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ONE ISLAND, ONE PARK — MAYBE

PLAN TO SAVE GREEN SPACE

Conservationists love the scheme,
but Mulcair's successor is less keen

MICHELLE LALONDE
THE GAZETTE

There are precious few places left on Montreal Island where you can close your eyes, smell nothing but moist earth and fresh air and enjoy the rat-a-tat of woodpeckers, a chorus of wood frogs, or the trickle of spring water over moss-covered rocks.

The forests and wetlands around Rivière à l'Orme in the West Island harbour some of those places, and conservationists say it's time Montrealers opened their eyes to the fact that natural spaces like these are disappearing at a shocking rate.

Since 1990, an estimated 1,000 hectares of forests have been stripped from the island to make way for private development.

This city now has the lowest percentage of protected natural areas of any North American urban centre.

Only six per cent of the island's land mass is unspoiled wilderness — woods, shoreline and wetlands — and half of that

is unprotected by any law or statute. Much of the unprotected half is owned by private developers.

An alliance of island conservation groups called the Green Coalition has been trying desperately to stop this steady erosion of green space. For the past two years, the coalition has been working with the provincial government on a project to give what's left of Montreal's natural spaces the legal status of a provincial park.

In fact, before he was turfed out of cabinet six weeks ago, former environment minister Thomas Mulcair was preparing to create a new provincial park on the island, starting at the shores of the Lake of Two Mountains and the Rivière à l'Orme, but eventually taking in all ecologically valuable land in the entire archipelago of Montreal. This includes the islands of Montreal and Laval, as well as dozens of other islands around them.

Please see PARK, Page A4

FROM PAGE ONE

"You have to educate their viscera and their hearts. ... People have to place a value on these places, emotionally as well as in their pocketbooks." Conservationist David Fletcher



PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Green Coalition member David Fletcher says urban forests like the Rivière à l'Orme ecoterritory are a joy for hikers and provide habitat for migratory birds and many rare and endangered species.

PARK Ecoterritory designation won't stop development, Green Coalition says

CONTINUED FROM A1

In an interview with *The Gazette* last week, Mulcair said the provincial park idea was "moving along apace" when he was forced out of the environment portfolio.

"The idea was that we take everything in and around the Montreal archipelago that is worth saving," and consolidate it into what the Quebec government refers to as a "national" park, or what is called a provincial park in other Canadian provinces, he said.

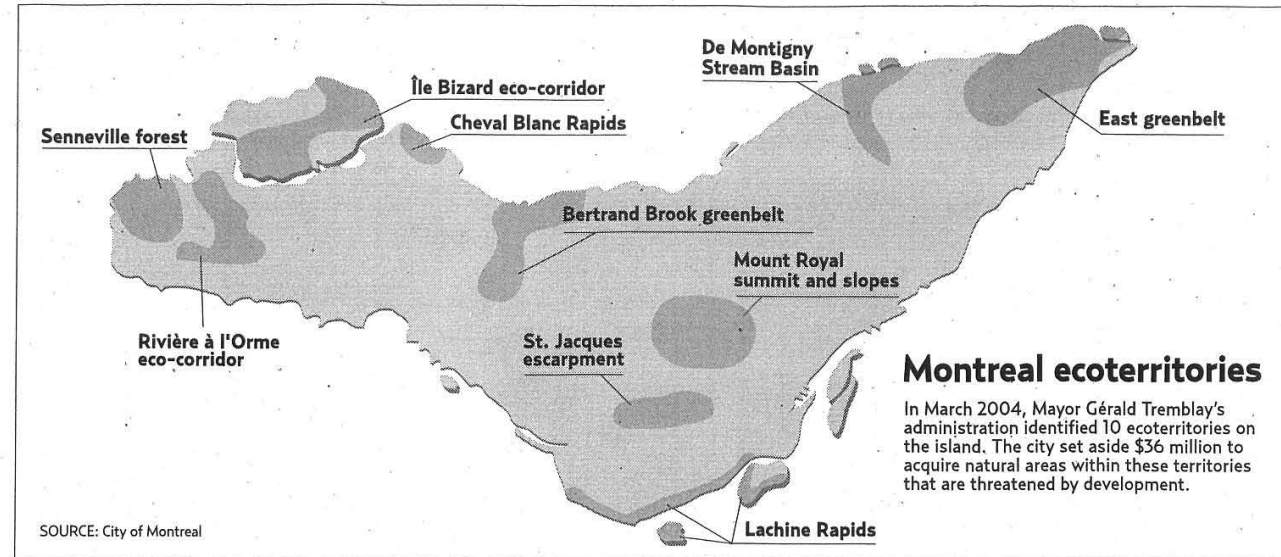
It would be Quebec's first provincial park in an urban setting, and the first that would be made up of many unconnected pieces of land. Mulcair's enthusiasm for the plan had conservation groups rejoicing.

But the new environment minister, Claude Béchard, has been silent on the project, as his government deals with the fallout from its controversial plan to sell off parts of another provincial park at Mount Orford.

Letters to Béchard's office from members of the Green Coalition and Montreal city councillor Marvin Rotrand demanding to know if the Two Mountains Provincial Park idea is alive or dead, have gone unanswered.

If you ask David Fletcher of the Green Coalition why we should save urban forests like Anse à l'Orme from development, his blue eyes light up.

Not only are these places a joy to hike through, he explains, but they provide habitat for migratory birds and many rare and endangered species. The islands in the Lake of Two Mountains, which include Montreal, Laval and many smaller islands, enjoy



THE GAZETTE

a micro-climate that allow certain rare plant and animal species to flourish.

For 30 years as a primary school teacher in Pierrefonds, Fletcher organized field trips so he could show children firsthand how everything – from the deer to the plants to the birds to the bivalve molluscs in the marsh – is interdependent.

Some of those kids are now active in the local conservation movement, he said.

"You have to educate their viscera and their hearts. ... People have to place a value on these places, emotionally as well as in their pocketbooks."

Forests on the island of Montreal are home to large mammals such as foxes, coyotes, deer and moose, as well as rare and endangered animal and plant species, including the map turtle, brown snake, milk snake, wild leek, wild ginger and tooth wart.

That's why the Green Coali-

tion was pleased – but far from satisfied – in March 2004 when Montreal Mayor Gérald Tremblay's administration identified 10 "ecoterritories" on the island, including the Rivière à l'Orme eco-corridor.

The city set aside \$36 million to acquire natural areas within these territories that are threatened by development.

But the coalition pointed out that budget is far short of the more than \$200 million it would cost to buy outright all the privately owned land in the ecoterritories. And the ecoterritory designation does not automatically stop development. It means that developers will have to go before a special city committee to see if their plans can better accommodate environmental concerns.

"It's just a name that makes people think that these places are protected, which is simply not the case," said Sylvia Oljemark, co-founder of the Green Coalition.

Oljemark said the city is in a kind of conflict of interest, because development brings in tax dollars. In fact, she notes, the city of Montreal, along with local boroughs and other island municipalities, are promoting major projects – roads and highways, housing, condo and commercial developments – in several of the 10 ecoterritories. For example:

Pierrefonds is planning to allow at least 4,000 new housing units to be built in the Rivière à l'Orme eco-corridor and major roads to serve that development would criss-cross that land.

Another major housing project is planned for the Cheval Blanc Rapids ecoterritory, also in Pierrefonds.

Verdun wants to allow 11 25-storey condo towers to be built on Nuns' Island. These would obstruct avian flyways in the Lachine Rapids ecoterritory.

And in Montreal's east end, Highway 25 would have a severe

impact on the De Montigny Stream Basin ecoterritory and the footings of the planned bridge to Laval would interfere with fish spawning grounds in Rivière des Prairies.

In an interview with *The Gazette* last week, an Environment Department official said the project is not dead, but he tried to lower expectations raised by Mulcair.

"For the moment, the Two Mountains Park project is just a concept, an idea to better plan and integrate conservation actions," in the Greater Montreal region, said Patrick Beauchesne, acting director of ecological heritage and parks with the Quebec Environment Department.

"We are reflecting on it."

He confirmed that the department under Mulcair had undertaken a "gap analysis" to look at what ecologically sensitive areas

are currently not protected and are threatened by imminent development. He said that process continues under Béchard.

But in terms of concrete action, the new minister has only gone so far as to have an assistant deputy minister approach the Montreal Metropolitan Council, which is responsible for greenspace management in the area, to begin general talks about planning.

"We don't envision taking action such as expropriating private land," he said. "What will be better in the long term, and not so long term, is to rally people toward the idea of conservation."

He said the department will not usurp the municipal and regional authority on urban planning, but rather support them in conservation efforts.

"The idea is not to make a park to create a moratorium on development. It is to work with cities and regional governments to integrate conservation into urban planning," he said.

But Mulcair said the park project was already well advanced when he left the department.

He plans to continue to lobby for Two Mountains Provincial Park through other cabinet ministers like Geoffrey Kelley, a longtime supporter of the project.

Mulcair said the province is much better positioned than cities and regional councils to protect ecological heritage.

"If you don't have that overarching vision of what needs to be done from Lake of Two Mountains right to the other end of the island and the other islands beyond, you just won't be able to build for the future."

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