

ACCIDENTAL WILDERNESS

The Origins and Ecology of Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park

by Walter H. Kehm; photographs by Robert Burley

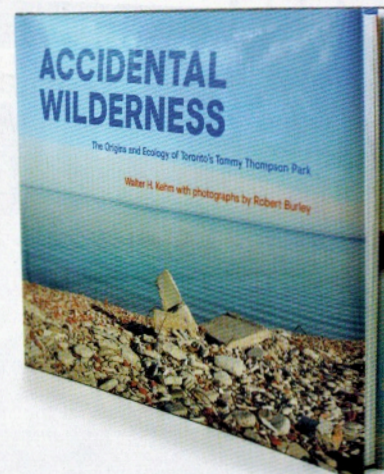
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"Nature," as American geographer William Cronin has famously written, is a human idea, and "wilderness" a human creation. The nonhuman (the silent shadow of a hawk overhead, the musical tinkling of ice against the shore) is part of wilderness, of course, but human values — about what is beautiful, or meaningful, or worthy of preservation — inform tensions about what belongs to culture and what belongs to nature.

Few places exemplify the interweaving of culture and nature more completely than the Leslie Street Spit, and few works explore the unexpected and sometimes astonishing things that can emerge from their interconnection as well as landscape architect Walter Kehm's wonderful new book, *Accidental Wilderness: The Origins and Ecology of Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park*. Kehm's

book, lavishly photographed by Robert Burley and with illuminating, eloquent essays contributed by biologists, conservation professionals, heritage specialists, and ecological advocates whose understanding of the Spit is unmatched, explores the history, politics, geomorphology, biology, and human ecology of "the Spit" in revelatory detail and traces the Spit's transformation from one of Toronto's most constructed environments to one of its most wild.

Originally conceived in the 1950s as the breakwater for a massive planned expansion of Toronto's outer harbour system, for decades the Spit was a dumping ground for construction debris, fill from subway excavations, incinerator residue, contaminated waste, and harbour silt. As the Spit grew from a haphazard landfill project into a five-kilometre peninsula, public officials and community advocates grappled with the Spit's purpose, considering industrial development, an airport, massive marina facilities, and even an amusement attraction before eventually leaving it as parkland. By the time the Toronto Region Conservation Authority took over management of the Spit in 1982, emphasis had turned toward protecting the park's ecology, already emerging in the form of vegetation sprouting through the rubble like hardy survivors, accompanied



by birds, mammals, and fish supported by its steadily diversifying habitat. Tommy Thompson Park is now a 500-hectare wonderland of recreational paths, rubble sculptures, cottonwood groves, and wetlands that are home to hundreds of species of birds and plants and dozens of species of mammals, amphibians, and fish.

The Spit's history — industrial ambitions transformed into an ecological aesthetic — is fascinating all on its own, but *Accidental Wilderness* shows that the Spit's story is about so much more. As Kehm and his contributors illustrate, the Spit challenges dichotomies around "culture" and "nature" (and "native" and "invasive") and shows that a robust ecology can emerge even in a constructed environment — if gently managed in ways that make room for the kinds of biological succession that increase biodiversity over time. *Accidental Wilderness* also holds important lessons for other areas of the Toronto waterfront (that, like the Spit, are almost all constructed landforms), perhaps particularly the former Ontario Place. If public agencies can manage to "design for conservation," even the most artificial of waterfront sites might become, as Kehm puts it, "a new mechanism for the renewal of a healthy city." Part field guide, part environmental history, *Accidental Wilderness* would make an excellent manual for ecological restoration along the entire lakeshore. †

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