



## History of Conservation Authorities

The *Conservation Authorities Act, 1946* was legislated by the province of Ontario in response to concerns expressed by agricultural, natural sports groups who highlighted that much of the renewable natural resources of the province were in an unhealthy state as a result of poor water and forestry practices during the 1930s and 1940s. The combined impacts of drought and deforestation led to extensive soil loss and flooding.

Leading conservation organizations and many practitioners within the provincial government believed that we could not protect Ontario's natural resources from contamination, degradation or depletion unless a more integrated watershed management approach was adopted across natural watershed boundaries.

Although legislative responsibility for managing natural resources resided with the province of Ontario at that time, the scale of erosion and other problems was such that a number of municipal councils agreed to become involved and this spirit of cooperation led to legislation of the *Conservation Authorities Act, 1946*.

The *Conservation Authorities Act, 1946* provided the means by which the province and the municipalities of Ontario could join together to form a Conservation Authority – based on watershed boundaries to undertake programs for natural resource management.

### Three fundamental principles were embodied in the *Conservation Authorities Act, 1946*:

#### 1. Local initiative

A Conservation Authority in any area could only be formed when the desires of the residents reached the point where they were willing to request the government of Ontario to form an authority. In making the request, the local people had to face up to the responsibility of contributing financially to the work of the Authority and also agree to assume the burden of running the corporate body known as the Conservation Authority. This latter task involved burdens and responsibilities similar to the running of a municipality. The local initiative requirement meant that people living close to the problems were required to recognize and solve them. It also meant that solutions could not be imposed from above and an authority would only undertake those plans which it could face economically, culturally and democratically.

#### 2. Cost sharing

The *Conservation Authorities Act, 1946* stipulated that the costs of projects should be shared by municipalities and by the provincial government. This proved to be one of the soundest ideas in the authority movement. It has meant that an authority can flourish only if the local people have enough enthusiasm and conviction to support it financially.

#### 3. Watershed jurisdiction

Conservation Authorities were to have jurisdiction over one or more watersheds. This stewardship was to cover all aspects of conservation in the area. This has meant that an Authority has been able to manage such problems as flood control. By its power to establish regulatory authority it has been able to protect life and property, river valleys from building encroachment and erosion problems.

A particular milestone in Conservation Authority history was the impact of a devastating event – Hurricane Hazel in 1954. This storm mobilized the need for managing Ontario's watersheds on a regional basis. As a result, after Hurricane Hazel the provincial government amended the *Conservation Authorities Act* to enable Conservation Authorities to acquire lands for recreation and conservation purposes, and to acquire land for the safety of the community.

Over time, Conservation Authorities have become involved in a wide range of activities depending on the resource management needs of residents, member municipalities and the Province. Each Conservation Authority's watershed management programs are geared to specific and are scoped according to the resources available.

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