

The Escarpment

Trick question. What does the foundation of your house have in common with Queen's Park, the Devil's Punchbowl, the CN Tower, Niagara Falls and 700-year-old cedars?

The answer, of course, is the Niagara Escarpment -- that 725-kilometre wonder that snakes from Tobermory to Queenston, embracing Hamilton like an old friend on a surprise stopover in town.

The escarpment -- what we in Hamilton lovingly, and self-consciously, call the Mountain -- has a greater hold on this city than any other feature. In fact, the escarpment, possibly even more than Lake Ontario and our harbour, has helped define this city. We are a city of heavy industry because of the escarpment. We are a city of magnificent forests and waterfalls (more than any city in North America) because of the escarpment. Even our weather (and smog) are influenced by the escarpment.

But as we have been shaped by the escarpment so, too, have we shaped it. Alternately stripping its slopes of trees (and occasionally replanting) or gouging giant holes into it (the cement that went into the foundation of your home likely includes escarpment limestone and the highways upon which we drive rest on its crushed remains).

It seems, at times, that the only urge greater than our desire to protect the escarpment is our longing to exploit it. Save the escarpment we cry, even as we wish that we owned one of those magnificent homes with a spectacular escarpment view. (Picture Perfect. Ravine Lot. Won't Last.) Such is the dichotomy of our relationship with this national treasure that has been recognized by the United Nations as a World Biosphere Reserve.

It's a complicated relationship, and one that seems imbued with a natural tension. Think of the acrimonious debate around the Red Hill Creek Expressway, which will carve the biggest slice yet out of the escarpment, and you begin to understand how complicated is Hamilton's relationship to our Mountain.

Beginning in today's Focus section, through next Saturday, we will show you the escarpment in a way you have never seen it before. We will tell you how it was formed (and how we almost lost it to Toronto). We will explore its history (250 million years, give or take a few million), and its animals - - past and present. We're talking mastodons to raccoons. We'll even tell you how a tiny salamander may help us better understand the force at play on the escarpment.

Of course, we will also introduce you to some of the seven million people who live within 100 kilometres of it, people who hike its trails, grow grapes and blast tonnes of stone from its back.

We will look at some of the human forces affecting the escarpment, politics, quarrying, development, recreation and tourism. We will ask hard questions about some decisions that hurt the escarpment, all the while resisting the temptation to offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. We will look for answers but not villains, conscious that we, too, live and work in the shadow of what previous generations called the Giant's Rib.

We will, I'm confident, help you better understand the escarpment. And better yet, you will share our sense of awe that this magnificent treasure is, literally, in our back yard.

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A project of this breadth involves the efforts of many, many people -- reporters, photographers and editors. And I thank them all for producing this tremendous body of work. They have, as always, done us proud.

But I also want to thank someone from outside our newsroom. Kenneth Hall, whose name many of you will recognize from his long association with groups like the Giant's Rib Discovery Centre and the Bay Area Restoration Council, is a great lover of the escarpment. And a year ago, Ken approached us with a proposal to do this series, offering to assist us as he had with Bringing Back the Bay, our 2002 award-winning series on Hamilton Harbour.

Ken's assistance was invaluable on this series. He even, with the help of some equally passionate escarpment lovers, arranged for a bus tour of the escarpment that took The Spec's editorial board and project team from Milton to Niagara.

Ken, for your great passion and assistance, thank you.

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