

What public lands in Ontario provide hunting and fishing opportunities?

Crown land provides the greatest opportunity for public hunting and fishing in Ontario. Crown land is owned and managed by the province and makes up approximately 937,000 square kilometers, or about 87% of Ontario's landmass. Access to Crown lands is primarily managed by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) through the forest management planning process because roads built for forestry operations are the primary public access point for Crown land. Although the majority of Crown land is found in northern Ontario, there are non-Crown lands in southern Ontario that provide public hunting and fishing opportunities. These include areas that are managed by conservation authorities, municipalities, townships or counties.

What are the benefits of access to public lands?

Access to public land provides the general public with opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation activities such as hunting and fishing. Access to natural resources provides important social and cultural benefits, as well as a significant boost for local, regional and provincial economies. The history, heritage and socioeconomic stability of many communities, especially in northern Ontario, are fundamentally linked to access of natural resources on public lands. The availability and accessibility of public lands is essential for the continued enjoyment of hunting and fishing, as well as the future recruitment of new hunters and anglers. In addition to social benefits, public access can also have positive ecological impacts by diffusing resource use over a larger area, creating edge effects that benefit certain species (i.e. moose) and for proactive management to maintain sustainable populations of fish and wildlife.

Why is access to public lands restricted on Crown lands?

The use of forest roads is managed through road abandonment, road decommissioning (making it impassable) and road access controls (i.e. signage, gates, etc.). In Ontario, public access to Crown land is restricted for a variety of purposes depending on the location and the priority of land use values in those areas. Restrictions to Crown land access are often used to protect the remoteness of an area for resource-based tourism, for fish and wildlife management, for species-at-risk protection (i.e. woodland caribou), as well as due to liability concerns and budgetary restraints.

On what scale is public access being restricted on Crown lands?

Our most recent analysis of Crown forest access roads in Ontario shows that we have experienced a net loss of 11,746 kilometres between 1996 and 2008. This information provides a general sense of the overall reduction in Crown forest accessibility; however, the available data does not allow for a more specific breakdown by the type of restriction used or rationale behind it.

What is the OFAH position on public access to Crown lands?

The OFAH works tirelessly to maintain or enhance public hunting and fishing opportunities throughout Ontario. We continuously advocate for a range of access to public lands that optimizes the benefits of our natural resource values (i.e. fish and wildlife). The OFAH also recognizes that access issues are not limited to public lands and therefore promote continued access on Ontario's public waters as afforded by the Navigable Waters Protection Act. OFAH members enjoy the full scope of hunting and fishing values provided by Crown lands. Ultimately, we recognize that these benefits are provided through local resource use, road-based tourism, remote tourism, and that balancing the desires of all forest users is necessary for the socioeconomic sustainability of our Crown natural resources. The OFAH believes that forest roads built on public land (often using public funding) should recognize all resource users, particularly those Ontario residents who require a high level of accessibility to enjoy the outdoors (i.e. the elderly or individuals with disabilities).

What is the OFAH position on public access restrictions to protect remote tourism values?

The OFAH believes that fish, wildlife and Crown land resources are public goods that should remain accessible to Ontario residents. We also recognize the importance of remote hunting and fishing values for the resource-based tourism industry and therefore understand that site-specific situations may require reasonable public access restrictions to maintain a range of all Crown land use values. The OFAH advocates for resource management decisions affecting access must be based on a thorough analysis of all alternatives, with full consideration given to the ecological, economic, social and cultural consequences of proposed actions. The OFAH strongly opposes access biases that preferentially benefit individual user groups.

What is the OFAH position on public access restrictions for fisheries or wildlife management?

The OFAH does not support the use of road access restrictions as a substitute for sound, long-term management of fish and wildlife populations, particularly where there is no substantiated justification for their use. We believe that resource management decisions affecting Crown land access must be fully rationalized to the public and should only be considered where all other management tools have been shown to be ineffective in achieving management goals and objectives. The OFAH is strongly opposed to the negative generalizations that are commonly associated with public access to fish and wildlife values. Management agencies are often quick to identify the negative ecological impacts of public access to Crown land without acknowledging the benefits. These resource management biases often result in inappropriate and unnecessary restrictions to public access. This is evident in the planned closure of roads to provide habitat for woodland caribou and the use of road closures to manage moose (as opposed to provincial tag allocations).

What is the OFAH doing?

The OFAH represents the interests of anglers and hunters on committees and advisory groups associated with public access issues. In addition, the OFAH routinely scrutinizes any legislation, regulations, policies or documents that have the potential to affect public access to fish and wildlife resources. We review and evaluate management plans for Ontario's Crown forests, county forests, provincial wildlife areas, provincial parks and any other documents that provide guidance for resources management in the province. In 2010 and 2011 alone, the OFAH rigorously reviewed and provided comments for more than two dozen Crown forest and Provincial Park management plans. Although the majority of these efforts are not highly publicized, the OFAH is a relentless advocate for optimized hunting and fishing opportunities on public lands. In 2010, the OFAH was influential in a successful petition for the removal of a gate on the Spanish Arm Road in the Sudbury Forest that restricted all public access. The Spanish Arm Road is only one recent example of the many success stories related to public land access that have resulted from the passion, commitment and influence of the OFAH and its members.

What can OFAH members do about land access issues?

There are localized public land access issues that we are not always aware of. We rely on our members to identify these issues and bring them to our attention. We encourage you to contact your local OFAH Zone or OFAH Head Office staff (Land Use Specialist, Shari Sokay, shari_sokay@ofah.org) if you have any questions or concerns related to public land access.