

A Regeneration Movement Takes Shape in the Greater Tkaronto Bioregion



by Eric Murphy

The Great Lakes are a marvel. One doesn't need to know that they hold nearly a fifth of the Earth's surface freshwater, serve as a drain for more than 300,000 square kilometres of land, and sustain countless species to recognize the precious place they hold in our ecosystem. You simply have to stand on any spot on more than 15,000 kilometres of shoreline to appreciate just how fortunate we are to be so close to this ancient, life-sustaining gift.

But as incredible as the Great Lakes are, they're not invulnerable. Pollution, particularly phosphorus runoff from farmland as well as waste, and an abundance of plastics from urban centres, pose serious challenges. Lake Ontario, in particular, is facing a myriad of threats, including those posed by [massive new development plans](#). Even before the potentially disastrous Bill 23, Lake Ontario was already absorbing millions of litres of wastewater each year.

Beyond the clear climate need to cut our pollution and emissions, much of Canada's freshwater and soil needs to be healed, and this problem extends far beyond our national borders. For many groups across the world, the answer to this mounting challenge is a holistic process called regeneration.

Initially inspired by regenerative agriculture, a larger regeneration movement has grown from a groundswell of individual organizations that seek not just to regenerate farmland, but also water sources, forests, and even the social fabric of the communities that take part in this work. In Canada, a number of organizations have taken up this cause, including Regeneration Canada and Farmers for Climate Solutions, which focus on the vital role healthy soil and farmland play in our ecosystem.

For our current newsletter, Climate Legacy connected with the [Legacy Project](#), a systems research and education group doing groundbreaking regenerative bioregional work. Their big-picture [7-Generation](#) initiative, which started with a pilot in 2014, combines the modern demographics of more older Canadians than ever before, and the vital intergenerative role they can play as elder stewards, together with the Haudenosaunee philosophy (also referred to as the Iroquois or Six Nations) that actions taken today should benefit those living seven generations from now.

“We have a lot of olders, but we need more elders. People who can reflect on their lives in a way that inspires communities to consider the long-term impact of decisions, looking at all that's come before you and what that means for the future,” says Brian Puppa, Executive Director of the Legacy Project.

The Bioregional Approach

The regenerative focus of the 7-Generation initiative is the “bioregion,” specifically the Greater Toronto Bioregion (GTB). It's essentially the area around Toronto bounded by the Niagara Escarpment on the west, the Oak Ridges Moraine to the north (as well as Lake Simcoe) and east, and Lake Ontario to the south.

The rough bioregional border was established in former Toronto Mayor and MP David Crombie's 1992 report [Regeneration](#), though the concept of unique bioregions is far larger, having been adopted by a number of organizations globally.

[Bioregions](#) aren't politically designated like municipalities or provinces. Drawing on earth systems science, a bioregion is the smallest real-world scale reflecting the bigger planetary system. They're defined by a combination of geography (like watersheds and topography), ecology, culture, and history. In essence, they fit with people's existing understanding of a unique region. A bioregion is the human-scale area in which people can create a regenerative way of life and economies. To take it a step further, once a network has been established in support of their bioregion, they can then collaborate across bioregions to have a more meaningful impact at a far larger scale.

“If you can work at the bioregional scale, that's the scale at which you can regenerate the earth, that's a holistic approach,” says Puppa. Using the bioregional approach, the 7-Generation initiative

connects new and existing projects and regenerative activities within the Greater Toronto Bioregion. This will weave together otherwise separate and uncoordinated actions for both ecological and social regeneration.

“This linking helps people put their small piece of the puzzle in a bigger planetary context, which brings more meaning and purpose to working on small regenerative projects throughout the bioregion,” says Puppa.

The 7-Generation GTB initiative has been chosen as part of the first North American cohort of a global Bioregional Network. They’re working with well-known regeneration leader Joe Brewer, who recently visited the GTB and other bioregions around the [Great Lakes](#). In the EU, [Commonland](#) supports regeneration projects in 20 countries, often at the bioregional scale.

The 7-Generation initiative recognizes the need for *social regeneration* (generations in community) to go hand-in-hand with *ecological regeneration* (community in bioregion).

It has a Group of Seven advisors, including Dr. Dan Longboat of Trent University’s Chanie Wenjack School and Dr. Peter Whitehouse, a neurologist and aging advocate with Case Western Reserve University and University of Toronto. 7-Generation GTB is also bringing together a diversity of organizations and municipalities, including City of Markham, Town of Caledon, City of Toronto, Markham Public Library, Social Services Network, York University, OCAD University, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, and others.

An Intergenerational Dynamic

The 7-Generation GTB initiative draws on the land *and* on an intergenerational dynamic. The need for regeneration reaches beyond our troubled ecosystems. In bringing generations together, learning from and with each other as we face an uncertain future, we can create a kind of “superorganism.” In some Indigenous cultures, they say the best way to make change is to “bring together a fired-up youth with a feisty granny.”

“There’s a growing proportion of older adults in our society, with a lot of skills, knowledge, experience, and caring,” says Puppa. “If you can provide meaningful pathways for older adults to work with young people in community, it would be a tremendous resource.”

Community-building between older adults and young people can be as simple as working together to plant a permaculture garden, but the real vision goes far beyond that. Older Canadians can step up and take on the role of Elder, rising into a meaningful role of support and stewardship for both younger generations and the planet. The Legacy Project has already released guidelines on how one can begin following this path on both [their website](#) and in a [December op-ed in The Toronto Star](#).

The Legacy Project’s 7-Generation GTB initiative is empowering elders to connect their stories into the bigger stories of place and of lifetimes across generations for the wellbeing of all – you, us, and the planet. Legacy isn’t something you leave behind; it’s something you create every single day as you interact with all ages.

To find out more, visit the Legacy Project’s [7-Generation web portal](#).