

ENVIRONMENT

To act green, we need concrete ideas**Legal loopholes let city's dependence on gravel rip apart Ontario's natural landscape****JOHN BARBER**
APRIL 16, 2009jbarber@globeandmail.com

Good thing nobody includes concrete in measurements of their so-called ecological footprints. Ontarians are such gluttons for the stuff that every man, woman and child would have to be fitted annually with cement shoes weighing 15 tonnes a pair and standing taller than they do, as hapless as any stoolies ever sent to sleep with the fishes.

But in that event, they would be much more likely to think about the wisdom of continuing to rip apart their most precious natural landscapes - conservation lands unhappily pregnant with gravel - to satisfy the mania.

Such thoughts would be especially welcome in Greater Toronto, concrete capital of Canada. Three of every four tonnes of gravel mined to serve our sprawl comes from the Niagara Escarpment or the Oak Ridges Moraine, according to a 2005 report by The Pembina Institute. In addition to their own protective legislation, both landforms are included in the province's more recent and widely acclaimed greenbelt.

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But look at the loopholes and you will see why former MPP Marilyn Churley called that the "gravel belt."

Activists fighting new pits and expansions quickly discover that gravel trumps all. Nothing is more protected in the green borderlands of Toronto than the right to turn them into gravel pits.

Ontario policy is strictly "aggregate *uber alles*," according to Mark Winfield of York University, co-author of the Pembina report.

Where other jurisdictions have rushed to reduce demand for aggregates and increase the use of recycled concrete, Ontario has concentrated exclusively on securing and protecting ample supplies of "virgin material" as close as possible to Toronto, according to Prof. Winfield.

At the same time, it has ignored repeated demands for reform from such figures as Ontario Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller.

"They talk about it but nothing seems to happen," Prof. Winfield said.

In Britain, anger over similar environmental destruction did force change, including imposition of a substantial tax on aggregate extraction - 60 times higher than the few pennies a tonne Ontario charges, according to Prof. Winfield.

Today, Britons wear cement shoes one-third the weight of Ontarians'. Recycling old roads, bridges and buildings provides a quarter of all the aggregate used there.

"We've done precisely the opposite," Prof. Winfield said.

That's why the Toronto Environmental Alliance all but ignored the provincial government when it launched its new "green gravel" campaign at City Hall yesterday. Instead of attacking the impregnable citadel once again, TEA is hoping to enlist local municipalities in the cause. With most locally extracted gravel going to build and repair local roads, cities have huge heft in the market.

"What we can do is ask for policies to be put in place to really cut down on the use of virgin material," TEA campaigner Jamie Kirkpatrick said. The foremost recommendation is that municipalities specify a minimum amount of recycled material to be used on construction contracts.

To sell the message, they have recruited singer-songwriter Sarah Harmer, a self-described "gravel nerd" and leading champion of the Niagara Escarpment.

If nothing else, such efforts will keep up the pressure where it really counts - at Queen's Park, custodian of an outmoded policy with the ecological credibility of Japanese whaling.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher