Hampton Park: An Urban Forest Under Threat



The woods at Hampton Park while on one of the many paths that run through it.

Hampton Park is an old growth forest located in the centre of Ottawa. It features enormous trees, some over 200 years old. It even has three trees, the American beech, red maple, and twin black cherry, that are listed among the National Capital Commission's 150 most Remarkable Trees of Canada's Capital. The park is also home to an array of native plant species and dozens of migratory and non-migratory birds. To me, Hampton Park represents something special, above and beyond its natural beauty, because it's where I grew up, where I took bike rides with my friends, and where I walk my dog. Hampton Park is a huge asset, providing valuable ecosystem services for a community of at least 43,000 people. However, the park faces many threats. An ecological study in 2019 found that the ecological health of Hampton Park was very poor. This is caused by three main factors: increased usage, invasive species, and a lack of government support.

The park, which features a forest, children's pool and playground, off-leash dog park, and baseball fields, serves a large, growing group of people with few nearby alternatives. Consequently, this high level of activity is putting severe pressure on the park. Some common instances are visitors making informal trails, allowing dogs to roam off-leash, even digging holes and adding bike jumps, all which seriously disrupt the soil and the growth of native plant species. There are rules in place against these actions, but since people are not following them, the plants get trampled and new growth does not have a chance to thrive.

A second major cause involves invasive species. There are more than 20 non-native plant and insect species that have been discovered, including aggressive plants like Japanese knotweed, dog strangling vine, periwinkle, buckthorn, and insects like the emerald ash borer. These invaders kill plants and trees, directly or indirectly, by taking over the space, soil, and available moisture, making it harder for the native species to grow. For example, periwinkle, like many other invasive plants, spreads by growing new plants from its roots. It can take over large areas and crowd out native plants. The only way to control its invasion is to dig it out, including the roots and soil surrounding it.

A lack of government interest and involvement is another key issue. Hampton Park is not receiving the required resources and support from the municipal government for sustainable forest management. The City of Ottawa and the National Capital Commission (NCC) are supposed to conduct regular visits to assess the health of the park, but due to staff shortages, they only respond when alerted to issues. Since the government isn't adequately involved, the Friends of Hampton Park, a local volunteer organization, are overseeing the management of the park without any real authority or funds to do so.



Sharon Boddy, the founder of the Friends of Hampton Park and Béatrice Boutilier, a NCC conservation biologist in front of the Hampton Park map.



Local citizens utilizing the green space by walking their dogs through the Hampton woods properly (on-leash and on the path).

Additionally, the declining ecological health of the park has many extensive impacts. In the summer, the park moderates temperature to keep the area cooler. When it rains, the sponge-like effect of the soil prevents the flooding of basements for nearby homes. And, the park also plays a role in improving the surrounding air quality, among other things. Yet, all of these green space benefits are at risk if the park's issues are not addressed. The resulting effects even extend beyond biodiversity. There are also negative impacts on how visitors can use and enjoy the park. Having Hampton Park's forest in the middle of a city is a wonderful opportunity for relaxing greenery and outdoor enjoyment. But, with loose dogs, informal trails and a lack of proper signage, it's not accessible or user-friendly, leaving Hampton Park less able to offer the experience of "getting away from the city".

The Friends of Hampton Park are the park's sole caretakers, serving as great advocates for its health and continuously proposing solutions. They are also very active on platforms like Facebook and YouTube, sharing their work and encouraging more people in the community to get involved. Some of their successful initiatives include removing all of the buckthorn from the park in the past few years and this spring, they're trying to tackle the periwinkle, Japanese knotweed, and dog-strangling vine. They're also trying to restore the native plants by reintroducing over 30 different native ferns, wildflowers, shrubs, and trees. The group even created a marked trail system in the woods to guide visitors away from sensitive or protected areas and recently added official signs from the NCC.



Founder of the Friends of Hampton Park, Sharon Boddy, using an extractor tool to remove the buckthorn in Hampton Park



Kids learning about biodiversity and hugging a tree at Hampton Park



Close up of one of many signs made by kids from a local school to line the path

Furthermore, the Friends of Hampton Park advocate to the City of Ottawa and NCC to start providing more support and better training for their staff. Meanwhile, they work with students, and neighbours to fundraise, work on the park, and educate others on biodiversity and conservation. This means individuals can become involved in many ways. They can join Friends of Hampton Park events like clean-ups and fundraising activities, or, visitors can help by simply following park rules like sticking to official paths, keeping dogs on leashes and trying to stop them from peeing on new growth. Through these efforts and the future plans of the Friends of Hampton Park, the forest will start to see some gradual regeneration, which will hopefully restore the park to its natural state. In turn, it will become an even more beautiful and biodiverse space that is more enjoyable and beneficial to the community.

Personally, I only just discovered the issues affecting my local park, but now that I have, I'll be more aware when visiting and I'll even try to volunteer to help sometimes. I strongly encourage everyone to look into their own neighbourhood parks and cherish them for the beauty and gifts they bring. Perhaps even give Hampton Park a respectful visit to see the impacts that a handful of determined community members can have, in person. Remember that true change starts small. It can start with you.