



# The Path Ahead: The Bruce Trail Conservancy Strategy Renewed for a New Era

By Ned Morgan

In the midst of a relentlessly gloomy news cycle, it is worth pointing out that the Bruce Trail Conservancy will not contribute to it. Instead, on the heels of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Bruce Trail, the news is good: last year the Bruce Trail Conservancy raised the most funds ever in its history for land acquisitions and programs. And then, within the first two weeks of 2018, more good news arrived: the announcement of two newly protected nature reserves, Kemble Wetland and Maple Ridge. Hundreds of new and returning donors secured the reserves, adding 202 acres to the Bruce Trail's conservation corridor and securing almost 2.5 kilometres of Optimum Route.



Photo: Marlon Chen

So after this good news is digested and the 50th celebrations folded up, a simple question may be posed: *What now, Bruce Trail Conservancy?*

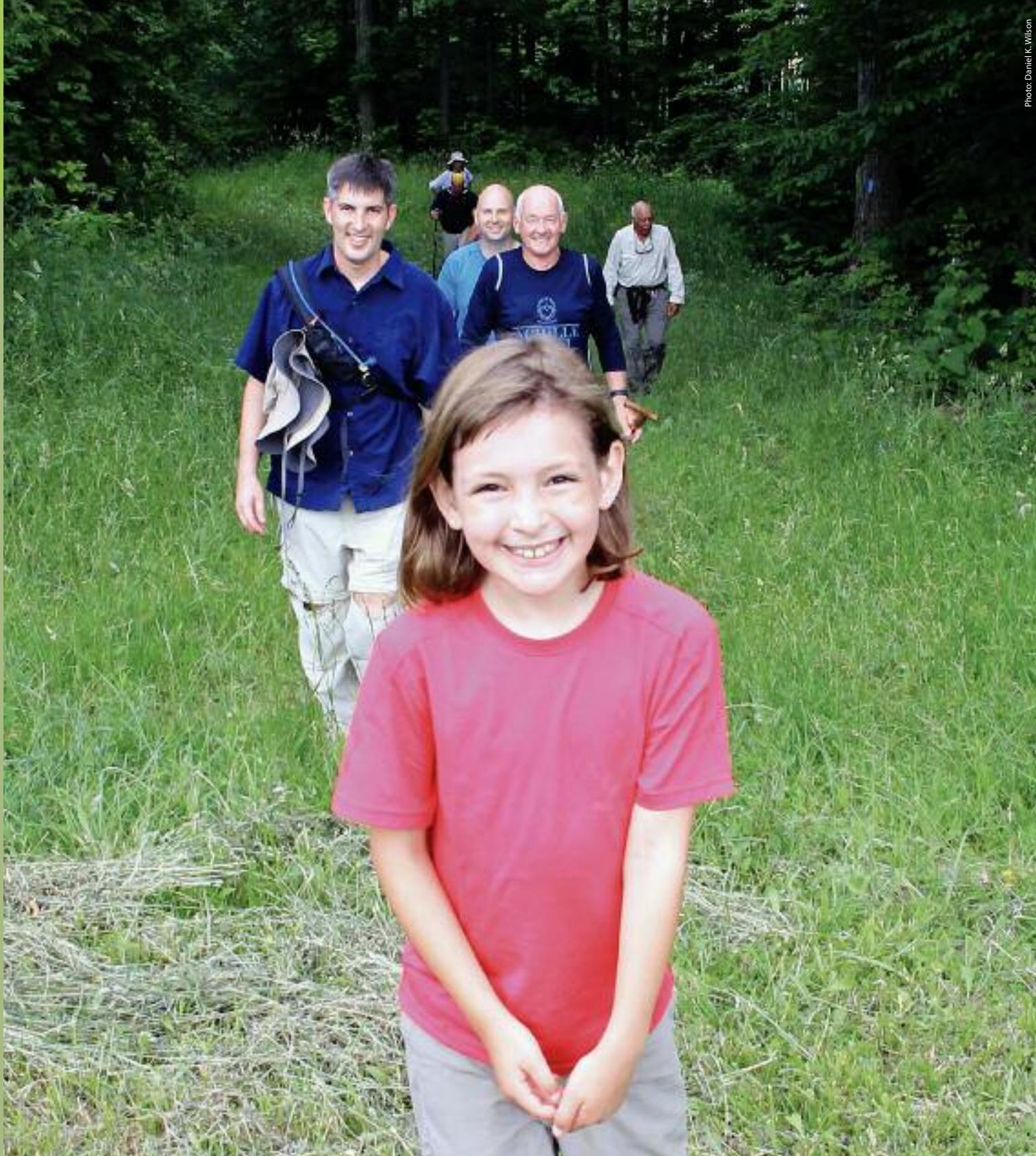
Warren Bell, Bruce Trail Conservancy Board Chair, reflects on the organization's successes and path ahead: "We've had tremendous success in recent years, culminating in 2017 being what I call our *Year of Records* – record donations, record membership levels, record land acquisitions. As successful as we've been, we know that the job of preserving the Niagara Escarpment and the Bruce Trail needs an even greater effort if we want to keep pace with the population challenges ahead. We need to preserve the remaining land over the next 20 years instead of 50." Bell adds that "Accomplishing this will mean enhancing our effectiveness with new and bold initiatives. Working with Bruce Trail Conservancy staff, and in consultation with Clubs and others in the Bruce Trail community, the Board approved a bold, ambitious and inspiring new Strategy in December 2017, which will guide us to 2025."

The work of the Bruce Trail Conservancy is guided by its Strategic Plans. These plans are developed, implemented and retired according to their constructed timeframes. The last Strategic Plan, approved by the Bruce Trail Conservancy Board of Directors spanned to 2012 to 2018. This plan had well served its purpose; and after five years of celebrating the milestones in the half-century-plus creation of the Trail, it was time to look to the path ahead.



Photo: Brian Popelier

Speyside Sanctuary Nature Reserve - Toronto section



The work of building a Strategic Plan is a comprehensive and cerebral task, involving data gathering, analysis, consultation, reflection, dialogue, revisions and more revisions. But the outcome of a successful Strategic Plan is a map to success.

Strategic Plans have a mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities, the same elements we would consider when planning a hiking expedition, for example. The mission might be to hike the entire Bruce Trail from Niagara to Tobermory. The vision – the thing most

desired when the mission is completed – is a better connection to the natural environment of the Niagara Escarpment, and the health and wellness that come from walking it. Values are the “code” we follow as we carry out the mission and the vision: stay on the blazed trail, camp only in designated campsites, support our fellow hikers, thank the dedicated volunteers we meet along the way. And strategic priorities? Now we’re getting to the strategies that will make the mission successful: the gear we’ll wear, the tools we’ll use to navigate, when we’ll hike and how we’ll get to the trailhead each day.

## Our Mission:

*Preserving a ribbon of wilderness, for everyone, forever.*

The new mission is a departure from previous mission statements, all of which ran much longer. Bruce Trail Conservancy CEO Beth Gilhespy explains the process – during engagement sessions with the Board and the Club Presidents – that led to the new phrasing. “We looked at previous mission statements, we looked at [Bruce Trail founder] Ray Lowes’ writing – we found inspiration here because he was such an eloquent writer – and we looked at what others had written, including newspaper articles on the Bruce Trail from the early 1960s. After brainstorming we ended up with this big assemblage of ideas. In an important sign of solidarity and unity of thought, all of the ideas were consistent with what we were already doing as an organization. With this in mind we set out to create a better mission statement, one that would be impactful, concise and memorable.”

The brainstorming process included mounting on foam board various quotations for display, including a short article published in the *Financial Post* in 1961 with the headline, “Can They Save This Ribbon of Wilderness?” Gilhespy says of the headline, “This headline struck a chord.

It was important in 1961 and it still is today. As we moved through the process with many of our stakeholders, this idea of a ribbon of wilderness, and the emotion it evoked, stayed with us.” Gilhespy added: “The ribbon is our beautiful Bruce Trail, winding through the landscape. It’s the sweep of the Escarpment’s cliffline, and the curve of the rivers and shorelines.” Gilhespy acknowledges the Bruce Trail is not always wilderness. “It’s a reflective and aspirational statement; many places along the Escarpment feel wild and remote, even those that are close to urban areas. We also want to preserve what wilderness we can, and bring impaired land back to ecological health.”

With only four more words added to “ribbon of wilderness”, the new Mission Statement makes every syllable count. “For everyone” was especially key. Gilhespy adds: “This wasn’t just about people who walk the Bruce Trail regularly and enjoy the benefits of hiking. The Bruce Trail brings societal wellness – better health of its citizens, preserved natural spaces for filtering water and air, and buffering the effects of climate change. It benefits everyone. And we also wanted to articulate that people should be allowed to walk on the Escarpment.” The final word, “forever”, underscores the ultimate and ever-present goal of permanent protection of the Bruce Trail and its corridor.



Photo: Beth Gilhespy

Duntroon Crevice Heights Nature Reserve - Blue Mountains section

**Our Vision:**

*The Bruce Trail secured within a permanently protected natural corridor along the Niagara Escarpment.*

In only fourteen words the Vision Statement outlines with absolute clarity the ambitious and uncomplicated goal of the Bruce Trail Conservancy. Together with the mission, both statements are concise, easy to commit to memory, and inspirational.

With these all-important new words in mind, the work of securing and protecting the Trail has new energy. The Bruce Trail Conservancy's new Values outline how the Bruce Trail Conservancy staff and volunteers will conduct themselves as they carry out the many activities necessary to achieve the mission and vision.

The Bruce Trail Conservancy emphasizes the following **Values** as central to all efforts:

**Commitment**

We encourage, foster and benefit from the commitment of excellence from our supporters – members, volunteers, donors and staff – to achieve our vision.



Photo: Jackie Rendle

**Integrity**

We conduct ourselves in accordance with the highest standards of professional and personal behaviour and ethics.

**Stewardship**

We embrace our role in responsible stewardship of the Bruce Trail, the lands in our care, and the organization's resources, for the benefit of all including future generations.



Photo: Bryan Poppeier

**Collaboration**

We work cooperatively with landowners, funders and other partners, share best scientific and business practices, and maximize our volunteer resources.

**Respect**

We show respect for all individuals and groups with whom we interact, recognize our special relationship with landowners, and acknowledge the traditional homeland of the Indigenous peoples of the Escarpment.



Webwood Falls Nature Reserve - Beaver Valley section

Photo: Randy O'Hara



Photo: Man Khun Chan

The final piece of the Strategic Plan is the set of strategic priorities on which the organization will focus to achieve the mission. Much good work is already being done by the volunteers and staff, and will continue unabated. The strategic priorities build on that good work, and are intended to focus efforts to achieve the mission and vision more quickly: increased fundraising initiatives so that more land can be acquired, new and creative ways of engaging with landowners and making land available for acquisition, an examination of membership and the role it plays in the organization, an analysis of our brand and how we can increase its effectiveness, and enhanced relations with government agencies, community partners and other stakeholders.

The new Strategic Plan is refreshing and inspiring, but also familiar. The core goal – preserving a corridor of land that contains the Bruce Trail – remains. Gilhespy notes: “The change in the description of the mission and vision hasn’t changed what we’re doing as an organization. Like the name change to ‘Bruce Trail Conservancy’ in 2007, we’re better articulating what we do. And our strategic priorities will build on the fine work already being done, and increase our effectiveness as an organization.”

The Bruce Trail Conservancy Board, staff and volunteers who worked on the creation of the Strategic Plan had fulsome and enlightening conversations about the Bruce Trail Conservancy, its role as a conservation organization, and its collective future. The best news of all is that all voices were in concert – eager to get to work to achieve this bold, inspiring and vital mission and vision. Its new strategic guidebook in hand, the Bruce Trail Conservancy is ready to embark on the path ahead. •

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR 2018 TO 2025

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1

#### Accelerate Land Acquisition

We will identify and implement innovative tools and techniques to accelerate our land preservation program and support our growing land stewardship responsibilities.



Photo: Lynn Reket

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2

#### Expand Fundraising

We will secure financial resources to fund our activities now and for the long term.



Photo: Brian Peeples

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3

#### Build Brand Awareness

We will promote a strong brand that will be readily identified with our unique balance of conservation and recreation.



Photo: Ethan Meleg

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4

#### Increase Impact of Membership

We will encourage and leverage membership and other sources of support, to increase our impact and effectiveness.



Photo: Man Khun Chan

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 5

#### Enhance Stakeholder Relationships

We will develop high quality relationships with all stakeholders to increase the Bruce Trail Conservancy’s effectiveness.



Photo: James Gibson