

# Conserving the Niagara Escarpment

I'd like to talk to you about our audit titled **Conserving the Niagara Escarpment**.

The Niagara Escarpment is recognized internationally by the United Nations as a World Biosphere, a place to conserve nature and promote sustainable development.

This ridge extends 725 kilometres through southern Ontario from Tobermory on the Bruce Peninsula, to Queenston near Niagara Falls.

But the Escarpment's natural environment is under threat. It is located beside the most densely populated part of Ontario.

The proximity of so many people results in a high demand for recreation and tourism on the Escarpment, putting pressure on its natural, and in some places, delicate environment.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is responsible for administering the *Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act*, while the Niagara Escarpment Commission is tasked with implementing the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

The Niagara Escarpment Plan is considered to be Canada's first land use plan with environmental protection as its primary objective.

The Plan co-ordinates a 44,017-hectare network of 163 parks and open spaces for conservation and recreation purposes.

Development activities in almost all of the Plan Area are regulated by the Commission, which issues permits with conditions on how development is to proceed, or gives exemptions for proposed development.

Our audit assessed whether the Ministry and the Commission are effectively and efficiently conserving the Niagara Escarpment in order to meet the purpose and objectives of the Act and the Plan.

We concluded that the Natural Resources Ministry and the Niagara Escarpment Commission are not fully providing the necessary leadership, resources and actions to maintain the Escarpment and adjacent lands as a continuous natural environment, nor ensuring that all development is compatible with that environment.

Our audit found that the Commission has approved almost all development permit applications in the last five years, and new and expanded aggregate operations on the Escarpment have been allowed despite the negative environmental impacts of pits and quarries.

Aggregates are materials that are extracted from pits and quarries and are used for building roads or making products like cement.

Even though there are thousands of aggregate sites across Ontario, because of the Escarpment's proximity to areas of high aggregate demand, such as the Greater Toronto Area, this proximity can cause increased pressure for extraction from the escarpment.

We also found there is no longer environmental monitoring performed by commission staff because there are no staff, resources nor programs in place to assess the environmental state of the Niagara Escarpment.

The Commission has not assessed the cumulative effects of the more than 12,000 development permits that it has issued since 1975.

Up until 2017, the Plan did not allow new development in endangered species' habitat. The government has recently changed the Escarpment Plan to now permit for development that harms endangered species' habitat. Protecting an endangered species' habitat is no longer explicit grounds for the Commission to refuse a development permit application.

Our report contains 23 recommendations, including that the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and the Niagara Escarpment Commission:

- assess the environmental impacts of aggregate extraction on the Niagara Escarpment;
- develop an environmental monitoring program with sufficient staffing and resources; and
- publicly report the results.

As well, we recommended that the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry work with the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks and experts in species at risk, to assess the sufficiency of the Niagara Escarpment Plan and its measures to protect endangered species and their habitat on the Escarpment.

To read this report, you can visit our website at [www.auditor.on.ca](http://www.auditor.on.ca)