

## From pit to paradise

### How the GRCA worked with gravel makers to guarantee an environmental gain

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BLOOMINGDALE

It's a warm spring afternoon, and around a small lake in Woolwich Township residents are enjoying the change of seasons.

Cyclists on mountain bikes whiz past groups of friends walking their dogs, while nearby a golden retriever comically splashes in the water, apparently in pursuit of an elusive fish. Overhead, an osprey delivers lunch to a nest atop a decommissioned utility pole.

It's easy to forget just a few years ago this oasis was a dusty industrial zone.

That's the whole point.

Snyder's Flats, nestled in a bend in the Grand River near Bloomingdale, was bought by the Grand River Conservation Authority 40 years ago as part of a larger program to keep valley lands within the conservation authority's control.

In the mid-1970s, the authority began collaborating with its neighbour, Preston Sand and Gravel, to remove aggregates from the 96-hectare property.

Mining was done between 1979 and 1987.

Martin Neumann, the conservation authority's supervisor of terrestrial resources, said the extraction was designed to create specific habitats with the resulting ponds and wooded areas.

"That was one of the very unusual things about this property," Neumann said during a recent tour.

"The extraction was done with a habitat goal in mind.

"We said if we're going to do this we want to come out of it with an environmental gain, and that's what we've done."

But typically, the options for pit rehabilitation are relatively limited, and far from satisfactory to critics of the aggregate industry. They say returning a pit to its original condition -- especially bringing it back to fertile farmland or its original natural ecosystem -- is not as easy as people in the industry make it out to be. Given the rapid rate of farmland reduction in Ontario, restoring pits to agricultural fertility has never been more urgent, some say.

An official with the Ontario Aggregate Resources Corporation -- the agency that oversees abandoned-pit rehabilitation in Ontario -- says rehabilitation is relatively easy, and there have been a number of successful restorations of farmland.

Many former gravel pits in Ontario have been transformed beyond recognition. Christie Pits in Toronto became a major recreational area. The Botanical Gardens in Hamilton was once a quarry. A large part of the University of Guelph's Arboretum was a gravel pit, and a number of former aggregate sites have been turned into subdivisions or golf courses.

Tony Dowling is the co-chair of the community group BridgeKeepers, which is trying to block the development of a pit in West Montrose. Dowling said for every 1,000 hectares of land excavated for aggregate extraction, only about half is rehabilitated to agricultural land. Rehabilitating pits to agricultural land is inefficient, he said, because the land is often only suitable for pasture, not deep-rooting crops.

The group Ontario Farmland Trust says about 240,000 hectares of prime Ontario farmland was lost to production between 1996 to 2006, due to urban development and the aggregate extraction that feeds the growth.

"Farmers around our area say no matter how much you rehabilitate it and try to bring it back, you will never get back to the same quality of land you had before excavation," Dowling said. "You disturb all of the soil culture when you move it off the land. Land is a living thing. When you pile it all up in berms around an excavation area, a lot of the life within the soil is disrupted and dies off."

It takes years, possibly decades for that soil to regain the fertility it had before, he added.

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