

Dog Stranglers in the National Park: Ecology and Politics in the Rouge Valley

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In April, 2012, the Federal Government formally pledged to create a new “National Urban Wilderness Park” in the Rouge Valley. In many respects, the proposed Rouge Park is a very novel “national park” entity. For example, it clearly does not pass as a wilderness, situated as it is in the middle of the densely populated Greater Toronto Area, and it therefore offers significant challenges to Parks Canada’s framework prioritizing preservation and ecological integrity. In addition, unlike many other national parks, the Rouge Park is quite an “organic” institution, in that its creation is, in large measure, the product of extensive lobbying by the Rouge Park Alliance, one of the many non-profit organizations concerned with various aspects of the watershed’s ecology and politics. It is not surprising, then, that Parks Canada moved rather quickly away from a discourse of “urban wilderness” toward a new moniker for the Rouge: “the people’s park.”

As public consultations and other Parks Canada preparations are still underway to transform the Rouge from proposal to Park, it is hard to know exactly what impact nationalization will have on the place. Some observers are optimistic about the “uploading” of management responsibility to the Federal Government, about the rationalization of political jurisdiction, and about the stronger protection against development that the Park may afford. Others are concerned about future relations between the vibrant grassroots volunteer community currently involved with the Rouge in interpretation, restoration and wildlife monitoring, and the sometimes rigid Parks Canada bureaucracy: what will the official “people’s park” do to the unofficial one? Others, deploying Parks Canada’s mandate, are using the opportunity to pressure for more emphasis on preservation in the Rouge; still others are wondering how the Rouge will fare in the face of \$30 million cuts to the Parks Canada budget.

Rather than address this constellation of issues and concerns directly, this presentation will take as a metonymic trajectory a particular ecological relationship that is of great significance in the Rouge Valley, one that will both affect and be affected by the creation of the National Park: that between human beings (*Homo sapiens*) and dog-strangling vine, or DSV (*Cynanchum rossicum*). DSV is considered (by some humans) to be one of the top ten “invasive” plant species in Ontario; the particular pattern of development and emparkment in the Rouge’s recent history, combined with its particular location at the intersection of several transportation and utility corridors, has provided an ideal habitat for the fast-moving, fecund, virtually predator-less plant. Thus, at the same time as various groups of humans may be actively creating the conditions for the realization of certain kinds of place-desire in the Park, DSV is busily doing much the same thing: remaking the Rouge in *its* own image.

Following recent scholarship in multispecies ethnography and (more-than-) human geography that emphasizes the active, productive agencies of plants in the construction – and in this case, contestation – of places, the presentation will consider the ways in which DSV and human beings currently interact in the Rouge Park, and how this interaction might challenge Parks Canada’s ideas about “the people’s park.” Issues raised will include: the implication of the discourse of “invasives” in the practice of nationalism, and especially of park nature-nationalisms; the history and biology of DSV and the science and (generally ineffective) industry of its eradication as part of the Rouge’s repertoire of naturalizing practices; the typically plant-like liminality of DSV as both agent and landscape element, which allows it to appear in and disappear from human view depending on the discourse in which the viewing takes place; and the kinds of struggles that may be engendered with DSV, and multispecies senses of place created, in different views of what the Rouge National Park should become.