

# The Mont O'Brien area could be given Protected Area Status in 2006 What does this mean?

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(scientific consultation with Paula Armstrong)

Who would have thought five years ago when the Mont O'Brien Association was taking shape that we would have such a great opportunity – to be given Protected Area status by the Québec Government. But what does this mean? Why is this important for the wild animals and plants in the proposed area, for the Association members, the Alleyn-and-Cawood Municipality and the surrounding community of permanent residents and seasonal property owners?

First, what is Québec's Protected Area Strategy? In May 2002, the Québec Cabinet announced the target of protecting 8% of its land surface, in keeping with its ratification of the 1992 U.N. Rio Accord. In December 2002, it passed the "Natural Heritage Conservation Act" setting out the Protected Areas process.

Most Québec Protected Areas will be first categorized as "Biodiversity Reserves", meaning that they are established to both represent and safeguard natural biological diversity far into the future. Their natural state is to be preserved; this means that animal wildlife, wild plants and other organisms will be monitored and protected in their natural habitats as much as possible. At the same time, social and economic factors in the surrounding areas are to be considered and all possible community benefits sought. Traditional low-impact recreational activities are to continue in a "Biodiversity Reserve".



Protected Areas can vary in size from a few hectares to over 20,000 square kilometers. Since 2002 several large Protected Areas have been established in the north and far east of Québec, along with scattered small protected areas in southern Québec along the St

Lawrence Valley and in the Eastern Townships. The only Protected Area established since 2002 under the Natural Heritage Conservation Act in the Outaouais is the 21 square Km Forêt La Blanche north of Mayo, which is an "Ecological Reserve", a higher protection category than "Biodiversity Reserve".

"Biodiversity Reserve" status sets aside an area from forest harvesting, from hydroelectric development, and from mineral, oil and gas exploitation. No digging or construction is to be done, except as part of the reserve's conservation plan. For a Mont O'Brien Biodiversity Reserve, discontinuing forest harvesting would be the most obvious change and major benefit. At the same time, traditional fishing, hunting, and trapping would continue.

This year the Québec Government is focusing on the "Southern Laurentians Province" of its environment ministry (now called the MDDEP, the Ministère de développement durable, l'environnement et parcs), which includes the Outaouais Region.

The Act may be found in English at the website of the Canadian Legal Information Institute ([www.canlii.org](http://www.canlii.org)) or in French as "la Loi sur la conservation du patrimoine naturel", at the website of the Québec environment ministry ([www.MDDEP.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.MDDEP.gouv.qc.ca)).

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005 all interested groups and citizens were to submit Protected Area status proposals to the environment ministry's regional office in Gatineau. The Mont O'Brien Board of Directors submitted a three-page letter, with a map, describing the main area we would like to see given Biodiversity Reserve protected area status -- the 60 square Km of Crown land south of Hwy 301 we refer to as 'Mont O'Brien'. This had been decided in 2004, and was discussed and supported at the March 2005 Annual General Meeting.

In its letter, the Board also requested that the equally-large area of Crown land surrounding the Picanoc River in the northern part of Alleyn-and-Cawood Municipality to be *considered* for Protected Area status. As was said in the submission, "*The Picanoc River area once supported magnificent northern red oak stands, and the river is excellent for fishing and canoeing. Members believe it should begin to be restored to its former glory, and that protected area status might help achieve this. We are submitting all the Crown land outlined on the map, but our priority is the 60 square km area we refer to as 'Mont O'Brien'.*" Sadly, some of the Crown land forest surrounding the Picanoc River has been heavily logged in the past few years. Biodiversity Reserve status would help

preserve the forest and the Picanoc River. It would also restore public access to the river and this Crown land, which has been lost during the past few years.

*For a copy of the Mont O'Brien Association submission letter go to [www.danfordlakevillage.gc.ca](http://www.danfordlakevillage.gc.ca) and select Mont O'Brien on the left menu and go to Reports .*

So we've submitted the letter – what is next? The letter was just one step in achieving Protected Area status as a Biodiversity Reserve.

September-December 2005: the environment ministry reviews all proposals submitted for the Southern Laurentians, including the Mont O'Brien Association proposal, to ensure the areas submitted are ecologically viable and representative of the geographic "reference frame" for this region of Quebec. We could be eliminated from the process at this stage. I wonder if they would eliminate us from the process because of the amount of logging that has taken place? We will soon find out.

January-March 2006: the environment ministry consults with other Québec ministries and departments on possible "constraints" on Protected Area designations. The Mont O'Brien Association does not participate in these discussions -- this is 'ministry to ministry' discussions.

On Crown land, these constraints may include CAAF contracts with mills for wood supply (several mills--Louisiana-Pacific, Mitigog and Bowater--have wood supply contracts for 2005-2007 on Crown land in the municipality). It may be decided that the wood still available to be harvested in the Municipality of Allyn-and-Cawood is too valuable to not cut, in which case the protected status discussion would end there.

Another possible constraint is that the municipality has submitted a proposal for an engineered landfill within the Crown land north of Hwy 301, and preliminary bedrock drilling and hydrological studies are being submitted to the environment ministry for assessment this fall. It should be noted that the location of this landfill project was drawn on the map we submitted to the environment ministry and that the Mont O'Brien Association Board has been neutral on the advisability of a landfill project. It really is in the hands of the environment ministry to determine if both projects will proceed - keeping in mind that both projects have different evaluation criteria. One possibility is that the area proposed for the landfill could have a different zoning than for the Biodiversity Reserve. Both would exist side-by-side.

April-May of 2006: If the process stays on schedule, the environment ministry announces in the spring the areas in the Southern Laurentians region to be given provisional Protected Area legal status, which is typically for a four year period. This would be a major milestone for the Mont O'Brien Association.

From this point, there are two stages before a permanent designation of Protected Area Status is granted, and in Mont O'Brien's case, as a permanent biodiversity reserve. The two stages are separated by a period of public consultation and assessment (BAPE hearing).

(1) Provisional Protected Area status: At the start of this first stage, an immediate moratorium on all industrial and commercial activities applies. For Mont O'Brien, this means there would be a moratorium on logging. Notice of Protected Area designation is published in the Gazette officielle, as well as in a local newspaper. The environment ministry prepares a conservation management plan, also published in the Gazette officielle, and carries the plan out for a minimum of four years. Existing recreational activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing (recreational activities already occurring) are allowed to continue in a Biodiversity Reserve.



Overall planning and administration of a Biodiversity Reserve is conducted by the environment ministry, although local organisations or communities may participate in certain areas. *It is important to communicate that the Mont O'Brien Association is not the manager of the Biodiversity Reserve, although it might be a major contributor as well as, I suspect, the municipality and the MRC of Pontiac.*

Québec government does make grants available for financial or technical assistance and/or research to implement the aims of the ministry's conservation management plan at this time. (Grants could be made for wildlife studies that would involve local hunters; plant and forestry studies and restoration involving local woods-workers; for constructing safe hiking

trails and bridges; studies to determine ecotourism potential; and for population viability studies by biologists.)

Public Consultation: If Mont O'Brien is given provisional Protected Area status, after four years the Minister of the Environment announces a BAPE (Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement) hearing to take place within 12 months. This is a broad-scale public consultation, along with a review of environmental assessment, ecological, and other findings during the previous four years. Notice of this hearing is published in the Gazette officielle of Québec and a local newspaper. A BAPE hearing usually lasts less than a year but it may go on longer.

During the hearing many items are discussed including:

- reasons to increase or decrease protection in parts of the reserve;
- if the boundaries the Biodiversity Reserve needs adjustments;
- whether or not the reserve status should be removed;
- suggestions for monitoring, management, changes to access routes and buffer zones;
- hunting, fishing, ATV and snowmobile access, pedestrian trail development and use, and other recreational activities.

BAPE commissioners publish their findings within six months of the end of this public consultation, and their findings will aid in setting the reserve's future status and management.

2) Permanent Protected Area Status could then be granted. It must adhere to a long-term conservation management plan written by the environment ministry. The plan takes into account findings and reports from the first four years of provisional status, as well as the report of the BAPE commission. Permanent Protected Area status is published in the Gazette officielle and in local newspapers. The plan is still subject to adjustment and to input from the public.

So, we are still a long way off from obtaining permanent protected area status – but it sure will be satisfying if we are granted provisional projected status next spring!

This will be an exciting year for the Mont O'Brien Association and would like to thank the members of the Association and the many volunteers; Mayor Joe Squitti and municipal council members; and all those who have helped to bring us to this point. We look

forward to continuing to organize hikes for our members; maintaining the trail network and establishing new trails; work on the roads and continue to meet with the Mayor, the council members and others who are interested in having input to the future of the Mont O'Brien area – whether we obtain protected status or not.

If we do not obtain protected area status ... well that's a discussion for another day.

See you on the Mont!

September 2005

