



Active in the Ravines

Summary Report

Created in partnership with

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Introduction

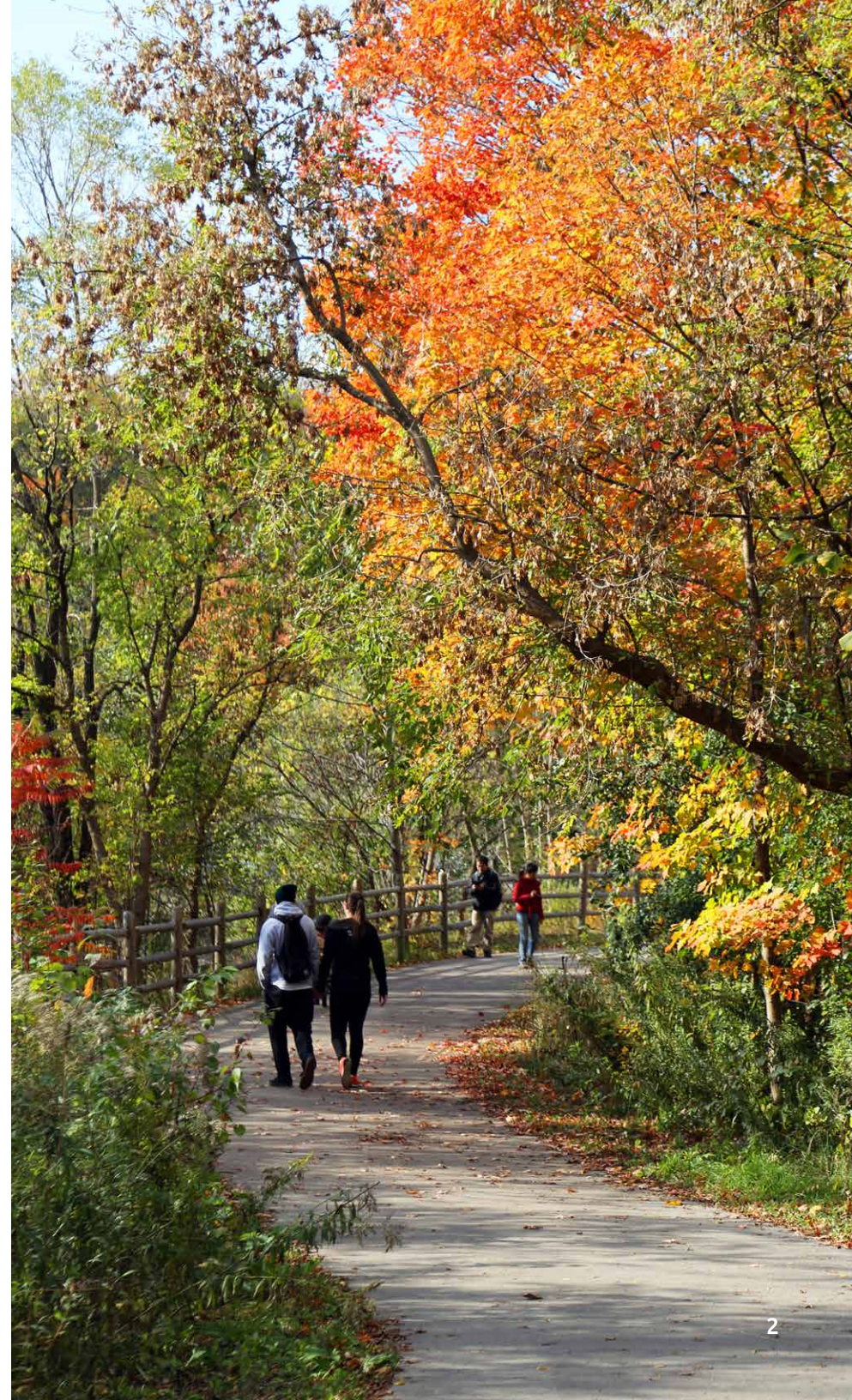
Evergreen is working with the City of Toronto and the Toronto Region Conservation Authority to establish a continuous 65km Ravine Loop Trail connecting the ravines throughout the entire city. Within this larger project is the Ravine Activations program, which aims to assess community members' current and future engagement with the Ravine Loop Trail for active transportation, identify barriers to ravine utilization, and determine measures to promote active transportation within the ravines.

This project is funded in part by the Government of Canada



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Methods

To achieve these goals, Evergreen with support from organizations like Park People, successfully engaged over 500 city residents in a comprehensive engagement process. The engagement included hosting pop-up events with 453 community members, surveying 187 individuals and interviewing five community experts. Interviews were conducted with the following experts:

- David Simor, Director, The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT);
- Salma Ginwalla & Monika Chopra, Members of the Markbrook Residents Group;
- Lanrick Bennett Jr., Executive Director Charlie’s Freewheels and Bicycle Mayor for Toronto;
- Carolynne Crawley, Founder of Msit No'kmaq and Turtle Protectors

Community engagement occurred at 15 events hosted in parks and ravines across Toronto over the course of 2022 and 2023. Of the 15 events, 13 were hosted in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas

(NIAs). Events were hosted in partnership with the following community organizations: High Park Nature Centre, Our Greenway Conservancy, Gateway Bike Hub, Lost Rivers, Thorncliffe Wellness Cafe, Prairie Drive Park Residents Group, STEPS Public Art, Happy Fiets Canada, Kidical Mass TO, Feminist Bird Club of Toronto, CultureLink, and Park People.

Key insights within this report are directly gathered from surveys with community members at engagement events to understand their experiences in the ravines, while expert input supplemented these findings by identifying key areas for enhancing accessibility and promoting active transportation. The data represented in this report serves as a foundation for identifying challenges in active transportation within the ravines and proposing a course of action for a more inclusive, active, and accessible ravine system, aligning with Toronto's Ravine Strategy, Vision Zero Road Safety Plan, and the Cycling Network Plan.

Engagement included:



Findings

1. Current State of Active Transportation in Ravines

Survey data collected from community members reveals that almost 100 of 187 respondents visit Toronto's greenspaces and ravines weekly (Figure 1). The primary motivations for visiting the ravines include seeking a connection to nature, exercising, and spending quality time with friends and family. Notably, a significant 89% of respondents highlight that their main motivation for visiting these spaces is to connect with nature. This is in stark contrast to the 35% who identify commuting through the ravines as a motivating factor for their visits (Figure 2). This suggests that most users understand the ravines' value for social and recreational activities, and that their value as transportation corridors is not as widely recognized.

49%

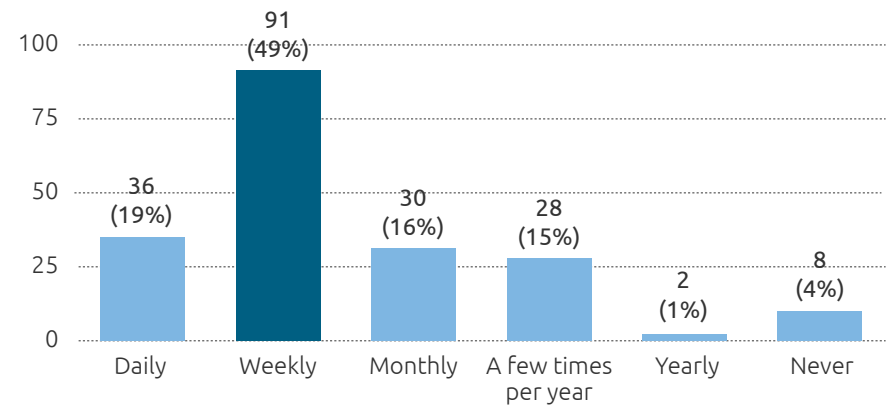
of respondents visit Toronto's green spaces and ravines **weekly**.

89%

of respondents' main motivation for visiting these spaces is to **connect with nature**.

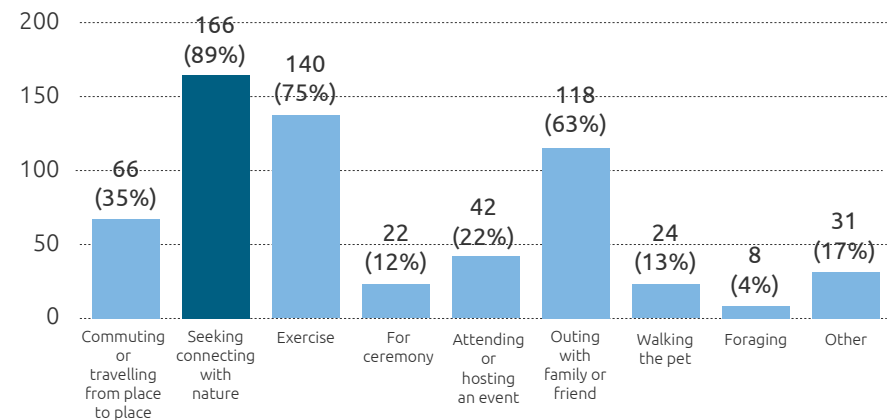
How often do you visit Toronto's green spaces and/or ravines?

Figure 1: Visitation frequency to Toronto's green spaces and/or ravines



What motivates you to visit Toronto's green spaces and/or ravines?

Figure 2: Motivations for visiting Toronto's green spaces and/or ravines



The most prevalent modes of transportation to and from greenspaces and ravines are walking (85% citing walking as a typical mode) and cycling (39%), with an additional 21% of respondents opting for car travel. Within the ravines, walking is the primary mode of transportation, with more than 2.5 times as many respondents reporting that they typically walk compared to cycling. This data demonstrates that active transportation plays a vital role both in travel to these spaces and within them, highlighting their significance in the city's active transportation network.

However, insights from previous community engagement for the development of the Ravine Strategy indicate that the ravines are not easily accessible to all city residents. Within this sample, 42% of respondents report facing some level of difficulty accessing the ravines. The following section will delve into the barriers and facilitators to access and engage in active transportation within the ravines, as identified by community members and local experts.



2. Barriers and Facilitators to Engaging in Active Transportation in Ravines

Wayfinding

The most commonly reported barriers to ravine access are the poorly signed entry points and a lack of trail signage. This tends to cause confusion among community members about whether they can enter and where ravine trails will lead them. In response to a query about amenities that would enhance the enjoyment of greenspaces and ravines, 21% of respondents mention the necessity for improved signage and maps throughout these areas. Community experts echo the need for better wayfinding, suggesting the utilization of technology like Google Maps.

Prioritizing the expansion of the City of Toronto's Wayfinding Strategy to Rowntree Mills Park, Thorncliffe Park, and other communities with a high proportion of newcomers unfamiliar with the city's ravine system could potentially address this gap. Community members also propose that park signage could serve multiple purposes, offering educational opportunities around park etiquette and local nature.

Physical Barriers

Challenging terrain and unpaved pathways are also highlighted as significant barriers to access. Members of the community emphasize that difficult terrain, such as steep inclines or tall staircases at entry points, excludes seniors, youth, and people with mobility challenges from these spaces. During winter months, these entry points become even more challenging due to inadequate maintenance, making them slippery and difficult to navigate.

Access to Cycling

Community members highlight a number of issues related to cycling in these areas. Ravines and greenspaces are some of the rare urban spaces where newer cyclists or those new to the city can gain confidence cycling without the fear of vehicle collisions. However, cycling is inaccessible to many communities who do not have access to affordable bicycle options or bicycle repair and who live beyond the boundaries of the BikeShare network. The Cycling Network Plan is focused on increasing access to cycling through the extension of high-quality cycling infrastructure to more neighborhoods, however, there is less of an emphasis on other barriers beyond proximity to cycling infrastructure.

Moreover, there are knowledge gaps around the presence of cycling infrastructure, bicycle maintenance, and "cycling etiquette." Providing multilingual resources on safe cycling within the city, including information on trail networks such as the Ravine Loop Trail, will ensure more city residents understand how to access existing amenities. Community experts also emphasize the importance of strategically placing affordable bikes, including BikeShare and bike repair stations, near ravine access points.

“ We were doing an engagement event at Thorncliffe a couple of weeks back with a lot of newcomers and racialized folks right next to the Don Valley. And there was a lot of conversation around how BikeShare could be the key to unlocking their access to the ravines”

– **David Simor, Director, The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT)**

Infrastructure & Maintenance

Community members suggest several infrastructure improvements to allow them to better enjoy greenspaces and ravines, including winterized public washrooms, improved lighting, public seating, shaded areas, and water fountains. Community members desire to use ravine spaces year-round, but challenges arise in winter and extreme heat due to inadequate infrastructure, specifically the lack of all-season washrooms, public seating and shaded areas. The absence of lighting in ravine spaces also poses difficulties, particularly during winter. This underscores findings from a [recent study by the University of Toronto](#) highlighting equity issues related to low lighting for shift workers.

“ There’s no water fountains along the way or no washrooms. So, the only way you can get to the washroom is when you reach Rowntree Mills Park, which is quite a distance. And oftentimes in the late evenings, if you want to go, those restrooms are locked.”

– **Salma Ginwalla, Markbrook Residents Group.**

Paved paths for cyclists and pedestrians throughout greenspaces and ravines are also important amenities to the community. Conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians are minimal, but there are some concerns around fast e-bikes on the trails. Community members suggest traffic calming measures aimed at cyclists to reduce conflicts. Community experts propose that vehicle traffic calming measures also work effectively for cyclists and encourage the installation of rest stations, such as benches and picnic tables, along with intentional areas of path narrowing to slow cyclist

speeds. This would work similarly to curb extensions in roadways that have proved to successfully calm traffic.

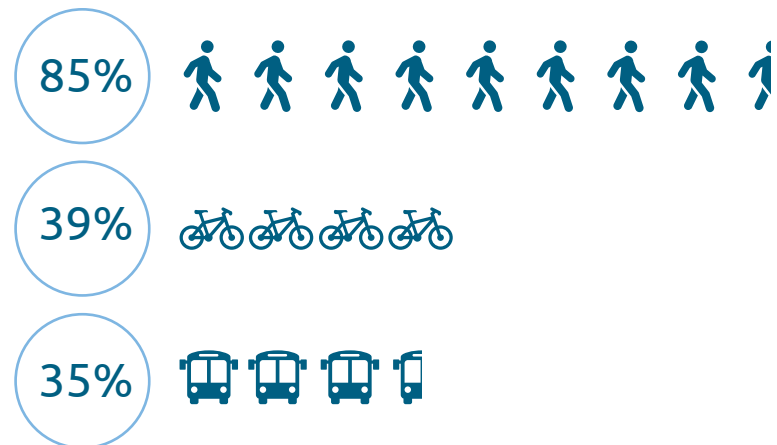
Maintenance of infrastructure, particularly pathways, is another barrier identified by community members. Poorly maintained and dirty pathways make spaces less inviting. Winter maintenance of pathways emerged as a prevalent theme, with the lack of snow clearing and de-icing leading to disengagement during winter months, impacting community connections and social health. By prioritizing winter maintenance, ravine hubs can be utilized to encourage winter recreation and the use of four-season active transportation.

“ There’s a lot of snow and ice, it’s slippery, so most people don’t use the trail in the winter months. However, it would be nice because winter is the time that you really want to get up, get out of the house, do some exercise and walk, but because it’s not maintained in the winter months, unfortunately, it’s not utilized as much.”
– **Salma Ginwalla, Member of the Markbrook Residents Group**

“ We need to invest in continuous winter maintenance where we are monitoring, clearing and cleaning. If we want people to use trails, we’re going to need them to function well in all seasons.”
– **Lanrick Bennett Jr., Executive Director Charlie’s Freewheels and Bicycle Mayor for Toronto**

Connectivity

85% of surveyed community members prefer to walk to greenspaces and ravines, with 39% opting to cycle and 35% choosing public transit. Both public transit and cycling offer opportunities for communities to broaden their travel boundaries and explore the extensive network of city trails and greenspaces. Community feedback suggests that enhancing public transit services and strategically locating transit stops at the entrances of greenspaces and ravines would be beneficial. There is a specific demand within the community for improved and more convenient accessible transit options catering to seniors and individuals with mobility limitations. Additionally, community experts underscore the importance of developing, or improving, cycling tracks that connect ravine trails to the broader active transportation network to ensure that those who want to cycle in ravines feel safe and comfortable accessing them.



Nature

Nature is both a reason that people seek out greenspaces and ravines and a barrier for some residents. While 85% of community members indicate they seek out ravines to connect with nature and experience tranquility, a fear of specific plants and wildlife, including poison ivy, coyotes, and skunks, inhibits access and feelings of safety in ravines. Parents express concerns about allowing children into these spaces unsupervised due to fear of wildlife.

Community members also express concerns about the environmental impacts of human activities in greenspaces and ravines. Community experts emphasized the importance of protecting nature and respecting the rights of all living things. Embracing and celebrating nature is central to the Ravine Strategy, although there is an opportunity for the implementation of the strategy to focus on respecting nature through an Indigenous worldview and to raise awareness about wildlife within these spaces.



I think there needs to be huge awareness and education around the relatives that live in the parks because it's not just about humans. And everything is so human-centric, and it's all about me having access and without really kind of thinking about the impacts upon the land."

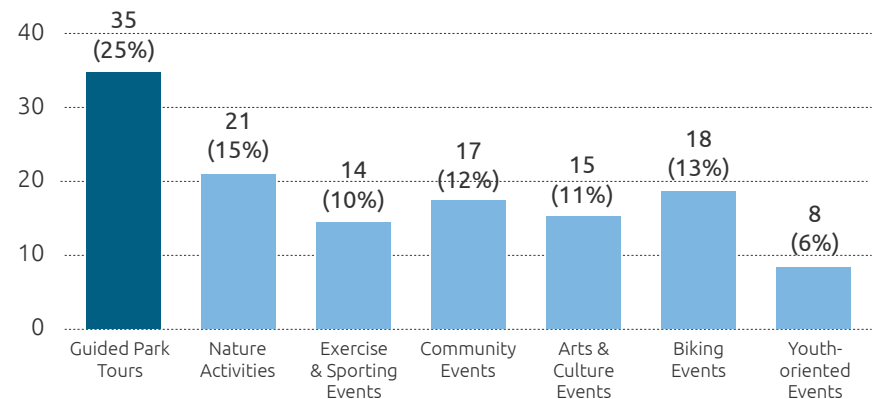
– Carolynne Crawley, founder of Msit No'kmaq and Turtle Protectors.

Community Engagement & Programming

Community members express enthusiasm for the prospect of more programs within these spaces. When asked what types of events or activities would encourage nature and trail usage, the most common responses include guided park tours (25%), nature activities (15%), biking events (13%), and community events (12%) (Figure 3). Ravine programming has the potential to heighten awareness of local nature and introduce newcomers to greenspaces and ravines.

What kind of activities, events, supports or services would encourage you to be active on the trails and enjoy nature?

Figure 3: Types of events or activities encouraging nature and trail usage



25%

of respondents said **guided park tours** would encourage nature and trail usage.



We've held several community events, like ravine walks, that have created an awareness amongst residents of Markbrook Lane about the ravines because prior to these events, a lot of people including our youth were not even aware that such a serene place existed.”

– **Salma Ginwalla and Monika Chopra, Members of the Markbrook Residents Group.**

There is substantial potential for community engagement and programming within ravines to encourage cycling. Active transportation experts emphasize that ravines provide an ideal environment for building cycling confidence away from traffic hazards. David Simor, Director of TCAT, underscores “that the more people cycle in their spare time, the more likely they are then to do it for trips to school, trips to get groceries, trips to the doctor, etc.” Therefore, programs in ravines and greenspaces serve as excellent platforms to engage the community in cycling and promote it as a practical form of transportation.



Recommendations

Based on community insights and a policy gap analysis of the Vision Zero Road Safety Plan, Cycling Network Plan, and the Ravine Strategy, we recommend the following to enhance equitable access to active transportation in Toronto's greenspaces and ravines:

1. Improve Access Points and Wayfinding

Active Transportation infrastructure upgrades should prioritize enhancing wayfinding and ravine access points. Upgrades should aim to minimize entry confusion by improving lighting, enhancing accessibility of entry paths, and increasing ravine signage. The City of Toronto's Parks and Wayfinding Strategy must be expanded to ensure the entirety of the Ravine Loop Trail has consistent and accessible wayfinding so that individuals of all abilities and backgrounds can easily and confidently navigate trails and access ravine hubs.

2. Develop a Winter Maintenance Plan

Develop a comprehensive winter maintenance plan for trails and ravine access points, prioritizing snow clearing on active transportation routes, including ravine trails. The plan should be aligned with the Cycling Network Plan and Vision Zero Road Safety Plan, ensuring prioritization of vulnerable road users while

minimizing environmental impacts in line with the Ravine Strategy. Winter maintenance of trails and bike lanes is imperative for fostering an equitable active transportation network, ensuring that individuals who depend on active transportation have safe and accessible routes throughout the year.

3. Collaborate with Community Organizations

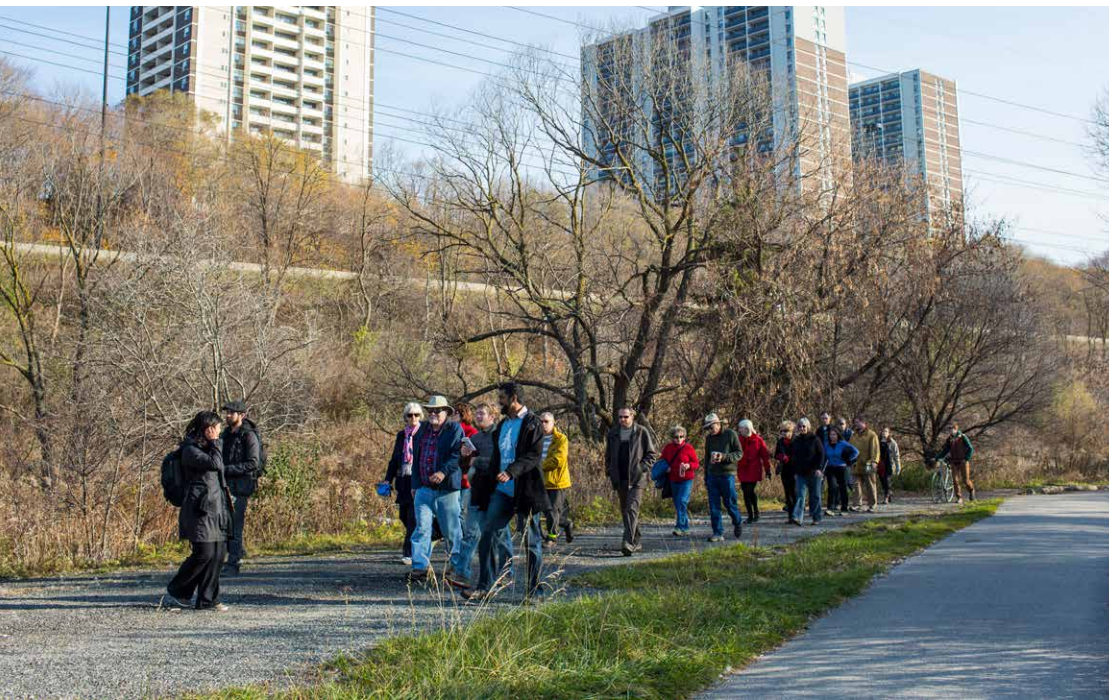
The Ravine Strategy should prioritize developing new partnerships with organizations serving older adults, newcomers, people with disabilities, and other groups who face unique barriers to accessing greenspaces. These partnerships are essential for providing community stewardship and other engagement opportunities directly to those underrepresented in greenspaces and ravines. This will help underrepresented groups become more comfortable and confident within these spaces.

4. Increase Community Engagement with Aspiring Cyclists

The Cycling Network Plan should integrate additional community engagement and programming actions into their implementation plan to enhance understanding of cycling infrastructure, bicycle maintenance, and affordable bicycle access. Additionally, updates to the Cycling Network Plan and the Vision Zero Road Safety Plan should incorporate insights from further public consultations with groups aspiring to become cyclists, addressing underrepresentation observed in previous consultations.

5. Enhance Wildlife and Ecosystem Education

Expand the Ravine Strategy to include additional actions promoting education on respecting nature and coexisting with wildlife in Toronto's ravines through an Indigenous worldview. To achieve this, it is essential to implement multilingual education strategies to make information accessible to newcomers. This will help foster a sense of comfort and safety in ravine environments. Additionally, establishing a Community of Practice with organizations along the loop trail is crucial to collaboratively develop a consistent strategy for activating the loop trail and enhancing nature education.



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