

# Saving the Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park

Morning File, Thursday, October 8, 2020

OCTOBER 8, 2020 BY [SUZANNE RENT](#)

---

## Views

### 1. Saving the Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park



Aerial view of the Sandy Lake – Sackville River Regional Park. A coalition of 27 organizations is working to give official status for the regional park and expand the park with another 1,800 acres. The area is also on the list of growth centres in the HRMs regional plan. Photo: Skyline Studios

There is a 1,000-acre regional park that lies between Hammonds Plains Road and the Sackville River that many people don't know about. Sandy Lake Park was first identified as having potential for a regional park in 1971. That's when the Metropolitan Area Committee on Planning identified Sandy Lake, along with six other areas, for proposed regional parks. The other six areas — including McNabs, Hemlock Ravine, and Long Lake — are all now popular parks in the city. Yet, Sandy Lake was never formally designated. For the last few years, the [Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park Coalition](#), which is made up of 27 groups, has been working to formalize the status of Sandy Lake Park, save it from development, and expand the park by another 1,800 acres. Karen Robinson is the co-chair of the coalition. She says:

It's interesting to look at it and see how the other six are all parks we know about, use, and love and Sandy Lake has been the best-kept secret, from a park's point of view, in the city.

Robinson says there have always been small groups working to protect the area. But it was in 2013 when Armco, which owned a parcel of the land near Sandy Lake, did a clear cut, that area residents really started to organize and learned plans for Sandy Lake as a regional park fell off the table. The coalition got stronger over the last few years, getting the word out and scientists on board to study the biodiversity in the area.



The recommended boundary of Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park in a community context.

The Sandy Lake Conservation Association has a [comprehensive timeline of all the events about Sandy Lake](#). There's been development in the area over the years and more attempts to make Sandy Lake a regional park. Sandy Lake (listed as Jacks Lake) is listed in the regional plan as a regional park. The Bedford Lions Club raised \$150,000 to create Sandy Lake Beach here in 2001. In 2006, the 1,000 acres, which are owned by the HRM, along with the Bedford Lions beach, were identified as the Jacks Lake Regional Park, but that park still has no official designation. Karen McKendry, the wilderness outreach coordinator with the Ecology Action Centre, which is part of the coalition, calls the park a "Schrodinger's Cat kind of park."

The coalition is also working to save Sandy Lake from development. While the park is listed in the regional plan as a regional park, it's also on a list of growth centres ([click here to see the list of growth centres on page 40 of the regional plan](#)). The coalition wants Sandy Lake removed from that list. There are private owners of land in the area, including Clayton Developments, which now owns the land that was clear cut by Armco in 2013. The coalition put together a 241-page submission for when the regional plan undergoes review ([click here to read that submission](#)).

People use the park now for recreation. They swim and boat in the lake and hike in the woods. The HRM provides a parking lot, some signage, garbage cans, a lifeguard station, and changing rooms. There is an informal network trail that people experienced with the area know well. McKendry is a trail runner and has been to the park many times. She says it's unlike so many other parks in that you can access old growth forests just steps from the parking lot. Says McKendry:

The woods there are astounding. It should be on par and have the same recognition the Backlands is getting and Blue Mountains already has. It's an urban oasis. This is a place where we could spread out during COVID. This is a place where we could be doing adventure therapy. This is where you could have guided nature hikes to connect people with nature. It's an underutilized park but some of the characteristics that make it amazing would be degraded if you're not serious about this whole thing. It's like a half-completed job.

Acquiring that additional 1,800 acres will accomplish a lot, including protecting three tributaries connected to Sandy Lake; preserve large swaths of old growth Acadian forest, including some trees that are more than 200 years old; leave about 600 drumlins undisturbed; prevent increased flooding of the Sackville floodplain; and protect a diversity of wildlife, including reptiles, endangered woodland turtles, and more than 100 species of birds. That area that was clear cut in 2013 is part of the additional 1,800 acres. The coalition says if this area is protected, that clear cut land could rejuvenate into healthy Acadian forests.



Hemlock stand at Sandy Lake. Photo: Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park Coalition

In 2017, the coalition invited Dr. David Patriquin, a retired professor of biology from Dalhousie University, to visit the park and do a flora survey. After that one visit, Patriquin visited more than 20 times for field trips and continues to do so. He records his observations at the website [Sandy Lake and Environs](#).

Sandy Lake is also close to Blue Mountains-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area. McKendry says modelling in the [Halifax Green Network Plan](#) show three wildlife corridors have been identified there that could help animals, anything from salamanders to moose, access the Chebucto peninsula. The Green Network Plan identifies Sandy Lake as one of the last three large greenspaces in the HRM.

Sandy Lake is also the watershed area for the Sackville River, which the [Sackville River Association](#) and its president, Walter Regan, have worked to protect. Salmon make their way from the Bedford Basin, down Sackville River, and into Sandy Lake. McKendry says someone reported seeing a mature salmon jumping in the lake recently.

Robinson says there's a danger, too, in sharing word about the park and what makes it unique.

As we put it on the table and more people hear about it and they start coming here and we want people to come here, but we need to have it organized and managed. Otherwise, it will be loved to death.

The coalition has been working to get the attention of all levels of government to come see the park and work to protect it. Says McKendry:

I've been out there with city councillors, MLAs, MPs in the last couple of months to say this is a city-defining project out here. For people in Lower Sackville and Bedford, this will be their super awesome park to go to.

Robinson says people can write their councillors and ask that the park be protected, formally and finally. [The letters are being shared on the coalition website.](#) She says when there's a new council, they'll write more letters. Says Robinson:

What we need is for citizens, whether they use parks or not, to contact councillors all across HRM, not just locally, but every councillor in all of HRM and tell them this is an important area to save for all of HRM. It's a regional park. It's not a local park. It was identified a long time ago and the scientists have come back in and found that it's still amazing.

We're working hard, we have hope, and what it comes down to, as Walter Regan says, is it's last man standing. We've got a lot of people who are standing, who see this as important, and who are giving all they can to convince people of what's here. It's one walk in the woods at a time.