

**DARK SKY PROTECTION IN CROWN LAND CONSERVATION
RESERVES IN THE MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES
PARRY SOUND DISTRICT**

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The author outlines the recent activities of the provincial ministry with respect to the inclusion of dark sky relevant commitments in the “Statements of Conservation Interest.”

I am going to discuss dark sky protection in Crown land conservation reserves in the Ministry of Natural Resources Parry Sound District.

The Ministry of Natural resources deals only with provincially owned Crown land, so that the measures that we are taking to minimize the negative effects of light pollution apply only to provincially owned Crown lands.

There is no provincial MNR position on this matter, but in response to a request from Peter Goering, MNR’s Parry Sound District has been making commitments to not allow “unnecessary undirected light pollution” in certain new conservation reserves.

The area that our office manages extends from Georgian Bay to the western boundary of Algonquin Provincial Park and from the Severn River north to the lower reaches of the French River. Within that area, through Ontario’s Living Legacy, our office is regulating 52 new conservation reserves. After each site is regulated, we are required to prepare a site-specific planning document that we call a “Statement of Conservation Interest.”

Through this site-by-site planning process for each of our conservation reserves, MNR is in the process of committing to maintaining dark sky values in individual conservation reserves. Specifically, we are committing that, should lighting be considered in these conservation reserves at some point in the future, the “MNR will not allow unnecessary undirected light pollution.” This commitment has been made because of our recognition of the “wilderness values provided by a pristine night sky.”

To date, dark sky provisions have been specifically included in the planning documents for 23 conservation reserves in our District. And we’re now preparing planning documents for another 15 sites and those documents will also provide night sky protection. We’re anticipating that, by the time we complete

the last of our conservation reserve planning documents, we will have committed to night sky provisions in 51 of the 53 conservation reserves managed by our District, covering approximately 84,000 hectares of Crown land. The two planning documents without dark skies provisions were prepared before we had considered incorporating this provision across the board.

I want to make it clear that it was a very easy step for MNR to commit to not allowing unnecessary undirected light pollution in these conservation reserves. Firstly, protecting a sense of remoteness of wilderness in these sites was seen as an important value, albeit not the key value for which these sites were created. Beyond that, we don't currently have any plans to develop or to permit someone else to develop facilities in these sites that would require any lighting at all. But these commitments are now identified publicly upfront and must be followed should any development be proposed in the future. So these commitments are most important over the long-term, with few short-term difficulties or impacts.

I should also note that these commitments also send a small educational message to stakeholders reading the planning documents, perhaps encouraging nearby property owners and permittees to be more careful about their own light pollution.

MNR's involvement in specifically supporting the "dark sky" concept began in the Torrance Barrens Conservation Reserve (near Gravenhurst), which is termed a "Dark Sky Reserve." Starting in 1993, there was a grass roots community effort to have the Torrance Barrens area set aside for protection, based on the existing broad recreational uses of the area, aesthetic values, and general ecological values, including its situation as a large, unfragmented area of Crown land.

In 1992, there had been an assessment by MNR that showed that this area had some important natural heritage values. The District Municipality of Muskoka, under the Muskoka Heritage Areas program, completed additional assessment in 1993. More assessment was done by MNR in 1995.

These assessments identified that the site has a rich diversity of vegetation communities, as well as a number of rare species of flora and fauna.

In the mid-1990s, MNR was looking for sites meriting protection and proposed Torrance Barrens for protection through public consultation in 1995 and 1996. The site was regulated as a conservation reserve in 1997, covering 1900 hectares.

The value of the site and the surrounding area for its light-free night skies was pointed out as MNR was starting to prepare a planning document for the site.

The absence of light pollution in the night sky made the area ideal for night sky viewing.

In 1998, Peter Goering and the Muskoka Heritage Foundation proposed that the dark sky conditions in the conservation reserve and nearby lands be protected for the long-term.

While they also recognized a need for involvement of municipalities and the general community, they specifically asked that MNR designate the Torrance Barrens Conservation Reserve a Dark Sky Reserve.

This goal was achieved in 1999 through the preparation of a planning document for the conservation reserve. That planning document commits MNR to limit development in the conservation reserve to the minimum required to service approved recreational land uses (e.g. parking, sanitation, trails and signs). It was noted that this development did not appear to require lighting after sundown, but if lighting were needed, it would be designed to ensure a minimum intrusion (e.g. focused downward). The night sky darkness was specifically identified as a value to be protected in this site.

This planning document also identified MNR's support for the protection of the night sky around the perimeter of the conservation reserve, although MNR does not have any control over that area.

In summary, MNR's Parry Sound District is committed to protecting dark sky values in our conservation reserves over the long-term. Our rationale is based on protecting the wilderness and remoteness values provided by a pristine night sky.

Should anyone wish to discuss the Torrance Barrens Conservation Reserve in detail, Jan McDonnell, our Bracebridge wildlife biologist, is the most knowledgeable about the site and Jan is here today. My role relates to the other conservation reserves.