



Alliance Parc Deschênes

*The Future Deschênes Park:
Priorities for a Management Plan*



August 2025

FUTURE DESCHÊNES PARK: Priorities Toward a Management Plan

The “future Deschênes Park” in Gatineau's Aylmer sector comprises undeveloped green spaces located between the Deschênes Rapids and Fraser Road, bordered to the north by Lucerne Boulevard and to the south by the Ottawa River (map: <https://www.parcdeschenes.ca/en/carte>). The area includes a wide variety of habitats and species and bears traces of the history of the city and the region: occupation by First Nations since time immemorial, the travels of explorers and fur traders, and industrial development using the river's hydraulic potential.

The site of the future Deschênes Park is part of the traditional unceded territory of the Anishinaabe; it served as a camp site, gathering place, and trading post between nations.

The future park has a special place in the lives of citizens in the surrounding neighborhoods and visitors who increasingly discover its beauty and richness. Thanks to initiatives by community organizations and citizens, the park's natural and historical heritage is well documented, and knowledge about it is constantly growing. Hundreds of species of flora and fauna have been recorded here, many of which are rare in Quebec, and some of which are protected. This small area (approximately 36 hectares) is home to forests, wetlands, riparian habitats, and rocky moors.

The future park is visited by a wide variety of users: hikers and cyclists, birdwatchers and nature lovers, cross-country skiers, skaters, snowshoers, artists, solitary walkers, and families. However, it is affected by harmful human impacts: makeshift camps, campfires, dumping of heavy waste (construction debris) and light waste (containers, plastics), excessive speed on bike paths, trampling of habitats by inappropriate activity, and others.

With a view to the ongoing protection of nature and the eco-responsible management of the site, we have established a series of objectives for the management of the future park based on respect for the environment and the promotion of sustainable recreational and educational uses. Priority actions are also proposed to document and maintain up-to-date knowledge about the park and to establish and manage eco-responsible activities.

This document was prepared with input from scientists, historians, citizens, and civil society and public organizations. Consultations with representatives of Indigenous peoples, which have not yet taken place, are planned in order to obtain and integrate their expertise and perspectives in the near future and create a broad and inclusive vision for the future of Deschênes Park.

The Alliance Parc Deschênes (APD) aspires to official recognition by government authorities in order to sustainably protect this natural space and its unique ecosystems. Adequate legal protection is essential to promote better awareness of the links between natural, cultural, and historical heritage, and to define the park's role as a place of memory, biodiversity, and resilience in the face of contemporary challenges.

A Rationale for preservation and protection of Park Deschênes

Following strong community mobilization, and thanks to information shared by community leaders favoring the protection of what would be called “the Deschênes forest,” the City of Gatineau voted unanimously in July 2020 to cancel the sale of the property announced earlier (Le Droit, July 7, 2020).

The Park Deschênes Alliance (APD) was subsequently founded in December 2020 to ensure the conservation of the site it identifies as the “future Deschênes Park”: the natural area located between the Deschênes Rapids and Fraser Road in Gatineau, including Conroy Island. The Alliance has set itself the following mission:

*To conserve and enhance the biodiversity and habitats
of this entire natural area while ensuring its recreational and educational uses.*

This document aims to summarize findings on the site's heritage value and identify objectives for achieving the APD's mission, in anticipation of the development of a management plan and action plan announced by the City of Gatineau. These documents will clearly define the levels of protection, sustainable use, and restoration targeted for natural habitats within the park.

This area along the Ottawa River is home to a wide variety of habitats and species, including some that are rare in Quebec, many of which are protected. The area bears living traces of the history of the city and the region, including occupation by First Nations since time immemorial, the voyages of explorers and fur traders, the development of industries using the river's hydraulic potential, and traces of dwellings dating back to the 20th century.

Official recognition by the authorities of the value of this natural space in an urban setting and its importance in relation to the heritage of Gatineau and the region would have a significant impact on citizens' quality of life. The richness of its biodiversity and habitats near the Ottawa River justifies its conservation. Furthermore, it is vital to include the remains (ruins) at the Deschênes Rapids in the park's conservation area, both for their historical value and nearby archaeological resources, and for the role of this area during the nesting period and migratory stops for various species of migratory birds.

The City of Gatineau has adopted a biodiversity charter and is working to implement the associated Action Plan, which aims to preserve and restore biodiversity and natural environments within its territory, involving all relevant stakeholders. In particular, the city wishes to adhere to the international target of the COP 15 Biodiversity Framework: 30% of land and oceans protected by 2030 to counter the decline in biodiversity. The future Deschênes Park represents an exceptional asset, a unique ecosystem essential to regional biodiversity and a concrete contribution to Quebec's Nature Plan 2030, something the City of Gatineau should be proud of. Its conservation and preservation in its natural state would be in line with the best sustainable development practices recognized by our various levels of government.

A Rich Biodiversity

The richness of the ecosystems and species in the future Deschênes Park has been documented by studies dating back more than a century. These include surveys conducted by botanists, naturalists, and other scientists; research and documentation recorded in archives and data centers; and, more recently, citizen science, including computerized observation entry tools.

The park consists mainly of forests, which account for 83% of the total area. In addition, the site also includes 9% grassland, 6% shrubland, and 3% permanent water. An average density of 300 trees per hectare was recorded during an ecoforestry inventory in 2023-25. An inventory of ecosystems and species by the Club des ornithologues de l'Outaouais in 2012-2013 listed 797 species of fauna and flora throughout the park, confirming its biological richness.

In Deschênes Park, 90% of the tree species identified are native. Some are uncommon species, such as the shagbark hickory, white oak, and Carolina hornbeam. Species most frequently seen are silver maple, red oak, bur oak, and eastern cottonwood. The coexistence of the three oak species in this forest—red oak, bur oak, and white oak—is a remarkable ecological asset, unique along the riverbanks in the Gatineau region.

The APD ecoforestry inventory also revealed a wide variety of plant life, recording 211 species of herbaceous plants, 28 species of trees, and 29 species of shrubs. It is estimated that the forest sequesters 193 tons of CO₂ per hectare. The oak forest in the western part of the park (Deschênes Forest) is home to trees between 100 and 200 years old, remnants of the forests that once covered the area.

In addition, the presence of water is significant, enhancing biodiversity: the ecoforestry inventory indicates that 31% of the site's area is occupied by marsh areas, mostly seasonal and in wooded areas. The Lamoureux Marsh, where water is permanently present, is the best known of these wetlands.

Deschênes Park has several rocky outcrops, including extensive areas of flat limestone rocks. These environments typically alternate between drought and flooding, which limit tree growth and favor specialized plant and animal communities.

Deschênes Park also contains sandy and rocky river shores, essential habitats for a variety of animal and plant species. These largely unspoiled riparian environments are crucial as ecological corridors connecting land and water, providing favorable conditions for biodiversity.

The rich diversity of mushroom species in the area has been documented by outings organized each fall since 2022 by the Outaouais Amateur Mycologists Club and the Alliance Parc Deschênes. In 2023, some 50 participants identified 70 species of mushrooms in the western part of the future park.

Conroy Island, at the Deschênes Rapids, has long been recognized as a rich area for bird watching which attracts many amateur ornithologists. The island is a nesting area for five species of migratory waterbirds, including the Great Egret, for which this is one of seven nesting sites in Quebec. The rapids' open water all year round provides winter habitat for birds like the Common Goldeneye and the Common Merganser.

Benefits of the Future Deschênes Park

Reducing Impacts of Climate Change

The future Deschênes Park is a healthy natural environment which contributes to mitigating the impacts of climate change. Wetlands and riparian areas act as natural filters, reducing the risk of flooding in neighboring areas and destructive erosion of vegetation and shrub cover, and slowing the impact of runoff by reducing discharge velocity. A healthy forest cools the atmosphere and surfaces, filters atmospheric particles, and absorbs pollutants. Carbon storage is an important contribution of forests.

Fostering Healthier Communities

The medical and scientific community increasingly recognizes the link between natural spaces with high biodiversity in urban areas and the physical and mental health of the population, urging us to protect this type of environment. A local nature park such as the future Deschênes Park facilitates social connections and improves social connectivity, health, and well-being. There is abundant evidence that contact with nature contributes to physical and cognitive health, promoting better concentration and reducing the incidence of cardiovascular disease, depression, and stress.

Maintaining Heritage and Historical Values

The future park is located on traditional Anishinaabe (Algonquin Nation) land that has not been ceded by treaty. It bears witness to Indigenous life and history, serving as a summer camp site and a place for nations to gather and trade. Artifacts have been found during archaeological research for over a century, attesting to multiple uses of the land throughout the ages. The prehistoric archaeological potential of the park's western edge has been identified and documented in the Archaeological Potential Study – Ottawa-Gatineau Region (Arkéos, July 2008) and subsequent potential studies (GRAO, 2015).

The history of the park and the neighboring village of Deschênes reflects important themes of Quebec and Canadian heritage—the evolution of transportation, industrial development, and protection and restoration of nature. Traces of our history remain on the site: centuries-old forests and trees the path of the old road connecting Aylmer and Deschênes; foundations and walls of dwellings along the riverbanks; remnants of the dam and industrial facilities at the rapids; and archaeological discoveries remaining to be made.

Threats to the Integrity and the Preservation of Deschênes Park

Climate Change and Natural hazards

Erosion, particularly the floods of 2017 and 2019, has significantly degraded the riverbanks near the Deschênes rapids, and this degradation continues. The absence of fences and erosion of the banks create increased risks of collapse threatening the safety of users. The effects of climate change are increasing risks of deterioration: more severe and frequent floods or droughts, higher temperatures, changes in

seasonal flow patterns, tornadoes, and other severe weather events could continue to have significant impacts on the park's ecosystems and visitor safety.

Damages from Uncontrolled Human Activities

As a natural space in an urban setting popular with a large population, the future Deschênes Park is currently regulated only by the good judgment and behavior of users. There are no official trails, user code, or regulations to encourage respect for this natural environment. Without official recognition or status, this outstanding natural space is at risk of deterioration, affecting all components of its environment. Since the 2020 pandemic, there has been an increase in illegal forest camps and fire pits in the zone, which seriously jeopardize the conservation of the whole natural area. Vandalism, illegal camping, vehicles, dogs off leash, illegal garbage dumping, including toxic wastes, are significant threats.

Political Decisions and Urban Development

The planned demolition of the dam at Deschênes Rapids poses a threat to the integrity of the park: in addition to removing vestiges of an important industrial past, this project would have a devastating impact on the nesting bird colonies on Conroy Island, on the shoreline landscapes and their growing forest, and on the aquatic environment. A rare stand of white oaks and potential archeological treasures would be threatened.

Residential development in neighbouring areas could have an impact on the conservation and protection of the future park. The land adjacent to the north, for example, is zoned for high-density development (10-story buildings), which could, if not appropriately regulated, affect the unprotected ecosystems of the future park.

One challenge faced in working toward protected status and regulation of activities is the multiple landowners in the future park —City of Gatineau, Quebec's Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, and private owners (individuals and real estate companies). This will require partnership and communication between the parties, as well as transparent collaboration agreements to achieve a common goal.

Priority Objectives of a Management Plan

The Alliance has two overall objectives for the future park: protecting nature and promoting sustainable recreational and educational uses of the park. Based on these objectives, the following measures have been defined for the Management Plan:

- Preserve natural habitats in terrestrial and wetland environments and protect wildlife and plant species throughout the park
- Monitor and protect populations of rare and species at risk

- Ensure the protection and enhancement of the park's historical heritage (e.g., industrial remains at the Deschênes Rapids, archaeological resources)
- Promote sustainable use of the park by communicating its natural and historical richness and overseeing activities
- Develop an educational component for the park in collaboration with local educational institutions and partner organizations.
- Improve and refine knowledge about the park's natural and historical heritage: fauna, flora, various habitats, and history.
- Recognize and promote the ecosystem services and benefits of this natural space for the population of the city of Gatineau in a context of climate change and biodiversity loss
- Ensure security of visitors through environmentally friendly safety measures
- To achieve the above objectives, obtain formal and permanent status for the park and, accordingly, ensure appropriate regulation by working with all stakeholders concerned.
- Work in partnership with the City of Gatineau (in particular the Ecological Transition Service for the Biodiversity Action Plan), the Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, other landowners, and associations that share our objectives (e.g., the Boucher Forest Foundation, CREDDO, Ottawa Riverkeeper, neighborhood associations, organizations and groups with environmental expertise associations).

Note:

This document summarizes a French-language version which includes additional detail and a complete list of references. It can be found at <https://www.parcdeschenes.ca/en/ressources>

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