

Businesses benefit from tourism at GRCA parks

BY PATRICK RAFTIS
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WELLINGTON COUNTY – In addition to protecting and managing Ontario’s waterways, woodlands and wetlands, the mandate of the province’s conservation authorities is to provide opportunities for the public to enjoy, learn from and respect Ontario’s natural environment.

It’s in this latter role that the economic impact of Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) parks and facilities in Wellington County is most strongly felt by local communities.

GRCA parks within the county include Belwood Lake, Conestogo Lake and Guelph Lake, plus the Elora Gorge, Elora Quarry and Rockwood conservation areas, and the Luther Marsh wildlife sanctuary.

In 2016, these facilities attracted an estimated 130,400 campers and sold 348,454 day passes, for a total of 478,854 visitors. In addition, Conestogo Lake boasts nearly 400 cottage lots, while Belwood Lake has 335.

While the authority does not currently track economic impact data, GRCA conservation areas manager Andrea Riley notes it’s substantial, with the two Elora facilities generating the lion’s share of the traffic in Wellington.

“The GRCA has been part of a larger programming and tourism group in the Elora-Fergus or Centre Wellington area, so the township itself does recognize that the Elora Gorge and the Elora Quarry contribute significantly to drawing consumers into the area,” said Riley. “The two parks in the Elora area, along

with Belwood, have a significant economic impact on the Centre Wellington area for sure.”



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**KENDRA MARTIN,
COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR
CENTRE WELLINGTON TOWNSHIP**



Centre Wellington tourism and destination coordinator Deb Dalziel said the natural aspects of the municipality are unique.

“We recognize and are working very hard to promote our natural and heritage assets that we have here in Centre Wellington, and we are so fortunate to have three GRCA parks,” she said.

With the two Elora parks bringing in the most traffic in Wellington County, they also bring a large economic impact to the busi-

nesses in the downtowns.

Kendra Martin, communications coordinator for the township, said the parks are the biggest draw for the community and businesses are benefitting from that tourism.

“I think it’s a great spinoff. The tourists are coming here for that aspect, and we are providing them, and downtown businesses are providing them, with the extras that come with a full-day experience,” she said.

In a visitor experience analysis completed by Elora and Fergus Tourism in 2016, the most popular activity for visitors was the Elora Gorge and the Elora Quarry. The survey noted the gorge was the top primary reason for visiting the area (40%) followed by shopping and dining. The quarry was also noted as a primary reason for visiting (11%).

Individually, the Elora Gorge drew 58,902 campers and about 83,400 day visitors in 2016, making it the busiest park in Wellington County with a total of 142,302 visitors. The quarry and Belwood Lake facilities do not offer camping but sold 85,000 and 44,000 day passes respectively last year.

In Mapleton, Conestogo Lake drew nearly 12,500 campers in 2016. Combined with over 37,000 day passes, the park drew around 49,500 visitors last year.

“We’ve identified Conestogo as one of our parks that we’re looking to market a little more



in-depth. With some of the new development in the Mapleton area and the back end of Elmira, we have some kind of hidden gems and Conestogo would be one of them,” said Riley.

Mapleton Mayor Neil Driscoll said the impact of the lake’s proximity can be seen in the number of cottagers that regularly visit local businesses.

“I know you recognize a lot of the cottagers that go to the grocery store ... and then you see them out at Marspan (building centre) and you see them in at Dobben’s (hardware store) and then if their boat needs a tune up you see them in at Dippel’s Garage,” he noted.

Driscoll explained the park provides a benefit without a significant burden on municipal resources.

“They pay their taxes to the GRCA, and we get them back from the GRCA.”

Driscoll said while the township does provide building department services to cottagers, “We don’t have to provide a lot of services other than those roads that lead into the lake.”

Driscoll said he definitely considers Conestogo Lake an asset to the township.

“It’s just one more beautiful piece of Mapleton that we have.”

The Rockwood Conservation Area accommodated about 27,800 campers and about 62,400 day trippers last year. Guelph Lake provided a camping experience for about 31,200, while 35,800 day passes were sold at the facility, in 2016.

Guelph-Eramosa Mayor Chris White, who also is the vice-chair of the GRCA board, said the parks create a sense of identity within the township, calling the Rockwood park the “heart of the community.”

He also said there is a positive economic impact from the conservation areas but in different ways.

“(Guelph Lake) pulls people into the township, so from an economic development perspective, I think a lot of the benefit goes to Guelph ... but it’s still an important park in the middle of our community that our people use. It’s a piece of who we are,” he said.

White said the township is still working on ways to move people into downtown Rockwood while they camp at the conservation area.

“Our challenge, and we’ve had this for a number of years, is to try to figure out a way to draw the people out of the park,” he said.

One of the tools the township has developed is a map of the downtown, highlighting the businesses tourists could potentially visit.

While the Luther Marsh in Wellington North draws visitors for hunting, fishing and environmental tourism, there is no camping at the facility and day use figures for 2016 were not available.

“Luther Marsh is unique in the fact that it’s not considered a GRCA park from a recreation perspective. It’s a wildlife sanctuary,” said Riley.

“There’s a lot of environmental and conservation work that’s done in that area. Obviously, it does have a significant impact during hunting season. We have a very formal hunting program there at the marsh, so that’s a draw

for a lot of hunters and anglers depending on what season we’re in.”

It is also unique in the sense that it is split down the middle by two municipalities - Wellington North and the Town of Grand Valley - with the access point on the Grand Valley side.

Wellington North Mayor Andy Lennox said he wishes to have more access to the marsh.

“There’s the Luther Marsh, which is a huge gem in our community, a wonderful nature preserve, but public access is extremely limited,” he said.

“We’d love to have access for people to hike or bike in there because it’s relatively close to our rail trail that runs from Arthur to Grand Valley; it could connect via road connection.”

Lennox said it is difficult to measure economic impact from the wildlife area because it’s restricted.

He added he wants “some of the more populous municipalities that really run the conservation authority (to) realize ... we would like to have some of that benefit in our community as well,” he said.

“We don’t want to mess with the natural heritage; we just want people to be able to come and enjoy it.”

In addition to drawing visitors, GRCA parks in Wellington County provide employment for 119 people, including both summer and regular park staff, many of whom are county residents. The Elora Gorge, with 35, has the largest staff contingent, while Guelph Lake



PHOTOS: BELOW: GRCA; MARC CADRANEL; ABOVE RIGHT: GRCA; JANET BAINE





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GUELPH-ERAMOSA MAYOR

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is next with 21, followed by Conestogo (20), Rockwood (18), Elora Quarry (12), Belwood Lake (11) and Luther Marsh (two).

Despite a heavy focus on camping, Riley says single-day visitors have a major impact on park use.

“In those situations obviously people are coming in for our nature centre programs and activities that are little bit more structured, using waterways and reservoirs for outdoor recreation, swimming ... we're really trying to work on our trail network in a lot of our urban parks and looking at developing a plan to formalize and expand some of the services we offer.”

Riley notes GRCA officials are working on a system that will allow them to better track usage and economic impact of their facilities.

“We're looking at installing controlled access that would give us a better understanding of where our members are coming from and where our day users are coming from.

That would give us a better understanding of our overall impact,” she explained.

“In our urban parks, where people tend to walk in to use the facilities in evening hours, whether for an evening picnic or just a family outing for hiking or some kind of a gathering with friends, they typically will buy a day-use pass or a park-specific pass, meaning they don't travel to a GRCA park to camp overnight.

“But that park is usually in their





ELORA QUARRY

PHOTOS: GRCA / KEN BORGHESE

area or at their backdoor, so they use that park on a regular basis.”

Out of area visitors and local residents both use the parks, the latter keeping money in the community, contributing to the impact on the local economy, Riley notes.

“We’re actually experiencing that in a significant way in the Elora-Fergus area with the Elora Quarry ... it’s marketed and really promoted as a day-use area, a natural swimming location and we’re seeing users come in from the GTA in very large numbers,” she said.

“Last year we estimated that there were over 80,000 users and it’s only open for a three-month period. So with that information, along with some of the stresses that we see on our resources, we have decided to move in a different management direction this year with that location,” Riley stated.

“We will be managing capacity much more proactively at the Elora Quarry so we will be capping the number of visitors at 1,300 per day

and we will be moving to a wristband system that will help us manage capacity and allow us to manage the trespassing that happens into that area as well.”

However, Riley anticipates the capacity restrictions will work to the advantage of local businesses.

“We’ve been working actively with the

township and the tourism office in Elora ... to drive people not only to our GRCA parks ... but there’s a lot more to do in this area,” she said.

With the number of visitors the Elora parks draw each year, Dalziel and Martin are hoping to direct those turned away from the Elora Quarry into the downtown.

Riley explained there will be an ambassador program within the Centre Wellington parks.

“We’re partnering with them through their ambassador programs this year,” she said.

“They have tourism ambassadors for Elora-Fergus that will be working within the Elora Gorge and Elora Quarry to educate people on what other active recreation or opportunities are available to them when our parks are at capacity so we can redirect them into the core area of the community, whether it’s restaurants, pubs, small business or other attractions.”

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ELORA GORGE



CONESTOGO LAKE



LUTHER MARSH

PHOTOS: P.22 GRCA, BELOW RIGHT: OLIVIA RUTT; P.23 GRCA