

Enhancing Public Access in the Muskoka River Watershed for Sustainability

This article is part of the Ripple Article Series. Every other week, an article will be posted on the Engage Muskoka website that dives deeper into one of the twelve technical projects in the **Making Waves: Integrated Watershed Management initiative.**

Did you know that the Muskoka River Watershed has over 2,000 lakes, 9 Provincial Parks, nearly 200 municipal parks and beaches, and thousands of kilometers of hiking trails? Whether you have launched a boat in Lake of Bays, hiked up the Huckleberry Rock Lookout, or picnicked at Windermere Park, you have used a public access point with by-laws or policies to regulate the use of these areas for safety, environmental, and accessibility reasons.

As part of the District of Muskoka's "Making Waves" initiative, a project has been launched that will compile an inventory of all the public access points in the Muskoka River Watershed, including lakes and rivers, as well as terrestrial areas like conservation areas, hiking trails, and public parks. This project aims to review policy options to support the balance of the watershed's environmental, social, and economic priorities. Exploring policy options will ensure that we are responsibly using the natural features of the Muskoka River Watershed today so that it's sustained for future generations.



Before policy options can be considered, the first step of this project is to map the locations of existing and potential future public access points within the Muskoka River Watershed. This includes gathering information on the type of access (multi-purpose trail, road, boat, etc.), facilities (washroom, garbage cans), and sensitivities (social, economic, environmental) for each access point. For example, this project could conclude that a forested trail has patches of invasive species, and litter is often found along the trail route. As such, to support environmental and social goals, a plan for invasive species removal and signs or garbage cans to reduce littering could be included in a policy option.

This project will be completed by early 2023 and published on the Engage Muskoka website. The next step will be to explore how to implement the appropriate policy options across the jurisdictions in the Muskoka River Watershed.

There are 12 projects under the District of Muskoka's "Making Waves" initiative. Other projects include a shoreline erosion study, a hydrological model, floodplain mapping, water quality indicators, and more. The goal of these projects is to assess the existing conditions of the Muskoka River Watershed to work towards a future Integrated Watershed Management plan.

Integrated Watershed Management is a land-use method that manages human activities and natural resources together on a watershed basis, considering the connected interests and needs of the environment, economy, and society. To learn more about Integrated Watershed Management and the other projects in this initiative, be sure to check out the Engage Muskoka page for more information.

The views expressed in this article are the views of the District and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province of Ontario.