

High Park Natural Environment Survey

September 2021



HighParkNature.org
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The Natural Environment Survey

Four key open-ended questions were sent to members and supporters of the Natural Environment Committee in August 2021. From this group there were 7 responses.

The same four key questions were posted as an online survey and announced in a High Park Stewards newsletter in early September 2021. From this outreach there were 26 responses.

Total number of responses: 33

Key questions:

1. What aspects of High Park's natural environment are doing well?
2. What changes or actions have been made that you consider beneficial or an improvement?
3. What are your top concerns about High Park's natural environment?
4. What actions do you think are needed to address these concerns?

The responses have been grouped and tabulated and displayed in bar graphs in the *Analysis of Survey Results* section. Selected individual comments are listed in the following section, *Key Themes*.

The primary focus of the survey is the natural environment of High Park. Some responses deal with matters that relate to the park as a whole, such as dogs off-leash and transportation.

Respondents expressed a passion for High Park, as well as support and interest in the work of the Natural Environment Committee and the High Park Stewards.

Many thanks to all who participated, and a special thanks to Sharon Lovett who created the online survey, promoted it and tabulated the results.

What Now?

The survey included a final question "Any other concerns or comments?" One response to this question was "Yes, that this will fall on deaf ears".

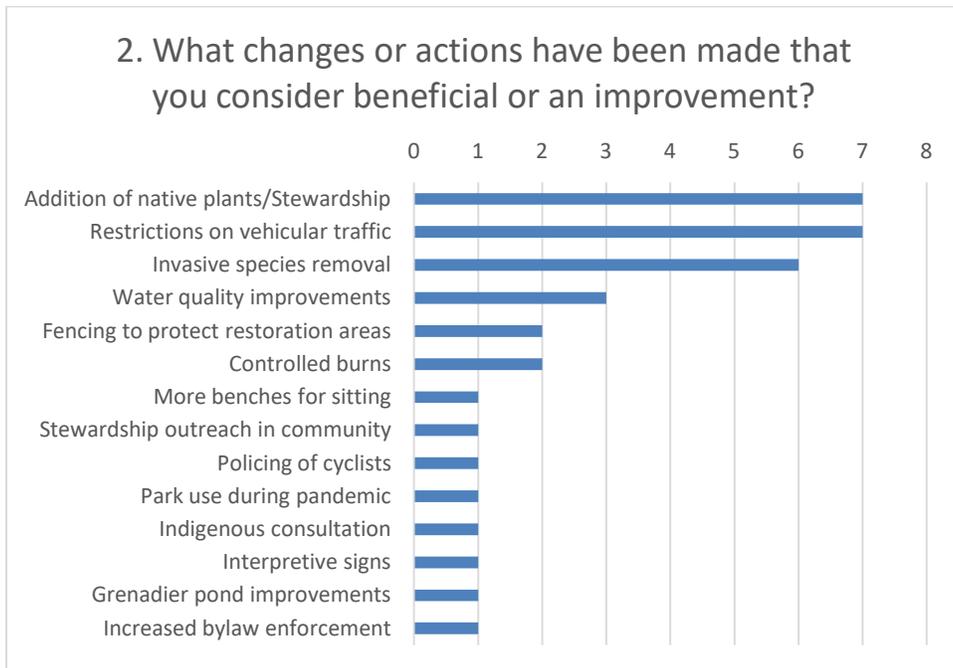
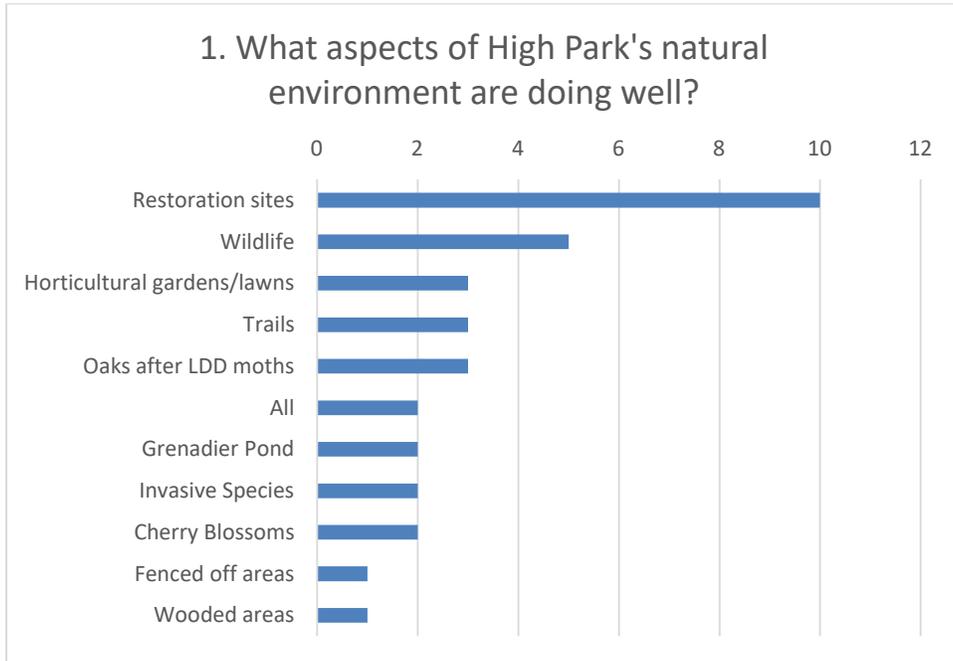
The Natural Environment Committee intends to make every effort to ensure that these concerns reach the appropriate authorities and lead to meaningful actions. We also look forward to engaging more community members in our committee in order to bring renewed strength to our efforts to secure the long-term future of High Park's natural heritage.

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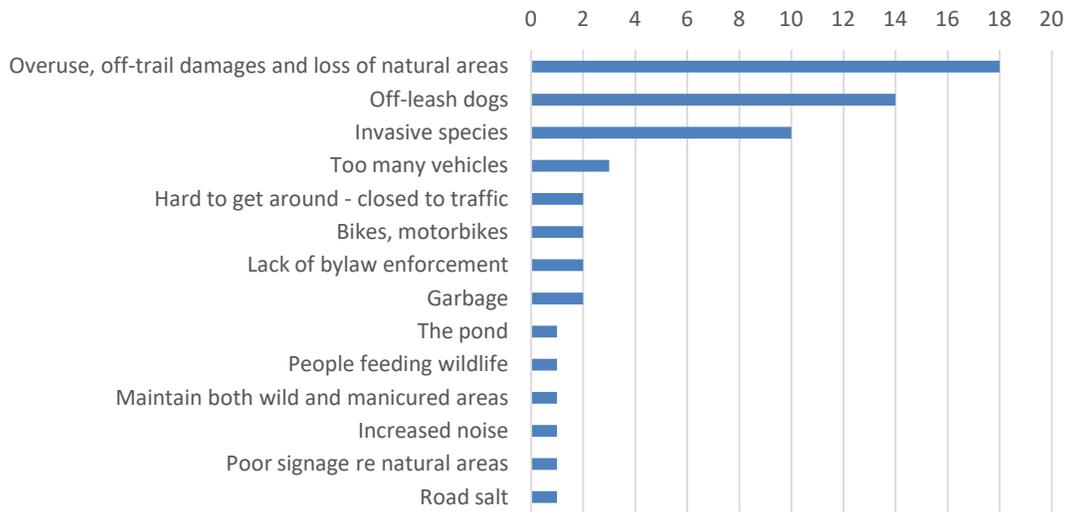
For more information about the work of the High Park Natural Environment Committee, please visit <https://highparknature.org/get-involved-with-high-park-nature/volunteer-in-toronto-high-park/high-park-natural-environment-committee/>

Karen Yukich & Leslie Gooding
Co-Chairs, High Park Natural Environment Committee

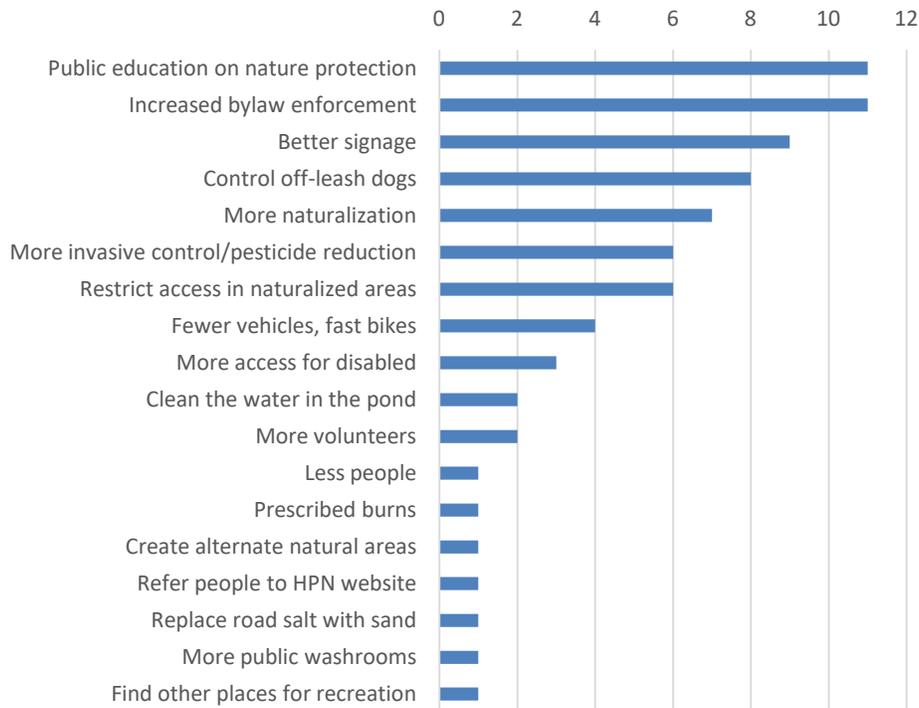
Analysis of Survey Results



3. What are your top concerns about High Park's natural environment?



4. What actions do you think are needed to address these concerns?



Key Themes

1. What aspects of High Park's natural environment are doing well?

Restoration sites

Due to the efforts of High Park Stewards Volunteers (and park staff), the native plantings and removal of invasive species are working well.

The City's "Parks" [Forestry] staff have truly impressive expertise: areas where they've been allowed to apply their skills to eco-restoration (such as, through prescribed burns) seem to respond well.

Wildlife

It seems that there is lots of wildlife. I see many ducks and swans frequenting the ponds, many chipmunks, squirrels, etc.

2. What changes or actions have been made that you consider beneficial or an improvement?

Addition of native plants/Stewardship

Areas that have been fenced off for regeneration, plantings in the savannah

Work of the HP stewards

Invasive species removal

Removing/attacking phragmites (and DSV et al.), removing sugar maples in the centre near the cafe

Volunteers helping to clear DSV, wild grape.

Restrictions on vehicular traffic

Closure to cars over the weekends has been very beneficial for safety of families walking, cycling, naturing, etc.

No cars on weekends is great and should be a permanent consideration - even increasing this to some or all weekdays!

3. What are your top concerns about High Park's natural environment?

Overuse, off-trail damages and loss of natural areas, invasive species

The northeast corner forested areas have a lot of garlic mustard infestation and I'm sure other invasive species.

Invasives everywhere - DSV, phragmites, buckthorn, burdock...

The Oak Savannah is under stress and is a priority to try to keep it healthy; I think invasives are a major challenge; I think we try to do too much to accommodate every interest, at the expense of the more natural areas.

Overuse, particularly of trails and protected areas. Erosion.

Off-trail hikers trample vegetation and compact soil.

Wreck-reaction activities that conflict with the goals of protecting and preserving the natural areas, and that impair the healthy functioning of High Park's diverse ecosystems.

The increase in use year-round due largely to new condo development surrounding park borders and also COVID has been dramatic. People are using park as backyards, cooking, hanging hammocks, pitching tents, in some cases camping overnight, and these activities are not being well monitored.

Off-leash dogs

Off-leash dogs are a serious menace: they damage plant communities by trampling and by compacting soil, they harass and injure wildlife, and their mere predator-scent is enough to deter many species of wildlife from establishing nesting, feeding and sheltering areas even where suitable habitat exists.

Too many dog owners allowing their pets to be off leash outside of allowed areas who end up disturbing or destroying sensitive areas

Feeding Wildlife

Individuals who feed wildlife, including foxes and coyotes, do great harm.

We need stronger messaging about not feeding the birds, squirrels, coyotes etc.

4. What actions do you think are needed to address these concerns?

Public education on nature protection

Inform users of how to take better care of the park so it remains the same or even better for future generations

Perhaps a public initiative to save the park for 2050 or similar that informs people about the longer term impact of misusing it now.

Dedicated city staff resource allocation. More efforts at building public awareness of the value and merits of 'wild nature'.

The Nature Centre should play a more prominent role - providing information to visitors as well as education. If people know about the special nature of this piece of land, they will be more inclined to take care of it.

A ""how to go to the Park"" training session via social media in multiple languages to address this with our diverse communities, same should be up on a YouTube

I think the website [*highparknature.org*] is terrific in trying to educate visitors; however, I suspect we are preaching to the converted. I think we need signs at major sites like the zoo, the ponds, the sports fields, the dog walking areas that encourage visitors to go to the website, to have more visitors understand the many, sometimes conflicting demands put on the park, often by well-meaning people who do not appreciate the larger vision.

More naturalization, more invasive control

More budget to park staff for invasives control, more support for volunteer efforts

More funds for people to remove invasives / replant

If the city would just hire like five full-time students for a few weeks in the spring, they could definitely clear enormous areas of the park and this could make a huge difference. [*re garlic mustard*]

With some good planning and help from many willing volunteers I'm sure this [*garlic mustard*] could be fixed.

THE POND!!! the tall grasses and algae taking over

Restrict access in naturalized areas

Naturalize more areas and restrict human and pet traffic in those areas.

Limit use of areas with significant erosion until plants recover and soil can be stabilized.

The areas that are fenced off seem to be doing better than other spaces.

Better signage

Better signage, particularly at all gates into and out of off-leash areas

Notices to stay on existing trails

More signage (explaining rules AND the sensitive nature of the rare black oak savannah).

Signs!! More signs to give information about the natural environment and direction! Also, warning signs in the Winter and Spring, about icy paths and unkept trails! Signs to stop bike speeders!

As for off-leash dogs everything, I wish the city or park could 1) crack down on it, and 2) install signage everywhere describing the problems with assuming it's fine to have your dog off-leash everywhere.

Control off-leash dogs, enforce bylaws

Close some of the off leash dog trails on the east side of the park so people don't think half the park is off leash; better signage and enforcement; education for dog owners

Better by-law enforcement (I.e. not one-off "blitzes")

Protect High Park's natural areas through vigorous bylaw enforcement.

Enforcement of bylaws. I was effectively told when complaining to officers and/or 311 that nothing will be done to manage off leash dogs unless one becomes aggressive and/or bites someone

Maybe sort of like park rangers, who go up to people feeding bread to the ducks and tell them to knock it off. This is how national parks in the US do it. And ticket people, if it's illegal. If it's not, it should be.

Prevent bikers from using paths.

Perhaps there should be clearer rules about safe use of the dog park space that puts the onus on walker safety rather than dog freedom. Leashes should be required everywhere in the dog park, even the trails leading to and from dog hill. Off leash should be allowed on dog hill only.

A meeting with the K9 and a separate training session with dog owners who are not on the K9 website

Other Comments

Lovely trails in natural surroundings; spacious walkways in the paved road system; neighborly feel to the park

The slow pace of establishing a proper balance of some incompatible land uses; the limited appreciation of the 'wild' character of some of High Park's nature heritage.

Designation by the province as an "Area of Natural and Scientific Interest" acknowledges the importance of High Park's rare plant communities. Sadly, the inestimable value of these communities, and of the diverse ecosystems inter-relating within High Park, does not necessarily coincide with "doing well." Protection of High Park's natural environment is still woefully inadequate.

I urge the City to make the health of High Park's natural environment a high priority. High Park represents a unique merger of ecosystems within our community, a treasure not to be found elsewhere in Toronto. It's a serious error to compromise High Park's natural environment with events and facilities that could be sited in locations where they would not damage sensitive ecosystems. One can find suitable places to build a skating rink, tennis court, softball field, etc. in an urban environment. A black oak savannah cannot be relocated. One may negotiate the development of new recreation or green space, or new bike paths in residential areas. One may not negotiate a "compromise" with wildlife: destruction of their habitat is a matter of life or death. Please advocate for adequate resources to rehabilitate, restore and preserve High Park's precious natural environment.