



## Ecological Impacts of Rondeau Cottages

For many people, it may be difficult to understand the impact that cottages impose upon Rondeau Provincial Park's natural habitats. However, cottages occupy an extremely active area of the park, ecologically speaking. Shorelines are important transitions between the open lake and the forest within the heart of the Rondeau peninsula.

Of the 9km length of the Lake Erie shoreline, 7.5km is occupied by cottages. On Rondeau Bay, all shoreline that isn't marsh has been developed. All in all, any shoreline that isn't occupied by cottages is unsuitable for development due to unstable shorelines. All shorelines that can be developed, are occupied by cottages.



*A cottage in a Provincial Park?*

Although the cottages occupy only 1% of the land area of the park (according to Stewart McLaren, President of the Rondeau Park Leaseholders Association), their impacts are felt in 100% of the park through the activities that go on around the cottages. McLaren claims that the cottagers are "Guardians of the Park," and that they keep the park clean by cleaning up debris, etc. It is these types of activity that are actually destructive to wildlife, and not appropriate within a Provincial Park. Debris types (ie. Leaves, twigs, fallen branches) are important habitat structure for many plants and animals. The following sections are summaries of the impacts that cottages have on the park's flora and fauna.

### Lawn Mowing

The cutting of lawns is highly wasteful to the potential of having high-quality habitat on beach dunes. Lawns allow for 0% regeneration of native species and are extremely low in biodiversity. Grasses are not allowed to reach maturity and provide seeds for wildlife to eat, especially wintering birds. Mowing allows for non-native lawn grass to perpetuate and rare Oak Savanna wildflowers are completely displaced. Many toads at Rondeau are killed during lawn mowing, especially the rare Fowler's Toad, unique to beach dune habitats. Most notably, lawns are attractive as ideal feeding grounds for non-native Brown-headed Cowbirds, English (House) Sparrows, and European Starlings. According to a Bird Studies Canada (BSC, 1999) report, these birds impact heavily on native birds at Rondeau including Red-headed Woodpeckers (vulnerable), Eastern Bluebird, and Prothonotary Warblers (endangered) by out-competing them for nest sites.

### Raking of Debris

Raking leaves and other debris exposes mineral soil, which encourages the propagation of weedy, non-native species like Garlic Mustard. Both these species are highly competitive with native wildflowers. Garlic Mustard is a 4-petaled, white flower that blooms in May. Wildlife does not eat it, making it useless as wildlife habitat. Lakeshore Road cottages are infested with Garlic Mustard due to excessive raking. The forest directly across the road is also infested because it is spreading from the cottage lots. This side of the road is also disturbed by dumping of raked debris, car parking, etc which also encourages Garlic Mustard. York University (Bazely, 1998) studies show that Garlic Mustard is of serious concern at Rondeau and needs attention. Also, our native plants are adapted to growing in this debris, and disappear without it.



### **Planting of Non-native Trees**

This seemingly innocent activity of planting foreign greenery is one of the most serious impacts of cottaging. These non-native species mature and “biologically pollute” the nearby habitats and seriously alter the species composition. In general, native wildlife species feed on native plants. The space that non-native plants occupy is sterile, and seldom used by wildlife. Also, that space should be occupied by native plants that would provide useful wildlife habitat. At Rondeau, 23% of the plant species are non-native. Some of the most troublesome are Norway Maple (includes Crimson King Maple), Tree-of-heaven, Japanese Honeysuckle, Japanese Barberry, Lilacs, and Eurasian White Poplar. All are popular landscape trees on cottage lots, and surrounding habitats are devastated by these species spreading seeds.

### **Irrigation, Fertilization, Pesticide Spraying**

Natural sand dunes are dry at Rondeau and the native plants thrive in the dry, infertile sands. The use of irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticides changes the bio-physical environment of the dune and disfavours native plants. The artificially maintained wet and fertile conditions encourages non-native plants to persist where they do not belong. According to the Ministry of the Environment, use of pesticides and fertilizers on sand dunes is not acceptable where the water table is highly mobile.

### **Fire Suppression**

The cottages are located in a fire-dependent habitat. White Pine, Black Oak, savanna wildflowers are encouraged to regenerate by fire. Natural grass fires have occurred in Rondeau for thousands of years and helped maintain diverse savanna habitats. When fire is suppressed, exotic species and grape vines invade and destroy the Black Oaks, White Pines and smother native wildflowers. On March 25, 2000 (source: Rondeau Provincial Park) a natural grass fire between Lakeshore Road and Harrison Trail was exterminated. This fire was in a natural area away from cottages and had the potential to restore a vast area of unhealthy Oak Savanna. This fire killed many grapevines, non-native trees before it was put out. Cottagers were instrumental in extinguishing the fire although it posed no threat to cottages where it was located. A second fire burning in remote areas of the South Point Trail on May 1, 2000 (source: Rondeau Provincial Park) was also extinguished after a cottager’s request. This fire suppression is destroying unique, globally rare Oak Savanna habitats.

### **Garbage, Food Scraps, Animal Feeding**

The presence of garbage, food scraps, bird feeding around cottages are all excess food sources in the park that subsidize an unnatural high population of Common Raccoons and Gray Squirrels. According to the Upper Thames Valley Conservation Authority, excessive raccoons are devastating the park’s turtle population, which suffers nearly 100% loss of eggs to raccoons. This is a serious problem since Rondeau hosts 7 out of Ontario’s 8 turtle species including the Eastern Spiny Softshell (threatened) and Spotted Turtles (threatened). These raccoons are also problematic with the endangered Prothonotary Warblers and many other song birds according to Bird Studies Canada. Excessive squirrels, on the other hand also raid bird nests and also consume nearly 100% of Chinquapin Oak (rare) seeds making reproduction unsuccessful.



### Lakeshore Road

The presence of cottages requires road access through sensitive natural habitats. After rains at Rondeau, hundreds of reptiles and amphibians are killed by cars especially during the spring and fall when they are moving between hibernation breeding locations (source: roadkill records at Rondeau Provincial Park Visitor Centre). Most alarming are the road deaths of Eastern Fox Snakes (threatened) and Eastern Hog-nosed Snakes (also threatened). Rondeau is the only hognose snake habitat in Chatham-Kent and one of the last locations for fox snake.

### Removal of Dune Grasses

Several cottages have completely removed Marram Grass from their sand dunes to create more beach, volleyball courts, etc. These grasses are the vital building block to sand dune formation, which built the whole park. It is unbelievable that cottagers who tamper with these dunes are not charged. De-vegetated dunes suffer severe erosion and the complete alteration of the natural topography.

Although the Rondeau Leaseholder Association President, Stewart McLaren, claims that leaseholders are “the guardians of the park,” he contributes to nearly all of the above impacts. His cottage supports an intensively manicured lawn of irrigated, non-native turfgrass. All landscape species are non-native including two highly invasive Crimson King cultivars of Norway Maple. The forest across the road is infested with Garlic Mustard, a sign of disturbance due to raking of leaves, etc. The nearby forest is also littered with young Norway Maple and Japanese Honeysuckle trees that have spread from the seed source on his lot. It is a perfect example of how typical cottages have impacts far beyond their lots at Rondeau Provincial Park.

### Solutions to the Impacts of Cottages at Rondeau

As the destruction of habitat continues in Southwestern Ontario, Rondeau becomes increasingly important as a refuge for disappearing plants and wildlife. Locally, the municipality of Chatham-Kent has a forest cover of 3.29% (OMNR, 1994 data) with no bylaws protecting forests. The remaining forests are amongst the most biologically diverse in all of Canada.

All possible efforts must be done to reduce the impacts of cottaging to this internationally significant mosaic of natural habitats, plants, and wildlife. Ontario Parks has a mandate to protect places of natural and scientific interest. In protecting Rondeau, it and must act on this mandate. In the 2000 Parks Guide, even Minister John Snobelen indicates that the three waves on the new Ontario Parks logo represent “protection, recreation, and heritage appreciation.” He continues to claim that “protection is the number one mandate.” Even more, he continues to say, “When I think of protection, I think of Rondeau...” Point Pelee National Park once had over 500 cottages and stuck to their protection mandate and did not extend leases. Ontario Parks should follow this example with Rondeau Provincial Park.

The following section outlines solutions that are recommended by the Peaceful Parks Coalition. All the following solutions are based in ecological information, and are logical steps that should be followed by Rondeau Provincial Park if Ontario Parks is true to its protection mandate. These solutions address the impacts discussed above.



## Long Term Solutions

- Phase out cottaging in 2017, or upon expiry of current leaseholder and spouse.
- Make leases non-transferrable and non-saleable.
- Phase out excess park roads (currently, four roads run north-south at Rondeau which dissects many large habitats -Marsh Trail, Rondeau Road, Harrison Trail, and Lakeshore Road). After removing cottages at Point Pelee National Park, 2 out of 3 park roads were removed and habitat regenerated.
- Encourage non-disruptive exploration of park, by bicycle and foot only. Provide tram service for access to physically challenged park users, along Harrison Trail.
- Allow native vegetation to regenerate naturally with natural wildfires.

## Immediate Solutions

- Enforce vegetation damage bylaws onto cottagers who continue to destroy dune grasses.
- Ban (and enforce) all pesticides, irrigation, and fertilizer application on cottage lots.
- Enforce bans on the planting of non-native species on cottage lots.
- Allow grass mowing only within 2 metres of cottage building.
- Leaves and natural debris must be left on cottage lots to decompose naturally.
- Restore mowed areas back to natural habitats, and conduct prescribed burns to restore original savanna vegetation.
- Ban feeding of all animals including raccoons, deer, and birds.
- All garbage must be stored in raccoon-proof garbage containers.
- Enforce all bylaws and increase fines for repeat offences.

## References

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