

# **Sauvons la falaise!**

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NOUVEAU PARC-NATURE DANS  
LA COUR TURCOT

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Lisa Mintz





## INTRODUCTION

Sauvons la falaise! was ecstatic when the grand parc of the falaise St. Jacques (also known as the St. Jacques Escarpment) was announced on June 21, 2018. We felt like all we had worked for was on the cusp of being realized. The falaise was going to become part of a fantastic new grand parc, the dalle parc was to be reinstated into the Turcot plans, and, as an extra added bonus, 30 hectares was going to be added to the grand parc from the Turcot yards.

The introductory message about the new grand parc and the beautiful new picture of this future park were further icing on the cake. Then came the ateliers. We were not allowed to add comments as to the future of the falaise and though that was strange, we hoped an assumed that that was because the falaise would be left in a natural state. At the November 1 synthesis of ateliers it became clear that the falaise was no longer a part of the Turcot grand parc. Still, information as to how the falaise would be transformed in the future was passed out as part of the pamphlet, *"The Transformation of the Turcot Yards."*

Sauvons la falaise has fought very hard for the reinstatement of the dalle parc and we are very excited to see that the north south link known as the dalle parc is a part of this consultation and a part of the future grand parc. We applaud the addition of 30 ha to the park itself and the links to the south that are being proposed.

Still, without the falaise, the Turcot grand parc is simply a reconstructed construction site which has no biological value and contains no biodiversity. We would like, first and foremost to see the falaise be a part of the grand parc which was originally created around it. Secondly, we would like to see public consultations as to the future of the falaise St. Jacques.



## OCPM CONSULTATIONS

The OCPM consultations on the Turcot Yards and environs consist of five distinct parts:

- The falaise St. Jacques
- Turcot Yards
- North South link known as the dalle parc
- Connections between neighbourhoods
- Connections between green spaces

While we will be concentrating most on the falaise, the dalle parc and the connections it will create, especially to other green spaces, are also vitally important.

## FALAISE ST. JACQUES ECO-TERRITORY

### History

The falaise Saint-Jacques is one of ten eco-territories on the Island of Montreal “slated for priority protection and enhancement,” according to Montreal’s Policy on the Protection and Enhancement of Natural Habitats. (6) An eco-territory does not have any protection per se.

The falaise stretches from Vendome Metro to the Montreal West Interchange just below the businesses on the South side of St Jacques Street in NDG, ending at Pullman Blvd and the Turcot Yards. Most of the falaise is in the Southwest Borough. There seems to be a bit of discrepancy about how long it is, the Ville de Montréal site under eco-territories has it at 3 km (1), but the present OCPM documents say 2 km (2). Regardless, it is a long thin band of green that you can see from Highway 20.

Falaise means escarpment - an escarpment is a steep slope or long cliff that forms as an effect of faulting or erosion and separates two relatively leveled areas having differing elevations. (3) The term falaise St-Jacques only came into use in the 1970s, referring to the street near the top of escarpment, St. Jacques Street having been named in 1964.

The falaise has a long history. The creation of the falaise began as the sea of Champlain, which stretched to Quebec City, receded and left some bodies of water behind. These included Lac a Loutre, also known as Lac St. Pierre. Lac a Loutre then lost more water and the northern bank of the lake became the slope now known as the falaise St. Jacques. Maps from as early as 1670 show the lake occupying the area that would eventually become known as the Turcot Yards, at the foot of the falaise.

At the end of the 18th century, documents still referred to the lake, but a few decades later, references to the area describe it as a swamp. One theory is that earth dug up during construction of the Lachine Canal was dumped in the lake. Another is that the lake which was already losing water lost the rest of its water to the canal when it was being constructed. The Lachine Canal was completed in 1825.

The falaise itself used to stretch from Mount Royal to Pointe Claire and was an important transportation route used by the First Nations to avoid the Lachine Rapids. There is a fair bit of evidence that the present site of the falaise was the site of the village of Hochelaga, a settlement of approximately 3,000



souls. The falaise is a south facing slope, which makes it a microclimate and much warmer than the surrounding landscape. Of the 150 trees which were cut down on the Western edge of the falaise, one quarter were *prunus Americana*, wild plum trees, and very unusual, which may very well have been descended from plantations made by the settlement. Another indicator is the Shagbark Hickory trees still to be found on Meadowbrook which were also used by First Nations as food trees.

Besides this evidence there are historical references to the village of Hochelaga made in such a way as to make the falaise the only place this village could possibly be. For these reasons we feel that the First Nations symbolism should be significant part of this project.

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, the area at the foot of the falaise became an increasingly important railway yard.

In the 1960s, vegetation on some parts of falaise was covered up by backfill, perhaps from earth dug up during construction of the Décarie Expressway. In the ensuing decades, the falaise became a popular place to dump garbage and backfill. (4)

Still there was agriculture on and around the falaise. The Montreal Melon was raised in its environs and some say that Benny Farm stretched down into the falaise. It is rumoured that the Bronfmans had a farm there and you can still see apple trees with wire around the bottom to stop rodents from chewing the bark. Aerial photos from 1949 show several pieces of land on the south side of what is now St. Jacques Street were still being used for farming. (4)

The first announcement that the falaise was to become a park was made under Drapeau before the 1982 election. Bourque, the chief horticulturalist for Drapeau and director of the Montreal Botanical Gardens (1980-1994) was charged with creating the park. He was most concerned with stabilizing the slope. For that he brought in a small vine from James Bay which required very little maintenance and 100,000 of them were planted to stop erosion.

In the late 1980s, the city swapped land with owners, exchanging the escarpment property, which could no longer be filled in or built on according to new laws, for land on the St. Jacques side. A fence was built and a cleanup was started.

The blue collar workers adopted the falaise and cleaned it up. Jean Blackburn of SCFP headed up this cleanup and he also created a maquette and a plan including a drainage system to get rid of the used oil which was regularly dumped there. It also included drainage pipes to channel the polluted water to bio-filters. Purification tanks to recover used sludge as well as a water level control system for nearby streams that would also serve as a channel for rainwater were also part of the plan. Drainage pipes and tiles are still in evidence in the falaise. (5)

Under Mayor Doré a linear path was put in which still stretches the length of the falaise. There is also a road which used to go down to Pullman and was put in for trucks probably in the 1960's. In the 1990's under Bourque, Sam Boskey City Councillor of NDG brought all the city councillors to visit the falaise, trying to re-ignite the passion for a park there.

When the Turcot was being built in 2004, the Ministry of Transport (MTQ), checked to see if the falaise was stable enough to become a park and the answer was no. Another 14 years have passed and though the falaise is more stable than before there are still regular landslides and downed trees. The landslides



are mostly caused by illegal snow and garbage dumping which inhibits growth of new vegetation when trees are not intentionally cut as they are at Lincoln Gabriel and Nissan Gabriel St Jacques. (7100 and 7050 St. Jacques Street).

In 2003, the MTQ bought the Turcot yards so that it could rebuild the Turcot and Angrignon interchanges. A year later, the city of Montreal designated the falaise as one of 10 “eco-territories”, important green spaces that should be protected.

It is important to note that the falaise St Jacques has been in the process of becoming a park for 36 years now. Through various administrations this has been an uncompleted dream. Still today, the falaise is not part of the grand parc being created. It is important that a strict timeline be laid down for the creation of this grand parc, and that the falaise St. Jacques be included in it.

### **Falaise Ecology**

The Falaise is one of ten natural spaces of interest—or eco-territories—identified in the 2004 Politique de protection et de mise en valeur des milieux naturels de l’agglomération de Montréal as “slated for priority protection and enhancement.” (6) Eco-territories include existing protected areas and natural spaces to be protected and enhanced in the future. These extensive spaces contribute to biodiversity: they are home to a variety of animal and plant species, some of whose status is precarious. They are not protected in any way from development.

Surveys of the flora and fauna of the falaise were done, the vegetation study by biologist Kim Marineau. She found six vegetation zones on the escarpment and identified 101 native and introduced species of vegetation. This includes two species with precarious status: American Hackberry and the Ostrich fern. Some common trees on the falaise are: Ash, Maple, Willow, Oak, Hawthorne, Buckthorn, Spruce, and Cottonwood.

Study of herpetofauna and mammals found 43 brown snake specimens. The brown snake is a species likely to be designated as threatened or vulnerable in Quebec. Nine species of terrestrial mammals were found. I have personally witnessed foxes, groundhogs, skunks and raccoons. I also saw a deer which has since died, likely due to the Turcot construction which dried up its water source.

According to a survey of flora and fauna done by GREBE inc. some 63 species of birds can be found in this 20-hectare green space, including many species which follow the falaise as part of their migratory flight path and use it as a migratory stopover. Thirty-four breeding species inhabit the falaise. (7)

There are two species which have recently been designated threatened by COSEWICK (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada):

- Chimney Swift which is designated threatened by the COSEWIC assessment and status report (8)
- Wood Thrush also on the COSEWICK threatened list (9)

Other interesting species include:

Indigo Bunting; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Scarlet Tanager (which is on our logo); Cooper's Hawk; Red-shouldered Hawk; American Kestrel; Yellow Warbler; Common Yellowthroat; Ravens; Also, murders of crows numbering several hundreds gather in the winter.



Beyond the rich ecological value of the falaise, this green space diffuses the effects of the air pollution from traffic. Situated between the industrial zone on St. Jacques, and the Turcot, the falaise acts as the lungs of NDG and the South West. It filters pollution and contributes to the health and well-being of hundreds of citizens, as well as being crucial for birds.

This precious area must be protected as part of a grand parc and consultations should be held so that citizens have a say in its future.

### **SAUVONS LA FALAISE!**

Sauvons la falaise was founded by Lisa Mintz and John Symon in September of 2015 as a reaction to the clear cutting of 2 hectares of the falaise St. Jacques.

In April 2015 when bird-watching on the Escarpment I was surprised to see a line of orange survey ties on the trees marking off the western edge below the U Haul and next to the Montreal West Interchange. At that time, I asked about these ties at a meeting of the Turcot Comité de bon voisinage NDG/Westmount and was told that this was a preservation measure for the endangered brown snakes in the area. When snakes were found on the Turcot Yards they were to be put back behind this orange line. I was assured no trees would be cut. I was very busy and wanted to believe this, so I did.

A couple of months later the area was bulldozed. At another bon voisinage meeting in September 2015 I was told that this destruction was necessary as the land was not stable.

It was then that Sauvons la falaise was born. The aim of Sauvons la falaise! is to be a watchdog over this vital green space.

The primary mission of Sauvons la falaise is to ensure protection the St. Jacques Escarpment Eco-territory, an “orphaned urban wilderness” and connection with other existing green spaces including the future Meadowbrook park.

Our vision primarily includes: protecting the falaise St. Jacques from further incursions by the MTQ and ensuring the connectivity between the areas which surround the falaise, including the Southwest, NDG, Lachine, Lasalle and Westmount through bike and pedestrian paths, creating a green corridor which would include the falaise St. Jacques, connect south to Parc Angrignon, the Douglas Hospital and parc des Rapides, east to Mont Royal and West to Meadowbrook, Dorval Golf and hopefully all the way to l’Anse a l’Orme.

Beyond this, Sauvons la falaise wants Montreal to live up to its responsibilities in protecting and enhancing the falaise, an area still used as a dump by many nearby companies. We also want Montreal to reach its stated goal of having 10% of the Island preserved as green space, a percentage still below that found in many other urban areas in Canada. To reach that goal, some 2,000 additional hectares of green space need to be protected on Montreal Island. We cannot afford to lose any existing green spaces.

Montreal can only count about six percent of its territory as green space but with the Project Montreal administration I believe that 10% is a possibility.



Sauvons la falaise! has spent the last three years attending bon voisinage meetings and asking questions in NDG and the Southwest. We have initiated manifestations and joined in others with our environmental partners such as Sauvons l'Anse à l'Orme and Technoparcoiseaux.

We have excelled in working with partners. Our partners are French and English, come from different geographical and ideological areas. They are municipal, provincial and federal and range from cycling groups (NDG cycling; Velo Quebec); to Health groups (Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment – CAPE); to environmental groups (CRE, David Suzuki Foundation; Green Coalition); and social groups (NDG Community Council; Concertation Ville-Emard/Côte St-Paul; Eco-quartier Sud Ouest) to name a very few. You will have briefs from many of them.

We have been very successful in attracting media attention to our cause and have appeared in over one hundred press, television and radio interviews.

We have been working with politicians since the beginning. Our first allies were Craig Sauvé and Peter McQueen who passed motions to protect the falaise, clean it up and reinstate the dalle parc in their respective boroughs of the Sud Ouest and NDG Cote des Neiges. We have also involved mayors (Dorais, Montgomery, Plante); and our provincial representatives; (Kathleen Weil and Dominique Anglade); as well as federal representatives such as Marc Garneau.

We have also been working with young people in the C Vert program. Patrick Barnard made a video of their declaration to save the environment (10) the video went to COP 21.

As volunteers we give talks – (Montreal West Horticultural Society, Concordia with the biodiversity secretary and the Climate Cafe). We also attend many events and man information kiosks, (Earth Day, Earth Hour in Westmount and at Westmont United Church). Every year we produce a calendar and that is how we raise our funds.

We have worked tirelessly and ceaselessly for three years, as volunteers, yet we are not being consulted as to the future of the falaise.

## OCPM CONSULTATIONS

On June 21, 2018 it was announced publically that the falaise was to become a grand parc (11). **For some reason, at this moment, the falaise is not part of the grand parc and no one is taking responsibility for the falaise.** Page 10 of the document *The Transformation of the Turcot Yards* calls this new grand park the: “The St Jacques Escarpment Nature Parc”(12), **yet the falaise St Jacques is not being included in the park itself.**

The pamphlet, “*The Transformation of the Turcot Yards*” also speaks of the falaise, mentioning “conservation and design initiatives...” “...offering vista points of the park” (p5), “Connecting the site (falaise) to surrounding districts with walking trails and bicycle paths(p5)” and especially concerning, “create new vista points or new entranceways at the top of the escarpment (p7). “ These kinds of actions could only be completed with significant damage being caused to the falaise. The falaise is not stable and the cutting of trees necessary to create new vista points, for example, could easily cause landslides and other forms of erosion and will certainly damage this precious resource.



The most worrying phrase in the literature is, “Landscape the escarpment to stabilize the soil...” (p7). The last time some of the escarpment was ‘stabilized’, in 2015, two hectares was clear cut including 45 wild plum trees which are very rare. The ‘stabilized’ area no longer exists. The soil and trees have been removed and there is a wall. I should hope that is not the future of this eco-territory.

The OCPM consultations were supposed to cover the falaise, the dalle parc and the turcot yards, but the falaise has not been a subject of any of the consultations or ateliers. OCPM literature does refer to the falaise and the substantial changes that are envisioned for it. The community organizations who have been working to protect this eco-territory, such as Sauvons la falaise and our partners, want to see the falaise protected and left in a natural state.

None of us have been consulted about what will happen with the falaise. It is our recommendation that important decisions as to the future of the falaise be made with input from the public and the concerned organizations and citizens who have been working to save it and that the falaise St. Jacques be part of the grand park.

First and foremost there should be no more cutting of trees in the falaise St. Jacques. Claudine Deschenes stated on Nov 1 at the OCPM synthesis of ateliers at the Unitarian Church that no trees would be cut in the falaise. Let us hope that remains a fact. The falaise St. Jacques needs to be protected. Eco-territories are not protected and if the falaise remains an eco-territory it has no protection at all.

## **THE TURCOT YARDS**

The Turcot Yards, formerly a major rail yard, has since become the site of the new Turcot Interchange project and the new route for Highway 20. Once the Turcot project is completed, there will remain 30 hectares of available land which will be used as the grand parc.

The OCPM consultations have covered different visions of what this future green space could look like in four ateliers. Constraints were established that 75% of the park could be green, but 25% had to be some sort of infrastructure, and the latter could include water features, pedestrian paths, etc. Our first question is: why were these constraints added to the consultations when it was evident during the ateliers that most people wanted the area to be 100% green?

The new Turcot yards should be mostly green space. An important element for the project should be the protection and enhancement of local biodiversity, which would include the reintroduction of native plants along with bird & bat houses, bees and pollinator flowers, and related natural infrastructure. Reconstruction of a water body, either the St. Pierre River or Lac à Loutre, on the site would also be a priority. Accessibility of and connections between the surrounding boroughs would be paramount.

Determining how the park will be maintained throughout winter must be taken into consideration from the outset; it cannot be used as dumping site for salt-filled snow cleared from the highway.

This project also needs also to be fully and adequately financed.





## THE NORTH-SOUTH LINK OR DALLE PARC

The dalle parc is a projected north-south cyclist-pedestrian link from NDG to the South West which was included in the original Turcot plans. Through the work of Sauvons la falaise! and over 60 community partners, as well as the public and politicians, it has now been re-incorporated into the Turcot project. At this present time a feasibility study is being conducted by the MTQ and the Ville de Montréal on the mechanics of the dalle parc infrastructure.

This bridge represents only 1% of the cost of the entire Turcot project and is the only part of the project meant for active transportation. It is also the only part which would enhance the lives of the neighbouring communities currently suffering through years of construction.

The original Turcot project created a major urban barrier between downtown and residential areas, while also dividing the residential areas from each other. We have the opportunity now, while the Turcot interchange is being rebuilt, to facilitate movement by pedestrians and cyclists between these divided neighborhoods.

The dalle parc should be a piece of green infrastructure connecting to the natural world and acting as a bridge over the Turcot to biodiversity. It should be a signature piece that is inviting for everyone to the great city of Montreal. Some of our key priorities:

- The bridge needs to be a minimum of 30 meters wide so that cyclists and pedestrians will be able to share it in harmony and in safety.
- The dalle parc bridge needs to connect the falaise, the Bande Verte and the Cour Turcot Parc with the surrounding neighbourhoods and green spaces.
- There should be various access points to get on and off the structure.
- In creating a north-south cyclist-pedestrian connection, a focus should be on the efficiency and safety of that link. We wish that by adding this important new element to the active-transport network of the city we will not only serve better those that choose to get around on foot or by bicycle but also encourage others to consider it a viable option. Efficiency and safety are two key components to ensure that that happens.

## CONNECTIONS TO SURROUNDING AREAS

The Turcot Interchange effectively cut off several neighbourhoods from each other when it was first built in the 1960s. St. Raymond, St. Henri, Ville-Émard and Ville St. Pierre are among some of the most disfavoured areas in the City of Montreal and they all border this new grand parc. What is more, residents in each of these communities have suffered the impacts of years of construction - dust, noise, and traffic - all from a highway project designed to serve the needs of suburban commuters in getting downtown, not the transit needs of local populations.

The neighbourhoods surrounding this project are all lower income neighbourhoods characterized at least partially by being physically isolated from the rest of the city. It is essential that connections to and through these neighbourhoods be well designed and take into consideration how residents of these areas are able to make use of them. All of the areas around the Turcot project now have a chance to share in a beautiful new park which would ideally link both the north and south, and the east and west.



The Ville de Montréal and MTQ should collaborate to ensure that the Parc-Nature Turcot connects to the Bande-Verte that is being built at the base of the falaise as part of the official Turcot Interchange project. The value of a pedestrian-cyclist network depends in large part on how well each section is linked together. If we could ask for just one thing it would be accessibility.

## **THE GREEN BELT**

There has been for several years the idea of a green belt with the falaise St. Jacques at its center. This greenspace would stretch west to the future Meadowbrook park; south to park Angrignon, the Douglas Hospital Grounds and Parc des rapides; and east (or north east) through bicycle paths to Mount Royal.

Montreal has the least amount of green space of any major city in Canada. Here we have a chance to create something special and lasting that would connect up the entire city and create corridors of biodiversity for the natural world. The dalle parc is a major infrastructure component which is necessary to create this green belt. The other is the connection to Meadowbrook.

Though Meadowbrook is very close to the falaise, there is a major highway and several train lines separating it from the western edge. The St. Pierre Interchange Reconstruction, which is forthcoming, will provide a not to be missed opportunity to create a connection between Meadowbrook and the falaise. After that it is just a matter of municipalities linking up creating bike paths and presto – instant green belt!

## **CONCLUSION**

The falaise St. Jacques is an important green space in the heart of Montreal, home to 63 species of birds and the brown snake. Presently it is considered an eco-territory, though recently it was supposed to be part of this grand parc. We ask that the falaise be re-integrated into the project which was originally designed around it, and that the falaise be granted the protection of grand parc status.

Sauvons la falaise! has been working to protect the falaise and will continue to watch over it until it is protected by the law. We ask that no changes be made to the falaise until public consultations are heard.

The addition of 30 hectares of new green space on the Turcot Yards is a beautiful gift. We would like to see it re-naturalized with indigenous species and the original water source. The re-instatement of the dalle parc is something we have been working towards for a long time. We ask that it be green and user friendly. We look forward to realizing our vision of creating a green belt in Montreal which would connect up not only green spaces but neighbourhoods as well.

Finally, we hope that this signature project for the Island of Montreal will be fully and adequately financed and have a clear timetable.

**FOOTNOTES**

- (1) [http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?\\_pageid=7377\\_94757641&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=7377_94757641&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)
- (2) [http://ocpm.qc.ca/sites/ocpm.qc.ca/files/pdf/P98/3.1\\_english\\_transformation\\_turcot\\_yard.pdf](http://ocpm.qc.ca/sites/ocpm.qc.ca/files/pdf/P98/3.1_english_transformation_turcot_yard.pdf) p. 2
- (3) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escarpment>
- (4) [http://ocpm.qc.ca/sites/ocpm.qc.ca/files/pdf/P98/3.3\\_la\\_falaise\\_saint-jacques\\_survol\\_historique.pdf](http://ocpm.qc.ca/sites/ocpm.qc.ca/files/pdf/P98/3.3_la_falaise_saint-jacques_survol_historique.pdf)
- (5) <https://www.scfp301.qc.ca/site/assets/files/1071/septembre1992.pdf>
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- (7) Groupe de discussion - Plan de mise en valeur de la falaise Saint-Jacques Valeur Biologique de la falaise/ Ville de Montréal 2015
- (8) <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/cosewic-assessments-status-reports/chimney-swift/chapter-1.html>
- (9) <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/cosewic-assessments-status-reports/wood-thrush-2012.html>
- (10) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN6jhoSq5Kg>
- (11) <https://youtu.be/iTEUllc087I> (see minute 8:26)

**OTHER SOURCES USED**

1. [montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/falaise-st-jacques-a-pocket-of-wilderness-in-montreals-concrete-jungle](http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/falaise-st-jacques-a-pocket-of-wilderness-in-montreals-concrete-jungle) Andy Riga Feb. 6, 2016
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Bourque\\_\(politician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourque_(politician))
3. [https://www.turcot.transports.gouv.qc.ca/fr/info-citoyens/activites-information/Documents/VersionFinale\\_Cahier\\_Ame%CC%81nagement%20bande%20verte.pdf](https://www.turcot.transports.gouv.qc.ca/fr/info-citoyens/activites-information/Documents/VersionFinale_Cahier_Ame%CC%81nagement%20bande%20verte.pdf)
4. <http://ocpm.qc.ca/fr/parc-nature>
5. Interview with Sam Boskey - City Councillor NDG 1982-1998