Policing Urban Natures: Conservation Officer Work in Ottawa and Toronto, Canada

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Abstract
Drawing on the results of interviews and access to information requests, we explore conservation officer work in two urban regions in one Canadian province (Ontario). Specifically, we examine the work of the federal-level National Capital Commission (NCC) in Ottawa and the provincial-level Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). Applying Jessop, Brenner and Jones’s model of socio-spatial relations, we show how nature plays a different role in NCC and TRCA policing depending on the places their conservation officers work in, the kinds of territorial boundary maintenance in which they engage, the scaling of their activities in various jurisdictions, and the policing networks that they are part of. In assessing the place of nature in conservation officers’ work, we contribute to debates about how the boundary between nature and the urban is produced through regulatory practices.

Introduction
Conservation officers now work in and around several Canadian cities, where provincial or national parks run through business districts or comprise the greenbelt and greenways that border municipalities. In urban areas, conservation officers not only engage in ecology-oriented work, such as regulating land developers who pollute parklands, but they have also become responsible for policing so-called nuisances such as homelessness and public sex. Here we demonstrate that the work of conservation officers does not simply entail protecting ‘nature’ from ‘the urban’. Instead their work involves the production of urban natures, requiring boundary-making practices in which ‘natural’ spaces are constructed as ‘pristine’ and in need of protection from urban sprawl. In this context, conservation officers condone some human activities while others are framed as against nature or out of order.

Our purpose is to examine how urban natures or ‘metropolitan natures’ (Gandy, 2002) are produced through the policing practices of conservation officers in two agencies: the National Capital Commission (NCC) and the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority (TRCA). These two agencies serve as trend-setting models for conservation work in Canada. In the nation’s capital, much authority has been vested in the NCC, a Crown Corporation with federal-level jurisdiction and the owner of 10% of the land in the Ottawa–Gatineau region. The downtown core has many NCC properties running through it that conservation officers police. In these sites, the work of conservation officers has

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focused on expelling ‘nuisances’ such as men having sex with men in public and homelessness. Operating in the urban environment, NCC officers have significant autonomy in enforcing their own regulations: the NCC Property and Traffic Regulations (2007). Through these regulations, the NCC officers aim to manage the capital’s image, cultivating a miniature vision of Canada in Ottawa. Because of the places in which NCC officers carry out regulatory activities, the territories that NCC officers seal off and the networks they work in, ecology-related regulation becomes secondary in NCC work. The primary focus is on order maintenance projects that disperse human activities considered to be offensive.

As the largest metropolitan area in Canada, and with a long history of inventive social and environmental planning, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has also played a key role in reframing conservation officer work in Canada. In seeking to alleviate intensive development pressures in the region, protected greenbelt areas have been established that conservation officers are responsible for policing. These lands are areas in which private encroachment is to some extent tolerated (Luymes and Tamminga, 1995; Erickson, 2004; Fung and Conway, 2007). Consequently, conservation officers engage in the work of boundary maintenance by trying to convince land users to comply with environmental regulations. This work is undertaken by the TRCA, which has provincial jurisdiction and enforces regulations under the Conservation Authorities Act. The TRCA is chiefly concerned with managing ‘fill’ — regulating land use that could damage ecosystems.

While NCC and TRCA officers are responsible for policing, the territories they work in, ecology-related regulation becomes secondary in NCC work. The primary focus is on order maintenance projects that disperse human activities considered to be offensive.

While the NCC is a federal agency oriented toward preservation of monumental public spaces that cut through the downtown, expelling those elements that fail to conform, the TRCA is oriented toward ecological protection in a green space shared by different municipalities and over which public and private interests quibble.

Through a critical case study analysis, we demonstrate how policing by Ottawa’s NCC and TRCA officers is based on variable understandings of ‘nature’ and its relation to the urban environment. In examining how conservation officers negotiate the line between nature and the urban during their work, we apply Jessop et al.’s (2008) model of socio-spatial relations, examining the ways that conservation policing is embedded in different places, oriented toward enclosing different kinds of territories, advanced at different kinds of scales, and interlinked in a multifaceted policing network. We show how the organization of conservation work depends on the places that officers assume stewardship over. This entails recognizing how their work is informed by historically distinctive projects for the production of urban natures. While the policing of urban spaces that cut through the downtown, expelling those elements that fail to conform, the TRCA is oriented toward ecological protection in a green space shared by different municipalities and over which public and private interests quibble.

This article is organized in four parts. First we examine literature on conservation officer policing through the lens of the production of urban natures. Then we offer a note on method and the access to information requests we used to obtain conservation officer occurrence reports. Next, we provide comparative case studies to illuminate how place, territory, scale and networks shape NCC and TRCA conservation officer work. The comparison of the NCC and the TRCA shows how the place of nature in conservation officer policing depends on the kinds of territorial boundary maintenance that conservation officers enforce.
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engage in, the particularities of their different jurisdictions and the policing networks they are part of. We conclude by reflecting on debates about the ways in which urban natures are produced (Parés et al., 2013) through the work of agencies such as conservation authorities.

Conservation officers and the place of nature in policing

Most existing literature on conservation officers associates their work with rural areas. Existing research is directed toward traditional conservation activities, such as the policing of poachers who encroach on rural parklands (e.g. Forsyth, 1994; Pendleton, 1998). There has been a growing emphasis on how game wardens are also involved in law enforcement activities in the United States (Carter, 2004; 2006; Eliason, 2011). For instance, Hermer (2002) studied the role of game wardens in regulating a range of conduct in provincial parks in Canada and state parks in the USA. However, even as research on conservation officers has started to examine their policing function, there is a tendency to take the spatialities of conservation work for granted. With the exception of Shelly and Crow (2009), almost no literature has explored how working in different legal jurisdictions and on different geographic territories shapes what these officers do.

The underlying premise in the literature on conservation policing is that this kind of work is located within 'nature'. It is presumed that nature is a discrete space that is cleanly separated from the urban. Yet this distinction between the human and the natural has been questioned in recent geographic literature. As suburban land developments push into the areas surrounding cities, and provincial and national parks are created near urban zones, the boundary between the natural and the urban is reconfigured, leading to changes in the work of conservation officers. Conservation officers have become responsible for producing urban natures, from small city parks to sprawling greenbelts that extend seamlessly into suburban developments. Conservation officers are not simply responsible for the protection of natural environments; in fact, through their work, they actively draw the line between the 'human' and the 'natural' in ways that enable them to maintain the environment as 'pristine'.

Public parks can be viewed as urban natures (Desfor and Vesalon, 2008), spaces built on cultural understandings of what nature should be, and which regulate the encounter with 'nature' in specific ways. The work of policing urban natures is predicated on a conservation discourse characterized by the compulsion toward ‘purification’, drawing lines between the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ and establishing ‘a partition between the natural world, which has always been there, a society with predictable and stable interests and stakes, and a discourse that is independent of both reference and society’ (Latour, 1993: 11). Conservation work should thus be viewed in the context of a larger cultural historical project, which entails specific understandings of humans and their place in nature. The project of creating parks and greenbelts that started in the nineteenth century has been oriented toward establishing an unspoiled space where humans can retreat into sublime contemplation of the natural. Along these lines, the public park has been designed to ensure that everything was in its proper place; the placement of every object was conducive to the production of a pristine whole and a corresponding sense of propriety in human conduct. As Joyce (2003: 227) notes in his history, modern public

3 In Calgary, provincial-level conservation officers work in the Fish Creek Provincial Park in the middle of the city. In Jasper, federal-level conservation officers work around the small municipality. In Vancouver, conservation officers patrol Cypress Provincial Park. Similar officers will be working in Toronto’s newly established Rouge Park. In these jurisdictions, conservation officers work in parks and ravines, and on beaches and river islands. They use fines as an enforcement mechanism. Many conservation officers are peace officers under Canada’s Criminal Code, which means that they have powers of search and seizure but do not carry handguns.
parks were often established as a means of engineering social improvement, prohibiting everything that interfered with ‘rational and uplifting walks’ such as gambling, dogs, drink, swearing, dirty clothes and games. The regulations governing public parks have consequently defined nuisances as any kind of ‘bad neighbour’ that generates a claim about disruption or contamination. Conservation officers ensure that the purity of the ‘natural’ environment is upheld.

With growing urbanization, this compulsion to regulate the urban and the natural through public parks and greenbelts has become increasingly sophisticated. The kinds of natures produced by conservation officers are variable, depending on the places in which their work is embedded, the territories which they seek to enclose, the scales at which they operate and the networks that they are a part of. To conceptualize the parks, greenbelts and greenways that conservation officers work in, we borrow from the framework developed by Jessop et al. (2008) in distinguishing between different spatial dimensions of conservation policing. This typology helps us to avoid reliance on dichotomies such as urban and rural, and instead allows us to analyze the elements that make up those categories. Rather than framing such concepts from on high, we show how they play out on the ground through mundane conservation practices.

First, we examine how the work of conservation officers is embedded in specific places. Conservation officers are responsible for establishing a ‘measure of groundedness’ through seeking to govern the manner in which socio-natural relations crosscut a specific location (Escobar, 2001: 140). Rather than viewing places as fixed locations, we examine how public parks are embedded in broader processes of urbanization (Jessop et al., 2008: 390). The distinctive location of public parks in the urban environment is significant for the work of conservation officers. To the extent that parks are located in a circumscribed downtown core, the manner in which they are regulated is different from the suburbs and amalgamated areas, where the distinction between the public and the private is open ended. While NCC property is situated throughout the downtown core of Canada’s capital city, conservation officers in the GTA are responsible for policing larger areas.

Second, we examine how conservation officers seek to enclose public parks. Distinct processes of bordering, parcelization and enclosure mark the public park as a territory (Blomley, 2004; Jessop et al., 2008: 393). It is bound up with specific conceptions of how such space should be used. While NCC officers adopt a view of the park as public property and are oriented toward the expulsion of ‘nuisances’ from within the park, the TRCA is oriented toward policing greenways which are based on a more porous understanding of public space and become involved in boundary maintenance, negotiating the edge between public and private space, and urban and natural space.

Third, we examine how the work of conservation officers is advanced at distinctive scales. Scale refers to processes of hierarchization and often is related to jurisdiction (Jessop et al., 2008: 393). While the NCC operates on a federal scale as a Crown Corporation and has some autonomy in governing public parks over the municipalities, the TRCA operates as a provincial agency, and is more enmeshed in the intra-scalar politics of the amalgamated region (Taylor et al., 1995). While the role of conservation officers under federal jurisdiction is to cultivate a sense of national identity through symbolic flower displays and other such spectacles, the provincial jurisdiction of the TRCA requires more focus on regional development goals.

Fourth, we examine the policing networks that conservation officers are a part of. Network analysis focuses on interconnectivity and interdependence (Jessop et al., 2008: 393). Insofar as conservation officers are responsible for regulating such urban natures, their work is part of a mixed economy of policing that bleeds beyond the park limits. Conservation officers can be viewed as part of a larger project of ordering space using law, and they are drawn into carrying out regulatory activities by other agencies in the network (see Table 1).

While the ‘natural’ space produced in the capital region’s park cultivates a strong sense of monumentality, focused on maintaining order in an ‘official’ state space, the
regional development model advanced in the GTA is oriented toward brokering compromise in a pseudo-public space in which the surrounding community maintains a proprietary interest. Focusing on the places in which conservation officers carry out regulatory activities, the territories that conservation officers seek to enclose, the scales at which they operate, and the networks that they are a part of, helps anchor our analysis of the production of urban natures in conservation work.

### Research method

The NCC and the TRCA serve as trend-setting models for conservation work. We have selected the NCC and TRCA as cases because they are atypical (Yin, 2003) and unique and therefore potentially indicative of trends in conservation policing in Canada. As model agencies, located in the nation’s capital and the largest urban region in Canada, their increased involvement in urban regulation is an indicator of what the future of conservation work in Canada might look like.

Though they are not conventional public police, which are traditionally more difficult to collect data from, these agencies were not easy to conduct research with. When we started this research, the NCC would not allow interviews with conservation officers (they have since allowed a half dozen interviews after repeated requests for access). As such, we developed a research strategy using access to information (ATI) requests to obtain stories that officers write about their work. Much of what conservation officers do in a day involves writing down stories about work in occurrence reports and it is these occurrence reports that we obtained using ATI.

ATI is a way of making public organizations disclose information that would not otherwise be released, to examine the texts not meant for public circulation. Use of ATI also comes with limits. For example, there are many ways that ATI requests can be stalled. Amber lighting refers to the tagging of a request as politically contentious, which leads to the request being delayed. It is also difficult to ascertain whether the documents released comprise a representative sample, whether key information was redacted, or whether certain key documents have been removed from the disclosure. Despite these barriers, we used ATI to produce a longitudinal dataset about the patterns of conservation officer work. This strategy is sequential, insofar as data from ATI requests can be used in forming subsequent interview questions. Using 15 requests, we obtained 1,015 NCC occurrence reports and public complaints from 1995 to 2010 regarding a variety of incidents (including public sex and homelessness, which we focus on below). We analysed the time and location of tickets and warnings, as well as the character of actions during occurrences reported in officers’ stories. We also coded for references to place, territory, scale and networks. During an interview, an NCC officer stated ‘I’m not sure what else we can tell you . . . the occurrence reports pretty much sum up our approach’, which provides confidence that occurrence reports shed light on conservation officer work.

### Table 1: Spatial elements of conservation officers’ work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Capital Commission</td>
<td>Canada’s capital, downtown core, suburban, 175 km of recreational paths, 90 km of parkways</td>
<td>Parks, greenbelt, greenways</td>
<td>Municipalities, police agencies, security agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto and Region Conservation Authority</td>
<td>Forests, streams, edge cities, 2,506 km on land and 961 km on water</td>
<td>Greenbelt, greenways</td>
<td>Provincial, municipal, Regional planning bodies, municipal, provincial</td>
</tr>
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work. We also used the ATI materials to create probes for interview questions. Interviews with NCC officers focused on the different spatial elements of their work. The NCC would only allow interviews with four officers. We use the interview excerpts as supplements to the document analysis.

The TRCA allowed for a ride-along in the jurisdiction described below, longitudinal interviews with a lead officer and the disclosure of the court files that comprise the case below. The court proceedings against the defendant occurred in the Ontario Court of Justice. The case is under appeal and the name of the defendant cannot be cited. Court files disclosed by the TRCA underwent redaction as per Ontario’s freedom of information legislation. The files include TRCA correspondence with the landowner and TRCA studies of the land use in question. The example exemplifies the TRCA’s approach to nature and the differences between the TRCA and the NCC in their respective regions.

The National Capital Commission

The NCC is a Crown corporation operating at the federal jurisdiction. It owns parks and properties that run through the downtown core of Ottawa. These properties also include many of the parks along the Rideau Canal and Colonel by Drive, and the parks along Island Park Drive, Ottawa River Parkway and Rockcliffe Parkway, extending east, south and west from the downtown core, and into the hills of the Gatineau Park. Because of the way the park system is territorially bounded in the city, its federal jurisdiction and its network relationship to other police agencies, the NCC possesses powers that are not shared by conservation officers elsewhere. NCC officers have assumed a distinctive style of stewardship over the Ottawa park system, oriented toward the expulsion of ‘nuisance’ activity from park space in the downtown core.

To understand place and conservation work in Ottawa, it is necessary to recognize how the NCC parklands are the product of a specific cultural historical project, which adopted specific assumptions about the relationship between humans and the natural environment. The contours of the NCC park system now inside the city were initially planned in the early twentieth century under ‘city beautiful’ concepts, which aimed to bring nature back into the city. Ottawa parklands were designed by Frederick G. Todd, who worked for the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted was the creator of Central Park in New York City. In designing Ottawa’s public parks, Todd drew from Olmsted’s philosophy, arguing that ‘there is always the temptation to make a show so that people will see that something is being done, whereas the most pleasing way would be to have everything done in such a way that one would suppose that nature herself was responsible’ (cited in Gordon, 2002: 33). Todd’s aim in constructing public parks, at that time, was to expunge the ‘human’ element, establishing an area where the public could contemplate pristine ‘nature’.

The circumscribed role of ‘nature’ in the urban environment was entrenched when the park system was taken under federal jurisdiction in 1927. In seeking to imagine this space as a miniature version of Canada, the NCC lands would play a symbolic role in nation building (Besmier, 2003). The park system was cordoned off as an official space, where citizens could experience a sense of national identity. The management of these lands was reframed under the discourse of regional planning in 1956 when the federally funded NCC took over from the Federal District Commission, with powers to ensure development of the new National Capital Region. However, aspirations toward spatial purity and monumentalism remain embedded in the landscapes of Ottawa’s parks today.

Given the location of NCC park properties near the downtown core, conservation officer work has been directed toward expelling so-called nuisances that threaten to despoil the natural landscape. Consequently, the concerns of NCC officers in the downtown core are associated with police concerns for order maintenance. NCC officers
are trained by Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers in self-defence, investigative practices and the writing of occurrence reports. However, the concerns of NCC officers are also associated with a discourse of conservation. To the extent that conservation officers presume stewardship over a pristine space, they are granted discretion in identifying nuisances and expelling them from NCC lands. For instance, section 18 of the NCC Property and Traffic Regulations (2007), used to regulate park sex, states ‘no person shall use any blasphemous or indecent language, or behave in an offensive manner, on any Commission property’. Any conduct that is construed as in violation of section 18 is defined as a nuisance and against the intended uses of the park. This is augmented by anti-camping regulations. Section 38, used to regulate homeless people, states ‘no person shall camp, picnic or erect a tent on any Commission property not designated’. The following examples of regulation of public sex and homelessness show how NCC officers work to enclose the territory, separating it from the urban environment through tactics of dispersal. This can be contrasted with the work of TRCA officers in Toronto, who are more concerned with negotiating the boundary lines of public and private space through the advancement of an ecological lens.

NCC policing of public sex: nuisance dispersal

NCC officers patrol NCC lands in and around Ottawa–Gatineau on foot or in trucks. One main task is to intervene in conduct that they consider to contaminate the park under section 18. A central duty of NCC officers is to police park sex, which takes aim at men ‘cruising’. Picking up for anonymous park sex is construed as a nuisance. Most of the parks where this public sex takes place are lands that the NCC (or predecessor agencies) purchased in the earlier half of the twentieth century, extending west and east along the Ottawa River. Though these parks such as Rockcliffe Park and Britannia Park were built with the idea of bringing nature into the city as an antidote to industrialism and as a sanctuary for families, the use value of all their nooks and crannies has been extended in novel ways, including by men who enjoy public sex.

NCC officers target men having sex with men in part because of the number of public complaints about encounters on bike paths and condom wrappers scattered in the bushes. Several occurrence reports in our sample are public complaints to the NCC or NCC responses to public complaints. The NCC has also installed video surveillance cameras in at least one park along the Ottawa River (Mendoza, 2006). Officers make patrols in trucks that allow them to access computers, databases and background information on people they stop. The following are examples of occurrence reports that NCC officers prepare after monitoring sexual activity in Ottawa parks:

7 June 2009, Bates Island: ‘while on foot patrol, observed two males together on picnic table . . . intercepted, advised of regulations, issued warning, expelled, not enough evidence to charge since they were just starting’.

27 June 2009, Rockcliffe Park: ‘while on foot patrol observed two males masturbating each other . . . intercepted, advised of regulations, issued tickets, expelled’.

In addition to following men who have sex with men in parks, NCC officers patrol the internet and monitor the chat rooms that men use to set up their park encounters. NCC officers write down what they learn about in the chat rooms using their occurrence reports, and communicate it to other conservation officers and to other policing agencies in Ottawa. They organize sweeps (a mass bust of men having sex with men in parks). Based on the information provided in their reports, one of the chief activities of NCC officers appears to be the routine observation of male masturbation:

26 July 2009, Ottawa River: ‘while on patrol observed one male watching another male masturbating. Intercepted, explained regulations, issued one ticket and one warning, expelled’.
6 September 2009, Bates Island: ‘while on foot patrol, observed one male sitting in his vehicle masturbating . . . intercepted, advised of regulation, issued tickets’.

Occurrence reports are catalogued at headquarters. NCC officers leaf through their colleagues’ reports about where to find the action before starting the next shift. The reports thus engender future policing efforts. Conservation officers not only target specific conduct, but precise spaces within urban parks (concealed areas like bushes and bluffs). In one report from June 2006, the officer is behind a tree waiting for action to begin to intervene: ‘while on foot patrol observed several men in the bush. Could not get a clear view of illegal activity, except for one . . . intercepted person with his pants down. Issued warning (not enough for a charge)’. The description is couched in the language of criminal law though conservation officers do not have such powers themselves. In another report from August 2006, after receiving a phone complaint from an NCC trail user about a ‘disgusting mess’ of condom wrappers, NCC officers discuss how to respond. The head conservation officer then asks a group of others over email if they are able to do ‘a little enforcement’ and anything ‘aside from doing more intensive brush clearing’. Men cruising in parks are treated as contaminants of the pristine environment.

NCC officers are (‘pragmatically’ in their words) trying to move the men out of the parks. As one NCC officer describes, ‘Sometimes we stop the same person doing the same thing five six times a month. It’s repetitive’. For example, in April 2009 ‘while on foot patrol observed five individuals in a circle masturbating . . . intercepted, advised of regulations, issued tickets, expelled’. And in June 2009, ‘while on foot patrol observed two males doing oral sex plus one male watching . . . intercepted, explained regulations, issued tickets, expelled’. The pattern ‘intercepted, explained regulations, issued ticket, expelled’ is repeated in most occurrence reports. Rather than permanent removal, the configuration of place, territory, scale and network demands promotion of public order, which takes the form of dispersing nuisances such as public sex from NCC jurisdiction.4

NCC policing of homeless people: nuisance dispersal

NCC conservation work also ensures that the park is only visited and not inhabited by humans. A dispersal-based orientation is evident in NCC officer policing of homeless people too. For instance, in June 2003, one conservation officer ‘observed one of our regulars sleeping in the flower beds. Couldn’t wake him. Had Ottawa Police Service come. Fire department came. Had to use a pole to wake him up. Expelled’. NCC conservation officers coordinate with Ottawa Police Service (OPS), private security, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and other agencies — they are part of Ottawa’s urban policing network. The following reports are suggestive of the many agencies involved:

30 April 2009, Plaza Bridge: ‘report about homeless sleeping . . . not NCC land. Belongs to Parks Canada. Advise to call OPS or Parks Canada’.

28 April 2009, Confederation Park: ‘received message from construction company there was vagrants sleeping, defecating around his job site. He said he would like us to take a look and explained that we would do our best in resolving the problem’.

As one NCC officer puts it, ‘if we are going to do a blitz, we bring joint patrols’. Officers from these agencies share occurrence reports, further evidence of networking. As with public sex, concerns about who to regulate are generated by complaints to the NCC. For instance, in July 1999, there is a ‘report from (a store owner) about four male vagrants

4 Conservation officers have access to different laws, such as land use regulations that are specific to their organization, resulting more in the use of tickets, rather than criminal sanctions. Fines operate to curb the frequency of an activity without subjecting it to criminal law. Yet more NCC officers have training in security management instead of ecology-oriented programs, reflecting the order maintenance orientation of the NCC.
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sleeping in the courtyard. She said she wanted them moved, didn’t look good for the tourists’. The policing of squatters extends into the greenbelt areas as well. In May 2009, for example, Ottawa residents write the following note to the NCC:

I am not sure to whom this complaint should be directed . . . our property backs on to the greenbelt. My husband and I were walking one of the regular trails last night around 8pm and we came upon what we believe to be a homeless person’s dwelling. They had cardboard assembled in the trees, and a campfire going. Could you please tell me if this situation is something that can be rectified by the parks persons who patrol the greenbelt?

In response, the NCC sends a patrol to ‘clean up’ the area. This idea of ‘cleaning up’ the parks is indicative of the NCC approach to dealing with homeless persons, who are treated as undesirable objects to be removed from the parks during certain hours. This ‘cleaning up’ approach is suggestive of how NCC officers deal with nuisance in the greenbelt and in the downtown. For one NCC officer, ‘We have the downtown parks, there are lots of tourists coming, we don’t need people passing out and making messes . . . we try our best to clean things up, make it a decent place’. The management of homeless people and their belongings as garbage is common with NCC officers. For example, in May 1999, the NCC officer writes ‘vagrants and shelter to be cleaned-up’.

For NCC officers in Ottawa, conservation work is oriented toward the expulsion of nuisances that are construed as contaminants. Things either look out of place or like they belong. The work of conservation officers can thus be described as nuisance policing. Public sex and homelessness defile the park’s image as a pristine space. The carving out of this pure space demands vigilance in warding off all kinds of activities that are ‘against nature’ in a normative sense.

As we have shown in analysing the policing of park sex and homelessness, sections 18 and 38 do not allow NCC officers to do more than move people along, which is a task that the NCC performs when called on by other agencies in the policing network. The NCC works closely with the OPS and RCMP in dispersing ‘nuisances’ from public parks.

Their position in the urban policing network of Ottawa creates demand for the NCC to regulate nuisances insofar as they are always responding to public complaints and calls from other agencies. The regulation of nuisances does not conform to typical expectations of conservation work. As one NCC officer put it, ‘more than half of what I do is this stuff . . . I wasn’t expecting it to be as rock n’ roll as it is . . . you come from dealing with natural resources stuff and get into quasi-police work when you’re in town, so I was surprised with the amount of that stuff you have to deal with’.

The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

Whereas NCC officers report that more than half of their work involves order maintenance, TRCA conservation officers note that most of their job involves environmental regulation. As one TRCA officer put it, they think of themselves as ‘first responders to environmental damage’. This reflects a different kind of ‘purification’ work, one not oriented toward order maintenance. Rather than focusing on regulation of disorderly conduct within the park — such as public sex or homelessness — the TRCA is oriented toward maintaining the boundaries between public green space and private development. This reflects the porous

5 Conservation officer policing in Calgary is similar to the case of the NCC in Ottawa. Gentrification of the downtown east side has led to dispersal policing by Calgary’s Fish Creek Provincial Park conservation officers. Homeless people are pushed out of Calgary’s downtown into river parks and then pushed out of river parks by the Fish Creek conservation officers. Fish Creek officers map hot spots too. The occurrence reports are similar to the NCC reports. For instance, in April 2009 a conservation officer ‘went looking for homeless’. In June 2009 a conservation officer wrote ‘homeless camp and individual removed from park’. And in September 2010, an officer writes ‘homeless camping in park . . . removed’.
boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ space in the amalgamated regions around Toronto (Keil, 1998; Desfor and Keil, 1999; Keil and Graham, 2006). With intensifying development pressures on the urban periphery, there is a need to make certain that pristine natural spaces continue to exist to promote the health of the region.

Again, the place of conservation work is the product of a specific cultural historical project. The distinctive ‘ecological’ frame of the TRCA is rooted in the shift toward regional planning and government during the 1950s and 1960s. Metro Toronto, which brought the City of Toronto together with 12 villages and townships in 1954, was at the forefront of this movement (Magnusson, 1981). The need to develop an agency responsible for conservation management was apparent from the beginning, as Hurricane Hazel hit Southern Ontario that same year, destroying the homes of thousands but also drawing attention to land use and water table vulnerabilities. The provincial government established the TRCA to acquire land in flood-prone areas to build infrastructure and control the flood plain. There have been attempts at greenbelt planning in this region, although these are often outpaced by leapfrog development (Fung and Conway, 2007; Sandberg et al., 2013).

One purpose of the TRCA is to protect people and property adjacent to flood-prone areas should another Hurricane Hazel happen. The TRCA acquires flood-prone and ecologically sensitive areas along the Humber River and further north into the forests and townships. As Desfor and Keil (2000) note, these preservation practices not only extend regional flood control but they provide recreational spaces. While the NCC parklands around Ottawa were built by urban planners who promoted a pristine notion of nature in the city, TRCA lands have been formed through the lens of scientific management of ecosystems. TRCA officers work in conjunction with ecologists, environmental engineers and planners who track ecological shifts in the GTA. In this approach to regional planning, the GTA is treated as a bioregion (Taylor et al., 1995). The 1992 report from the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront extended this ‘ecosystem approach’ to regulation based on a sense of integration between nature and the urban.

Under the modern scientific discourse of ecological management, the greenbelt in the GTA is treated as a natural space requiring protection to ensure the health of the metropolitan region. But while the ‘public parks’ protected by the NCC are cordoned off in many ways, the emergence of modern greenbelts and greenways is oriented toward cultivating ‘connections’ between the human and the natural worlds (Erickson, 2004; Fung and Conway, 2007). Hence, the report from the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront (1992: 179) argues, ‘the essence of greenways is connections — not simply connecting recreational areas through trails, but connecting wildlife habitats to each other, human communities to other human communities, city to country, people to nature’. The work of ‘purification’ here is a process of trying to get the greenbelt’s neighbours to comply with environmental regulations.

Like all conservation authorities in Ontario, the TRCA has a set of regulations under the Conservation Authorities Act (1990), specific to its region. The Act is a legal knowledge (Valverde et al., 2005) insofar as it mimics law but incorporates ecology, geography and geology. The Conservation Authorities Act is non-binding, with a maximum $10,000 fine. TRCA officers attempt to encourage property owners to comply with the Conservation Authorities Act, meaning numerous consultations with property owners to ensure their use of fill abides by law. TRCA officers can also invoke the Federal Fisheries Act (1985) when activities they encounter infringe on any lake, river or stream containing fish. The Provincial Offences Act of Ontario (1990) also intersects with their work when the TRCA pursues violations in court.

8 However, TRCA conservation officers lost their peace officer status in 2006. They no longer have the power to make a search and seizure without a provincial warrant.
Separating bad neighbours from the natural

The GTA is an intriguing region in terms of the division between the natural and the urban. The ring outside of Toronto follows a polycentric pattern of development; the TRCA work in the wetlands, parks and floodplains that developers see as sites for growth. Our example focuses on an individual property adjacent to the Humber River. The Humber River is part of the regional flood plain. Below we describe one example of TRCA work that exemplifies the limits of compliance as a regulatory mechanism for achieving urban ecology. The property in question bordered on the Oak Ridges Moraine wetland near the city of Vaughan. Vaughan is a suburban city stretching out from the GTA that has experienced rapid development. The area includes the Elder Mills Forest range and is regulated by the Conservation Authorities Act (1990), such that no fill may take place in the area without a permit from the Conservation Authority. TRCA officers work along the rivers and meadows that make up the Oak Ridges Moraine, which are being encroached upon by the GTA. This encroachment started to occur in the latter half of the twentieth century, but was accelerated under the Conservative provincial government of Mike Harris in the mid-1990s (Keil and Boudreau, 2006).

The TRCA had previously considered purchasing the land, given the proximity to the Humber River, which is considered to be a sensitive area. In 2005, the property owner was alerted about the TRCA’s Fill, Construction and Alteration to Waterways regulation (1990). The letter from the TRCA specified all the steps that needed to be taken (an environmental impact assessment, a 30-day evaluation period) and the land use and fill allowable under the TRCA regulations. The property owner did not have permission from the TRCA to dump fill; the TRCA indicated they would not allow any proposed intensification of use and had made several consultations to attempt to garner consent. This ecology-related regulation is reliant on officers’ ability to be persuasive. It is policing based on garnering consent with non-binding guidelines using fines as the primary enforcement mechanism. The task of TRCA conservation officers has been to ensure that bad neighbours do not contaminate the ‘purity’ of nature. TRCA officers demarcate a threatened ‘nature’ from an encroaching ‘urban’, thus rendering nature as an object that is to be protected from edge cities (see Hubber and Currie, 2007).

In November 2006, TRCA staff were forwarded a complaint regarding fill. The fill was for a parking area large enough to hold 40 or more cars. Fill was going over the edge of a bank and into the Humber River. Over 50 tandem loads had been pushed down the slope toward the Humber River in August and October 2006, an estimated 1,200 m$^3$ of waste. In April 2007, the TRCA officer met with an Ontario Justice of the Peace requesting a Provincial Offences Act search warrant for the property, to obtain photographs and samples of the site. TRCA enforcement officers took notes and pictures. The TRCA officers visited again in April 2007 with ecologists, engineers and planners to document erosion in the slope and damage to the Humber River.

During the search, the TRCA officer observed that the fill materials included concrete, garbage, skids, tires, metal and glass. The planner wrote that ‘the fill material did not appear to be clean . . . more likely should have been destined for a disposal facility’. This fill did not take place in accordance with environmental regulations or with due notice to the TRCA. The fill added about 5 m of material, which was eroding and cracking, in contravention of the TRCA’s Valley and Stream Corridor Management Program. No TRCA permits had been obtained. The embankment became unstable and as a result ‘constitute[d] a high risk to both human safety and asset integrity’. The property owner had also dumped material into the oxbow connected to the river and the wetlands. In their assessment, the TRCA engineer focused more on the composition of the fill, while the TRCA ecologist assessed the reduced biodiversity of the valley forest. The Federal Fisheries Act (1985) could have been invoked given the proximity to the Humber River.

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9 Fill, Construction and Alteration to Waterways – Metropolitan Toronto and Region, RRO 1990, Reg. 158.
but the TRCA decided to pursue a provincial offense. The TRCA lawyer then sent a note to the property owner indicating that the TRCA would seek restoration of the site and that the property owner would be held financially responsible.

The TRCA decided to pursue legal action to force the property owner to restore the site. In court, a contractor acted as a witness and reported he saw another contractor pushing the fill over the edge with a bobcat. He said the fill was waste from new subdivisions near the city of Vaughan, an irony not lost on the TRCA officers who associate development near Vaughan with encroachment on the greenbelt and the Oak Ridges Moraine wetland. In the pictures produced as evidence from the investigation, there were water bottles and paint cans littering the banks of the Humber River.

The TRCA officers submitted evidence pertaining to the prior notice, the flood plain and high-quality forest designations of the land. The property owner was charged under section 28(16) of the Conservation Authority Act in the Ontario Court of Justice and was found to be in violation of that section. The Justice ruled that the property owner ‘did unlawfully cause, suffer or allow development in the form of the placement of fill’. In the decision, the Justice ruled that the property owner will ‘restore and stabilize the respective areas from which the fill is removed to original contours and grades’. If the property owner does not do so, the Justice stated, the TRCA is allowed to enter the property and have the fill removed and the area restored; the defendant is liable for the cost. In the court ruling, the Justice could have imposed a fine of $10,000 and three months in jail. The Justice argued, ‘Aesthetically speaking, the area is scarred, and appears unusable’. There is an ecological rationale in the ruling:

Although this property is privately owned, society in general is increasingly becoming aware of the cascading nature of environmental damage, and the possibility that small acts in small places can have far reaching and long lasting effects to the environment we all share. It is important that the general public understands the responsibilities that we, even in our positions as private property owners, have to this shared environment. And for that reason a penalty that I impose should not be a minimum penalty in this instance.

The penalty was $6,000, and the cost to restore the site could be upwards of $1,000,000, though the property owner pursued an appeal. Nevertheless, this example demonstrates how nature occupies a particular role in TRCA policing and its relation to boundary maintenance (Jessop et al., 2008) and their ‘stewardship’ role in attempting to prevent bad neighbours from contaminating the ‘purity’ of the natural. This example also demonstrates the importance of jurisdiction and networks in conservation officer work, which we reflect on further below.

TRCA conservation officers are not situated in a policing network that requires them to engage in nuisance dispersal as NCC officers do. TRCA shared patrols are with ecologists not criminal law enforcement officers. The TRCA only has access to non-binding rules and they can only encourage compliance. TRCA officers have advocated for access to laws that would allow them more regulatory powers, since their compliance approach to policing depends on the good will of the violator to follow the TRCA rules. Compliance requires the party being policed to agree to rules; hence TRCA officers must make attempts at persuading property owners and land developers to comply with environmental regulations. As a workaround, TRCA officers have started to use probation orders to try to enforce compliance. Probation orders allow the TRCA to distribute additional fines to ‘bad neighbours’ who refuse to restore damaged sites.

Discussion and conclusion

Through a comparative study of the NCC in Ottawa and the TRCA, we have examined how conservation policing reorders and patrols the boundaries of urban natures. The
work of conservation officers involves more than simply protecting a ‘pristine’ environment from human encroachment. Conservation officers are continuously re-establishing the line between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ forms of human activity. However, in confronting intensifying urbanization in the downtown core and in amalgamating regions, these conservation areas are far from ‘pure’ spaces. Conservation officers cultivate distinctive kinds of urban natures in their work.

Rather than operating with a reified notion of the urban and the natural as most existing literature on conservation officers tends to, we have sought to understand the spatialities of conservation work. Applying Jessop et al.’s (2008) model of socio-spatial relations, we examined how conservation work is embedded in a specific place in the urban environment, seeks to enclose territory, is framed at different scales and is enmeshed in a web of policing networks. There is variation in conservation officer work depending on the urban areas that make up their jurisdiction.

The NCC is responsible for establishing clear boundaries demarcating public parks as official state spaces within Ottawa’s downtown core. Consequently, the work of conservation officers is oriented toward identifying and expelling ‘nuisances’ from within the park. Conservation officers in Ottawa regulate conduct such as park sex and homelessness. These activities are treated as offensive to the public and ‘unnatural’ contaminants that are incongruent with the ‘natural’ environment and, in the words of the NCC, must be ‘cleaned up’. The dispersal of ‘nuisances’ is carried out following a federal mandate to provide a miniature version of Canada in and around Ottawa, which results in the preservation of parks as symbolic spaces under which ‘natural environment’ and ‘national identity’ blur. Ottawa’s historic planning has resulted in a less intensive ecological focus in its greenbelt and greenway projects (Erickson, 2004), which still manifests itself in the day-to-day work of NCC conservation officers. The maintenance of a ‘pristine’ space involves confronting nuisances within the park and policing the behaviours that bleed beyond the park limits. NCC officers are entangled in a policing network, working with the RCMP and the OPS to ensure that urban order is maintained. The urban natures enacted through NCC work are selectively inclusive and exclude certain forms of conduct (e.g. public sex, homelessness) that officers define as nuisances.

The TRCA is responsible for policing the greenbelt that wraps around the amalgamated regions of the GTA and the greenways that cut through it. Compared with the NCC, the TRCA focuses on conservation and restoration of ecosystems that have been damaged by land development and sprawl. In the outer GTA and its greenways, the division between ‘public’ and ‘private’ space is porous and the work of conservation officers is oriented toward boundary maintenance. In confronting the intensifying processes of urbanization on the periphery, conservation officers seek to ensure that developers and other bad neighbours do not encroach on the ‘pristine’ space of the greenbelt. The TRCA is just one agency attempting to make certain that the ecologically minded greenbelt and greenway projects in the GTA are not undermined by the encroachment of developers (also see Fung and Conway, 2007; Sandberg et al., 2013). This project is advanced on a provincial scale, in the interests of orderly regional development. Consequently, the work of TRCA officers is oriented toward an ‘ecological’ perspective, involving networks with natural scientists such as geologists, ecologists and geographers rather than with traditional police agencies.

Conservation agencies are involved in the production of different urban natures. We have shown how this work can be situated through the spatial lenses of place, territory, scale and network (Jessop et al., 2008). Rather than situating the work of conservation officers in ‘natural’ space, we have argued that conservation officers shape parks and greenbelts as ‘pristine’ through their boundary-making practices. With the development of increasingly specialized and multiscalar arrangements governing ‘urban’ encroachment into the ‘natural’ environment, the regulatory work of conservation officers has become an important factor in producing and reinforcing urban natures.
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