

Smith property Side Trail re-opened!

For those who enjoy walking the popular Smith Side Trail, they'll be happy to see that this trail has been re-opened, as of Feb. 12.

The **Grand River Conservation Authority** is the landowner of this property on Watson Road, and was conducting some forest management work this winter. The work involved cutting down trees within the conifer plantations throughout the property, using heavy machinery, so the trail was closed to the public (Nov. 20 - Feb. 12) to ensure safety during this work. This work took longer than expected, due to the unusually mild winter weather this year.

On your next walk along the Smith Side Trail, you may notice changes to the property due to the forestry work. Some areas along the trail are more open, some rows of pine trees have been entirely removed, there has been some disturbance to the ground, and a lot of small logs and branches left lying on the ground. These will provide habitat for animals in the forest, and eventually decompose, enriching the forest soil.

Thinning plantations increases forest diversity, improves wildlife habitat, and increases resilience to insect pests, diseases, and climate change. This is good forest management practice, and the GRCA regularly conducts forest restoration projects like this, on GRCA-owned lands.



Forest restoration with conifer plantations

When European settlers arrived in southern Ontario in the early 1800s, they cleared the native forest by cutting nearly all the trees, and tried to farm areas that turned out to be not suitable for agriculture. Without trees to anchor, enrich, and shade the soil, many areas became more vulnerable to erosion by wind and rain.

Since the early 1900s, tens of millions of trees have been planted in southern Ontario to increase forest cover. This was initiated in response to environmental problems caused by the low forest cover levels of the late 1800s. These problems included severe soil erosion, extreme flooding and low summer river flows and an overall loss of biodiversity.

Historically, large areas were often planted with only one or two species of conifer trees – especially white and red pine, spruce, and cedar. These are among the few hardy species that can survive in dry exposed conditions, and provided an inexpensive and reliable way to quickly re-establish forests. Over 40 per cent of the 11,500 hectares of forest owned by the GRCA are conifer plantations.

But, establishing these large blocks of conifer trees is only the first step in the restoration of a healthy, diverse forest. Plantation thinning is a management practice used to diversify these plantation forests, and is the next step in the forest restoration process.

“Thinning” means removing some of the planted trees. This allows more light to reach the forest floor, so that other varieties of young trees and shrubs can germinate, such as maple, oak, black cherry, and other hardwoods. It also provides room for the larger trees to grow. The ultimate goal is to establish a forest with diverse tree, shrub, and plant species. Over time, a forest with a variety of tree species, sizes, and ages is established.

Next steps in the forest restoration plan include:

- Ongoing removal of invasive species such as buckthorn and dog strangling vine
- Planting and seeding of native trees in open areas

Other benefits of plantation thinning:

- Improves and protects wildlife habitat, for a greater variety of birds and animals
- Increases forest resilience
- Produces useful timber products - sequestering carbon
- Provides revenue from renewable, sustainable forest products (GRCA uses this revenue for additional forest improvements)

Enjoy your next hike on the Smith Side Trail loop, and imagine what the forest will look like in another 20 years!

Story by Frank Schoenhoeffer, with information from GRCA webpage:

<https://www.grandriver.ca/en/our-watershed/current-forest-projects.aspx#gsc.tab=0>

