

The Honourable Jeff Yurek
Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks
Via email jeff.yurek@pc.ola.org

July 14, 2020

Dear Minister Yurek:

RE: Protecting Provincial Conservation reserves from consequences of COVID-19

In its battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Province has made some difficult decisions in the interest of long-term public health protection that have taken a toll on peoples' lives and the economy. There have also been unexpected consequences to the environment and natural greenspace resources in the province as more people have descended on our parks and open spaces. We are looking for your support with local community efforts to mitigate this damage and preserve these resources for public enjoyment for years to come. In particular, we are asking for your support in working with community volunteers at the Torrance Barrens Dark-Sky Preserve to repair the boardwalk and install better signage and for the Ministry staff of Ontario Parks to take action on rampant camping, makeshift campfires, partying and general use of the property that was never intended.

Emergency measures have severely curtailed employment and recreational options for people throughout the province. This has created a situation where young people have a lot of extra leisure time and fewer places to spend it. The result has been an influx of visitors to Provincial Parks and conservation reserves where they are camping, building fires, holding parties and damaging the natural environment, putting at risk the long-term sustainability of this resource. The Torrance Barrens Dark-Sky Preserve is but one example.

As a background, the Torrance Barrens Dark-Sky Preserve (the "Barrens") is an Ontario Conservation Reserve located south-east of the Town of Bala. It is notably the world's first permanent dark sky preserve and of great interest to international astronomical organizations. The Barrens only came into existence in 2009 as a result of considerable effort by the local community and today is watched over by a group of volunteers known as the Guardians of the Barrens.

This group raised concerns over the dozens of makeshift firepits and campsites that have sprung up in the Barrens due to the recent increase in visitors.

There is garbage strewn everywhere, discarded masks and alcohol containers, evidence of illegal fires and years of neglect have resulted in a dilapidated boardwalk. To address this last issue, the group sought and received \$20,000 from the Township of Muskoka Lakes (TML) to repair the boardwalk and YMCA Camp Pine Crest has offered to carry out the work. This project has wide support from councillors and the mayors of TML and Gravenhurst as well as community groups including the Muskoka Lakes Association, Clear Lake Association, Muskoka Conservancy and the Muskoka Rate Payers Association. The only requirement, at this point, is the co-operation of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Unfortunately, previous communications between representatives of local community groups and the Ministry have proven unproductive. Communications with Wade Murrant, Zone Manager of the North-East Zone, indicated that the boardwalk, which is essential for accessing the trails in the area, would be removed and not repaired, against the wishes of the community groups that have secured labour and funds for their repair. Further, Mr. Murrant has rejected requests to review the current management direction documents for Torrance Barrens with regard to limit camping to designated sections of the Barrens in an effort to preserve and protect the ecosystem against a surge in noise, litter and fires created by the recent increase in usage. Mr. Murrant did arrange for the area to be cleaned up in June, for which we are sincerely grateful, but the return of garbage scattered everywhere, and evidence of improper fires suggest increased protection is required. In fact, the need for increased protection was made abundantly clear by a complaint to the OPP on June 26, after which six firearms were seized from the property and two people were charged with improper use of firearms. We are confident that the Premier and the Minister would not like to see a recurrence of this type of activity.

We hope this letter will make two issues clear. The first is the need for attention to the Torrance Barrens Dark-Sky Preserve, which is a unique and esteemed resource for the people of Ontario, with a particular emphasis on the need to limit overnight camping and rebuild the boardwalk. The second issue is the value of a collaborative relationship with local community groups. Many conservation reserves and provincial parks have passionate volunteer organizations that look out for and advocate for these natural recreational areas that have no voice of their own. These groups are people who share your values and provide invaluable support and monitoring of these fragile ecosystems. We urge you Minister and your representatives to engage with these groups when seeking input on the management of local resources for the people of Ontario.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawton Osler". The letters are cursive and somewhat slanted to the right.

Lawton Osler, President
Muskoka Lakes Association

c.c.

Wade Murrant, Zone Manager of the North-East Zone

Norm Miller, MPP Muskoka

Phil Harding, Mayor Township of Muskoka Lakes

Paul Kelly, Mayor Town of Gravenhurst

Dayle Hogg, Director, MLA

Deborah Martin-Downs, Chair, Government and Land Use Committee, MLA

Mike Silver, Chair, Guardians of the Barrens