural predators (HPNEC and HPS, 2011). High Park Stewards accomplish the task of preserving and maintaining the High Park ecosystem by removing these invasive species – fulfilling the role of a natural predator, collecting seeds of native vegetation, and planting those seeds regularly throughout the Spring, Summer and Fall seasons. These are significant tasks because, in their own words, “Our work gives the rare native plants and dependent wildlife a fighting chance to prosper” (HPNEC and HPS, 2013, C).

To the objective observer, there are many strengths in the way in which the Program’s members have approached the issue of fostering resilience in the face of ecosystem collapse. The Program is voluntary, meaning that while the occasional high school student trying to complete their forty hours of community service will enlist, only the most committed volunteers are chosen to be part of the administration. As an incentive for regular biweekly attendance, these “core” members are given first priority when applying to attend native plant nursery events or greenhouse planting sessions “where working space is limited” (HPNEC and HPS, 2013, C). These devoted Stewards would liaison with like-minded organizations such as Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF), Toronto Field Naturalists (TFN), Tallgrass Ontario, and engage in reaching out to local schools to encourage volunteering from an early age (HPNEC and HPS, 2013, H). Additionally High Park’s VSP has tremendous youth outreach potential, having a presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter while maintaining a presence on regular media through the HPNEC and HPS website and print ads in community magazines and newspapers.

Due to their seasonal approach, anyone interested in participating merely has to read their calendar of biweekly events. In 2013 alone there are 21 various activities ranging from greenhouse seed cleaning to lectures by veterans of invasive species management, and the annual group tradition of hosting a native plant sale. These events strengthen the group's efforts because they help promote community attention towards community mobilization for the benefit of the park. Yet perhaps the most permanent accomplishment was the 2008 publishing of *Rare Plants of the Endangered High Park Black Oak Savannah: A Volunteer Stewardship Guidebook* written by High Park's VSP and the HPCAC. Retailing for \$15.00 at local venues, including Colborne Lodge within High Park itself, all proceeds from the 64-page publication “support stewardship and educational projects in High Park” (HPNEC and HPS, 2012, B).

Despite their efforts, High Park Stewards encounter challenges attributed to decreased Urban Forestry staff, changing public expectations of the park, along with the traditional threat of invasive plants (Lovett, 2007). With respect to enrollment, an additional challenge lies in the task of recruiting informed and committed volunteers. The "rain or shine" attitude of High Park Stewards demonstrates a willingness to rough it, that not everyone is willing to make in wake of other commitments. More pressingly, High Park Stewards face the challenge of the public's expectations for high impact recreational facilities (Lovett, 2007) that undermine the surrounding ecosystem. Rivalling this

challenge is the task of changing attitudes so that visitors accept "native habitats as well as manicured gardens" (Lovett, 2007). Working with the City has not alleviated these challenges entirely. Room for improvement lies with the recognition that more city staff invested in High Park will translate to enhanced Stewardship and, consequently, better park management.

Ultimately, the High Park Volunteer Stewardship Program is destined to be one of the most effective, resilient environmental groups in the City of Toronto. I decided to title this report *Where the Wild Things Aren't* after Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* because High Park Stewards engage in community exercises preserving the natural. Unlike fiction, the invasive wild things in High Park do threaten the local ecosystem if ignored. These contemporary guardians of nature have demonstrated an ability to be both grassroots in terms of community mobilization, while simultaneously making the most of media and social media to solidify their status as Stewards of High Park.

References

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*Comment submitted to City of Toronto on 24 February 2012 about misspelling.