

Save Ontario Parks!

OPSEU campaign speaks out for our natural heritage — and the people who protect it

by Randy Robinson



Natural Heritage Educator Diana Haywood, Local 221, and friend Photo: S. Wilson, Canapress

When Queen's Park slashed provincial park staff this year, Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay said it wouldn't be a problem. He used words like "superior" and "fantastic" and "priceless" to describe the experience park visitors get.

Maybe so. But Ontario Parks cut the equivalent of 226 seasonal and regular student summer jobs — a 19 per cent reduction over 2005. And park visitors don't agree that the cuts were harmless. Visitors to the OPSEU web site at www.saveontarioparks.ca complained loudly about reductions in maintenance, fewer patrols by park wardens, park store closures, and cuts to nature education programs.

The Ministry of Natural Resources is one of 15 Ontario ministries that saw its

budget "flatlined" in 2006 — meaning costs went up but the budget didn't.

"In medical terms, 'flatlined' means you're dead," says Arthor Otskinau, a member of OPSEU Local 362 at Petroglyphs Provincial Park, north of Peterborough. "They cut, cut, cut, and they think they're saving, but there's a point where you can't resuscitate the services without spending three times as much."

"I am a seasonal camper at Esker Lakes Park and have been for the past 14 years and can't believe how this year the park has gone downhill," wrote one visitor to the website. "From cleaning the outhouses to cleaning the comfort stations to grass cutting to the hours of the gatehouse, this is by far the worst I have seen the park run."

Who's looking after Fowler's Toad?

"In Canada, Fowler's Toad only occurs along the north shore of Lake Erie," Natural Heritage Educator Diana Haywood, Local 221, explains. "They live, basically, in the sand, within two to three hundred metres of shore. They're nocturnal. When you do see them, they're usually on their way back to shore to get rehydrated."

Despite a habitat restoration project, human activity can put the toads at risk.

"We have a snow fence in place, but we have kids riding down the sand dunes and knocking it over because they think it's a play area," Haywood says.

Over the summer, OPSEU members handed out leaflets and talked to the public in parks from Rushing River (near Kenora) to Bass Lake (outside Orillia) to Rock Point (on Lake Erie). The public reaction was always the same, says Kevin Haywood, a park warden at Rock Point and a steward with OPSEU Local 221.

"We only had a positive response," he said. "People are seeing the deterioration in the parks. We had families coming up and asking for postcards. We also know that people were sending e-mails to the Premier."

Haywood's spouse, Diana Haywood, was hit hard by the cuts. Her summer contract as a nature educator was chopped from 22 weeks to 12. She's worried that staff cuts may further endanger Fowler's Toad and a dozen other species at risk in her area.

Since the recent cuts, there are no staff on duty to monitor or maintain the restoration area, Diana Haywood says.

Nature education has also taken a hit. With Haywood off the job for most of May, June, and September, school trips to the park have dried up.

“We’re not doing any school programming, none,” she says. “I used to do between 15 and 20 in the spring, and in the fall about 10.” Other education programs have seen similar reductions. It’s not for lack of interest from park visitors.

“I did a fossil walk a couple of weeks ago, and I had 56 people show up,” says Haywood. “People have an interest in the geology, they have an interest in the earth.”

Dalton McGuinty needs to open his eyes about the impact of park cuts, Haywood says.

“For a lot of people, the reason they come to Ontario parks is that we have programs that educate adults and kids about what’s here, and what we can do to help some of these things so that they’re here for future generations.

“He’s taking something away



Photo: S. Wilson, Canapress

that means so much to a lot of people.”

For more information about the Save Ontario Parks campaign and to sign the online petition, go to www.saveontarioparks.ca.

Going green: OPSEU embraces conservation

by Randy Robinson

Air pollution kills 5,800 Ontarians every year. Our provincial parks are losing staff. Cuts to conservation enforcement are letting poachers roam free. The McGuinty Liberals plan to spend \$46 billion on nuclear power plants. **Does this seem like a good time to “go green”?**

“The need for action on the environment is more urgent than ever,” says Gino Franche, an OPSEU Executive Board Member and a member of the union’s Green Team. “OPSEU members want our union to be part of the solution.”

At the 2006 Convention, delegates voted 100 per cent in favour of Greening OPSEU, a long-term green plan for the union. Hearing a speech from David Suzuki was a great inspiration, Franche says.

“Dr. Suzuki had a huge impact,” says Franche. “He

talked about how the members of OPSEU can make a big difference if we work consciously to become more environmentally friendly. He challenged delegates to take the Suzuki challenge (see www.davidsuzuki.org), which consists of things people can do to conserve energy and reduce waste.”

This fall, the OPSEU Executive Board will discuss ways to give Greening OPSEU the resources it needs to succeed.

“For the plan to succeed, it’s definitely going to take a long-term commitment from the Executive Board,” says Franche. “We need a green coordinator. We need a report card — something that our members can look at and say, yeah, we’re on track, we’re meeting the goals.

“Most of all, we can’t make our union greener without the involvement of our members,” says Franche. “Communication and education are going to be critical to our success.”

For more information about Greening OPSEU, contact the Green Team through the link at www.opseu.org/notices/greeningopseu.htm.



Greening OPSEU calls for action in eight areas:

1. Creating a network of green stewards;
2. Standing up for OPSEU members who work in environmental protection;
3. Conserving energy, water, paper, and other resources in OPSEU operations;
4. Supporting conservation where OPSEU members work;
5. Investing in green growth through OPSEU pension funds;
6. Helping members be green in their everyday lives;
7. Helping to “green” the labour movement; and
8. Working towards greener communities.