



AN INTRODUCTION

Ontario Stewardship is a program of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) that was initiated in the summer of 1995. This innovative program is supported – not controlled - by the OMNR. The success of the program is in the foundations of volunteerism and community empowerment. The Ontario Stewardship network consists of 41 community based “Stewardship Councils” located throughout Ontario. The OMNR provides Stewardship Coordinators who support these Councils.

The landscapes in which these volunteer Councils exist are predominantly privately owned but also include areas with that patchwork of crown and private lands enriching the community agenda to include all resource users regardless of land tenure. Councils are formed geographically by County and community as well as by population and private land clusters. Ontario Stewardship advocates that these lands be managed through a stewardship approach. The stewardship ethic is defined as:

*An ethic in which humans care for the land as one part of the natural system.
To participate in environmental stewardship is to make a personal commitment
to the land and to sustain and enhance it for generations to come.*

The program is in place to **bring together people to advance resource stewardship**. It brings together landowners, individuals, associations and resource agencies with an interest in responsible land care and sustainable resource use. The Councils use an ecological approach to create and/or enhance healthy environments. The Ontario Stewardship council ‘network’ is involved in over 600 projects each year ranging from natural resource education, waters, wildlife habitat enhancement, as well as forest related - community generated projects. Many of these projects result in economic development and enhanced community leadership. The Council initiatives support events that draw people to the community, assist new business ventures, and increase landowners’ ability to generate benefits from natural resources. These projects encourage local employment, increase community capacity, and empower local leaders to act and direct local initiatives. This in turn encourages the volunteer commitment of time, expertise, and financial resources that have made Ontario Stewardship a unique community led, government supported model.

Annually (2004/05 data) Ontario Stewardship engages 18,557 volunteers who contribute over 236,000 volunteer hours working with 2655 registered partner organizations and individuals. Monetary in kind effort from these partners reaches over \$7.9 million with total levered dollars at a staggering \$ 9.4 million. This adds up to a total contribution and effort for natural resources at \$17.3 million dollars. MNR’s investment in staff and support to the community brings this to over \$20 Million.

The success of Ontario Stewardship lies, in part, with the networking, consensus building, community capacity building, and the tangible change on the ground, which result in increased ecological sustainability and attitude shift.

THE MODEL

Ontario Stewardship has two key components: the influential volunteer members of the **Stewardship Councils** and the OMNR **Stewardship Coordinator**.



The Community **Stewardship Councils** are active groups that share a strong commitment to the program purpose and represent landowners, land interests and resources in the area. They are respected people who provide a forum to recognize and influence community involvement and interest in stewardship. Representation is predominantly landowners such as woodland owners, loggers, farmers, cottagers, naturalists, and recreationalists. Each Council has a chairperson and the council members act much like a board of directors, in addition to getting directly involved in many projects. Councilors are apolitical and non-partisan.

THE COUNCILS:

- Provide a forum to foster stewardship, influence responsible land care by landowners and land interest, and seek funding opportunities to support their initiatives.
- Integrate with existing community groups – do not duplicate or replace their efforts, but compliment their work and pursue opportunities for synergy.
- Encourage cooperation among agencies and associations through their focus on projects that require shared efforts.

STEWARDSHIP COORDINATORS

Stewardship Coordinators are paid by MNR with the understanding that they work for the community through the Stewardship Council. Their task involves building the necessary relationships and partnerships, working collaboratively with agencies and associations, providing a window to the science and information within MNR and the extensive network that they are a part of. They take an active role as the spokesperson for the Council. They have a local network of personal contacts in the community, and have a responsibility to be an active participant in the greater network of 41 Councils, which is Ontario Stewardship - a key to the success of this program. They are also part of a regional/provincial/national network, which will:

- Create a broader sense of purpose (e.g. ecosystem and corporate approach);
- Lend some consistency to the program;
- Maintain currency with programs and developments;
- Obtain and give advice on “how to” (e.g. relationship development; skills & techniques);
- Create synergy and momentum.

CONCLUSION

Ontario Stewardship is a model developed by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to empower people to take part, in a real sense, in their own communities. The Ontario Stewardship network establishes the connectivity and encourages the ecosystem approach. The program set out to improve stewardship of our natural resources, to create a collaborative resource management model, and to implement a model of influence. Much more than that has happened. The program has created a new relationship with communities, found better efficiencies, unexpected alliances, and most importantly illustrated the tremendous value of true partnerships. Community Stewardship Councils in the Ontario Stewardship program are always looking for new partners, ideas and volunteers. To become involved in the program, contact your local Stewardship

Council or visit our website at www.ontariostewardship.org .

