

The Gift of a National Park to York and Durham Regions



Brief History

In 1972, Ottawa announced that nearly 19,000 acres of land in Markham, North Pickering, and Uxbridge, most of it prime farmland, would be expropriated for a new international airport – Toronto’s own Mirabel.

In 1975, the project was put on indefinite hold when Ontario chose not to provide the infrastructure. In the subsequent decades, most of the expropriated land continued to be farmed.

Fast-forward to 2013: The federal government announced the transfer of 5,000 acres of the site to Parks Canada for the Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP). In 2015, a further 5,200 acres were committed to the Park, whose mandate will be to showcase nature, culture, and – uniquely – agriculture.

It is our belief that the best and highest use for the remaining Federal Lands – some 9,000 acres of prime farmland – continues to be agricultural. The main advantage is obvious: by preserving the land that feeds us we can ensure that it will continue to feed us for generations to come. What’s more, agriculture perfectly complements the Park and its mandate. But other advantages will also flow from such a decision, and from the RNUP itself, offering many exciting opportunities for York and Durham regions.

The Opportunities

The creation of the RNUP is a game changer. By featuring permanent agriculture, the Park will act as an anchor for the local agricultural community and will generate a whole stream of economic possibilities. The idea we favour – and it’s perfectly feasible; all the basic ingredients are already in place – is the development of **a food hub**, serving the GTA and beyond, bringing back to the area all the necessary farm services and food processing operations, and creating opportunities for organic farms, micro-farms, and incubator farms where the next generation, the young people who will be feeding us in the future, can be given their start. But clearly, the Park will also generate **tourism**. And this effect is one that York and Durham regions should be positioning themselves to capitalize on in a big way.

Aside from the many full-time and part-time jobs the Park itself will create, there will also be opportunities for hundreds of permanent new jobs, full- and part-time, in the agri-food industry and in the recreation and tourism sector. The Park will be instrumental in the growth of these sectors, as has been the case in national-park areas all across Canada. Parks Canada’s website provides links to collaborating organizations (local partners) and features local tourism links for every park – which is why York and Durham regions in particular should be paying attention to the opportunities the RNUP will be opening up in the coming years.

National parks draw tourists from around the world. And while it may be stating the obvious, the fact is that when people come to experience the special character and features of a park, they also spend their tourist dollars at shops, restaurants, and B&Bs in the park's vicinity. In 2009, just as an example, spending by Parks Canada and by tourists visiting Ontario's five national parks contributed over 1,300 full-time-equivalent jobs, nearly \$10 million in taxes, and almost \$100 million to our GDP. [*Source: Economic Impact of Parks Canada, The Outspan Group Inc., April 2011, p. 15*]

What's more, culinary tourism is a growing trend worldwide and becoming very big business – something to keep in mind while perusing this list of tourism possibilities (presented in no particular order) that could be explored, developed, and promoted, not just to RNUP visitors, but to the GTA and beyond:

- guided walking tours, integrating over several days many of the activities and experiences mentioned elsewhere in this list
- local restaurants, bakeries, cafés, craft breweries, wineries, pubs – many showcasing local food
- agricultural fall fairs, farmers' markets, farm visits, food-preparation and cooking demonstrations/classes, farm and town B&Bs featuring local food
- self-guided scenic drives through unspoiled York and Durham countryside; geocaching
- visits beyond the Park to nearby national historic sites, such as Sharon Temple, the Leaskdale Manse (home of Lucy Maud Montgomery)...
- local artists, studio tours, garden tours...
- local art galleries, antique shops, spas...
- day hikes, biking, historical walks, nature walks, camping, horseback riding...
- the Trans-Canada Trail, the Oak Ridges Moraine Trail, the Uxbridge Trail System, and the Waterfront Trail, which will link directly to the RNUP and from there to the Uxbridge Trail System
- the wonders and beauty of the Oak Ridges Moraine, revealed through videos, presentations, guided tours
- Durham Region's ski slopes, cross-country ski trails, snowshoeing
- local museums
- visits to historic shopping districts
- riding the rails with York-Durham Heritage Railways...
- hang-gliding over farmland; ultra-light flights over the Moraine...

As it takes shape, the Rouge National Urban Park will create a new dynamic in York and Durham regions. Canada's most accessible national park, within the country's largest urban area, will become an international tourist magnet, affording outstanding spin-off opportunities for the two regions that encompass it, and ultimately transforming the eastern reaches of the GTA.