

A NATURAL DESTINATION

TORONTO'S RAVINES - CELEBRATED AT HOME AND THE WORLD OVER

*The Evergreen Brick Works tucked into the Don Valley, photo by Tom Arban.
Below: Milkman's Lane, photo by Geoff Fitzgerald.*

By Geoff Cape, CEO Evergreen and Evergreen Brick Works

Most every story written about Toronto's ravine system starts with the quote by Robert Fulford: "The ravines are to Toronto what the canals are to Venice, hills are to San Francisco, and the Thames River is to London." Indeed, the three major rivers that flow through Toronto — the Humber, the Don and the Rouge are on the city crest.

Toronto's ravines are unique. With six watersheds crossing more than 44,000 acres of urban wilderness, our ravines are larger and more dramatic than any other urban park system. Yet, in modest Toronto fashion, we barely acknowledge their existence. They are "hidden jewels" to those who know them, but almost unknown to many Torontonians and totally invisible to visitors. This, despite the fact that they meander through almost all of Toronto's communities. Unlike the commanding Mont Royal in Montreal, our ravines are inverted, dipping below our horizon line, and as a result often overlooked. But to those who explore them and marvel at their beauty — especially the children — they are magical spaces, like stepping through the wardrobe to Narnia.

OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

Toronto's ravine system — the largest ravine system of any city in the world — carries the tributaries of the city's urban watersheds, created by the meltwater of receding glaciers from over 10,000

years ago. Beyond their obvious contributions to the natural landscape, ravines have also influenced our cultural heritage, from the pre-European native settlements through the modern era's industrial development, to the multicultural, mobile society of today. From an ecosystem service perspective, their natural catchment also keeps our basements from flooding, and, as a result of Hurricane Hazel in 1954, they have become protected and maintained by Toronto and Region Conservation and the City of Toronto.

The most central artery of Toronto's ravine systems is the Don Valley, which has played a key role in shaping Toronto's history. With grand city building developments underway in the Portlands and along the waterfront, it is positioned to again take centre stage in the city's consciousness.

THE DON VALLEY

The history of Toronto is intimately tied to the Don Valley. First Nations used the river and its surrounding valley as a seasonal hunting and fishing ground over 12,000 years ago. People continued to hunt and fish in the valley regularly into the mid-1800s. As the 19th century progressed, the natural heritage of the Don Valley was increasingly seen as secondary to its role as a driver for emerging industries and a repository for their

waste products. More than a century of heavy industrialization left the Don Valley's landscape degraded and polluted. Although rail lines and expressways would bring thousands of Torontonians through the Don Valley everyday, public access was limited, and the region's natural features went underappreciated as the valley became something to travel through, rather than a prized destination, itself.

However, since the 1990s, something remarkable has happened: Toronto has begun to return to the Don Valley. In 1989, the Task Force to Bring Back the Don was established, and in 1991 they published their report "Bringing Back the Don", which outlined a series of steps necessary to restore the river. Since that time, partnerships between citizens groups, the City of Toronto, government agencies like the Toronto and Region Conservation, and not for profits like Evergreen have embarked on an impressive series of re-naturalization projects that have begun to restore the habitats and ecosystems of the Don Watershed. The intent was always to re-wild the space, rather than create boutique, manufactured greenspaces.

Through these partnerships, over the years, thousands of volunteers have helped to restore some of the Lower Don's ecological functions, and instilled in the community a sense of





Left: Aerial view of the Don Valley, photo by TRCA. Right: Learning more about Toronto's ravine system, photo by Mike Derblich.



pride in creating beautiful public space. Great public places can transform urban environments and help us open ourselves to new experiences. Sadly, this unique ravine system would remain lacking in access points and connections for adjacent communities such as Cabbagetown, Regent Park, Riverdale, East York, Rosedale, Leaside, Thorncliffe and Flemingdon Park.

To address this, the City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation division initiated a Master Plan study of the Lower Don Trail in fall 2012. Alongside their planning process, Evergreen began a conversation with community members to refine a shared vision of imagining an improved Lower Don. Community consultations took place in the spring of 2013, and the Master Plan which can be viewed online, was completed in the fall of 2013. The outcome was a proposal to transform the Lower Don river area into an innovative, accessible greenspace. The City of Toronto, the Toronto and Region Conservation, Evergreen and many other partners are working together to revitalize the Lower Don. This will include new gateways, access points and bridges, and improved pedestrian and cycling trails. In addition, ongoing community consultations will help to continually enhance the vibrancy of this green corridor by implementing a series of open-space improvements, protecting existing habitats and restoring healthy natural functions in the Lower Don watershed, and adding nature-inspired art installations.

Through improved access, wayfinding and trail systems, we can create better opportunities for movement through the unique Don Valley corridor. By enhancing wildlife habitat in the valley ecosystem, and by stimulating people's imaginations through public art attuned to the environment, we will build points of interest and fascination that challenge and engage all visitors.

A groundswell of renewed activity is emerging, and it has re-energized the public commitment to revive Toronto's Don Valley. With strong partnerships between the City of Toronto, agencies like the Toronto and Region Conservation, and

non-profits like Evergreen, coupled with initiatives as vast and bold as the work of Waterfront Toronto, the Pan Am Games village, the Pan Am Path, the Luminous Veil, and the award winning Corktown Commons Park, Toronto is well on its way to realizing the Lower Don's potential.

THE TIME IS NOW

More than 250,000 people currently call the Lower Don watershed home, and soon an additional 70,000 new inhabitants will move to the area, thanks to significant residential developments in the West Don Lands, East Bayfront, Central Waterfront and Downtown.

By linking sites along the Lower Don corridor with the waterfront, the river will connect Evergreen Brick Works with other heritage and cultural hotspots, such as the Distillery District, Regent Park, Riverdale Farm and Todmorden Mills. Revitalizing the Lower Don into a prime destination in the city — a place to celebrate, admire and appreciate the ecological significance of Toronto's ravine network — could serve as an example for how Toronto can best interact with all of our natural spaces.

In other cities around the world, similar projects are underway and proving to be a great success. The Highline in New York, Vancouver's Greenway Network are examples of how previously underutilized built and natural spaces can be reconnected and woven together — all while driving tourism dollars, neighbourhood 'lift', and tax revenues.

Green spaces and corridors can help define cities, and act as inspiring and transformative projects, which capture people's imaginations and draw them into unique spaces. We hope attention towards the Lower Don and Toronto's natural ravine system, will serve to deepen and transform our collective relationship with our city's watersheds and waterfront. There has never been a better time to make the Lower Don a natural destination for residents and visitors.

Geoff Cape is the CEO of not for profit Evergreen and Evergreen Brick Works. With a background in real estate development, sustainability and urbanization trends globally, Geoff helps to evolve Evergreen programs to offer leadership solutions for cities and citizens. For more information, visit www.evergreen.ca.