

# Report on Park Stewardship

## Darlington Ecological Corridor 2023

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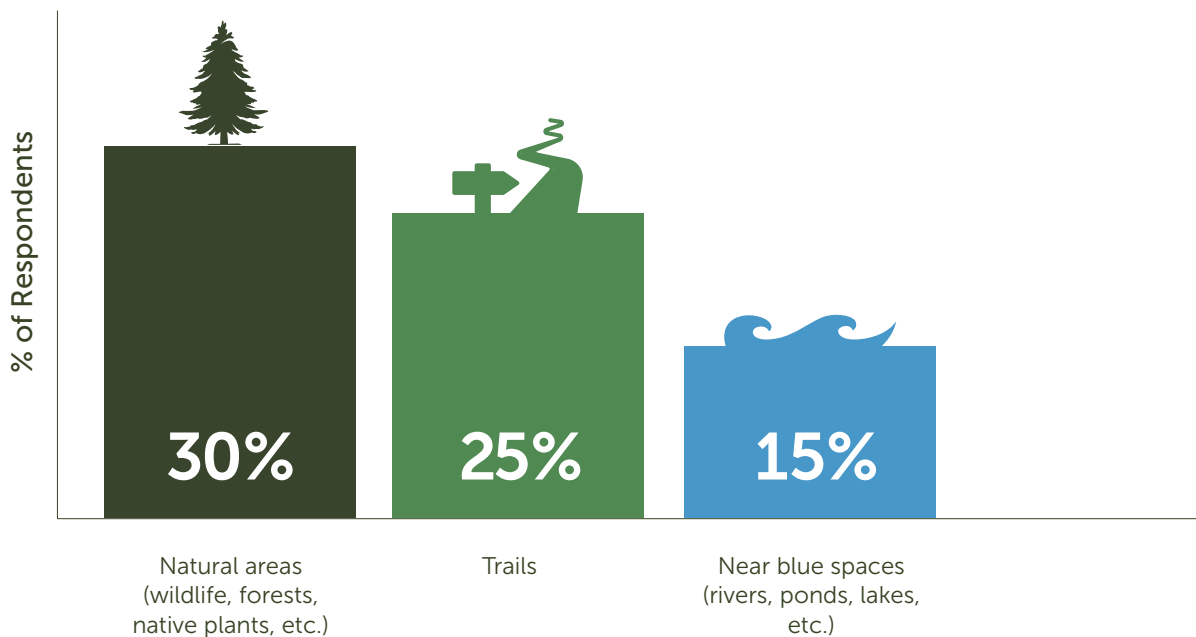
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## Park Context

The Darlington Ecological Corridor repurposes a former rail corridor in Montreal into a vital link between urban and natural spaces, prioritizing ecological restoration and social well-being. The corridor is located in the Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce borough. Darlington touches a number of diverse communities that have a high proportion of newcomer populations. This project takes a socio-ecological approach to address biodiversity, food security, and climate resilience, which provides residents and visitors with ample opportunities to interact and connect with nature.

Previous Cornerstone research in 2022 found that a strong connection to nature was highly associated with better perceived mental and physical health and overall well-being. Therefore, as people feel more connected to nature, their health and well-being improve.

## Places and Activities that Promote Nature Connectedness



Just as certain park qualities can encourage nature connectedness, there are spaces and activities in parks that can have the opposite effect. Our 2023 survey showed that spaces that inhibit nature connectedness are paved areas, including sports facilities (**50%**), areas with a lack of trees and wildlife (**33%**), and crowded spaces (**15%**).

## Park Restoration and Stewardship Programs

The Darlington Ecological Corridor focuses on the development of an integrated ecological network through greening, urban agriculture, rainwater management, and other ecological interventions in order to improve the living environment of residents.

The approach adopted is intended to be collaborative, participatory, and partnership-based. It offers interventions for and with the actors concerned (residents, citizens, municipality, institutions, businesses, organizations, and experts) through the insertion of interrelated ecological micro projects and according to development opportunities and the needs of the various stakeholders.

### Darlington Stewardship Impacts 2023

Metric	Quantity
Number of people who participated in Cornerstone Parks initiatives	300 People
Number of hours dedicated to stewardship and restoration activities	200+ Hours
Number of trees, shrubs and wildflowers planted	1,222

### Darlington Ecological Corridor Stewards

Much of the restoration work done within the Corridor is conducted by volunteer stewards working with the Darlington Ecological Corridor. From surveys with stewards, we found that in 2023:

- Over **50%** of surveyed stewards volunteer once a week or more
- **67%** of stewards visit the park once or more per week

“Le Corridor c’est la 8e merveille du monde”  
- Darlington Volunteer





Photo: Darlington Ecological Corridor Team.  
Taken by: Darlington Ecological Corridor

## Benefits from Stewardship

From our surveys, we also found that not only does the environment benefit from stewardship, but there are a host of benefits for stewards. The 2023 survey of Cornerstone park stewards found that:

**98%** of stewards agreed that their participation contributed to feeling connected to living things and the environment

**96%** of stewards agreed that their participation contributed to feeling happy and satisfied

**93%** of stewards agreed that their participation contributed to their mental wellbeing

**85%** of stewards agreed that their participation contributed to their sense of self

When stewards were asked how they feel in their Cornerstone park, the most common responses were:

**21%** Happy

**26%** Connected (to nature/  
community/self)

**33%** Peaceful/calm/relaxed





*Photo: Park Event in Darlington Ecological Corridor  
Taken by: Darlington Ecological Corridor*

## Pro-Environmental Behaviour of Stewards

Our 2023 survey results also indicate that those participating in stewardship activities often carry their experiences beyond the Darlington Ecological Corridor. They also engage in other pro-environmental behaviour, some of which are newly adopted and possibly inspired by their work with Darlington.

**92%** of stewards say that they are performing additional ecological actions at home (i.e. recycling/composting, using less electricity)

**76%** of stewards say that they are also conducting stewardship or conservation work at home and/or for their neighbourhood park (39% started taking this action since volunteering)

**49%** of stewards say stewardship encouraged them to start teaching other people about environmental issues

“Parks are the first places to change mindsets. People are connected to places and we must retain those connections at the same time that we support ecology. That’s what’s at the heart of the socio-ecological approach.”

- Alexandre Beaudoin, Founder Darlington Ecological Corridor



## Fostering Inclusion in the Park

Cornerstone surveys conducted from 2021-2023 found that park users and stewards tend to identify as women, white, and able-bodied. However, Montreal residents need to share access to high-quality, large urban parks equally. Therefore, Darlington is working to employ strategies to foster inclusion within the park and stewardship programs.

### To increase inclusivity in the Corridor and Darlington Ecological Corridor programs, Darlington has undertaken the following actions

- **Annual festivities:** A celebration of the Corridor where food and activities are offered to the community through multiple organizations. This is an opportunity to connect with collaborators and create the Corridor in their image.
- **Gardening pots:** Giant pots placed along the length of the Corridor, in partnership with the Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce borough, where low-income residents can reserve a pot, receive free flowers, and take free gardening courses.
- **Nourishing forest and gardens:** Garden plots and public space fruit trees, berry shrubs, and medicinal plants that allow food insecure residents to help themselves. Additional projects toward food security were realized in partnership with MultiCaf, whose mission is to provide food aid, create social connections, and seek resources for all vulnerable people in Côte-des-Neiges since 1989.
- **Water features:** Rain gardens for rainwater management, access to water for maintaining gardens, and a revitalized healing pond for patients of the Gingras-Lindsay Rehabilitation Institute with acute sensory, language, hearing, and motor impairments.



Rendering: Gingras-Lindsay Rehabilitation Institute pond revitalization  
Supplied by: Darlington Ecological Corridor

# Appendix

## A. What are Cornerstone Parks?

Cornerstone parks are rich in biodiversity, increase our cities' resilience to climate change, and for the millions of urban Canadians who visit them yearly, provide the deep connections to nature that people need to ensure their mental and physical well-being. These parks are stewarded and animated by communities to maintain and enhance the benefits these green spaces provide to society and the environment.

Cornerstone Parks is Canada's only national network dedicated to maximizing the impact and influence of Canada's large urban parks.

## B. Methodology

Data was collected through surveys developed by Park People in collaboration with our Cornerstone Park partners. In 2023, 86 park stewards participating in programs with four of our Cornerstone partners were surveyed. These partners include; Meewasin Valley Authority, Saskatoon; Darlington Ecological Corridor, Montreal, Free the Fern Stewardship Society and Everett Crowley Park Committee, Vancouver.

The survey was designed for participants of park stewardship programs (activities related to caring for the land, i.e. invasive species removal, tree planting, and plant and wildlife inventory) and was conducted in the fall of 2023 through online surveys. This is the second iteration of the survey and previous research findings from our surveys in 2022 at our founding Cornerstone Parks can be found on our website.

The goal was to understand better the impacts that stewardship participants perceive on their well-being and behaviour.



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