

Request to end the cull of Double-crested cormorants at High Bluff Island, Presqu'ile Provincial Park

To:

The Honourable David Ramsay
Minister of Natural Resources

From:

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On behalf of:

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Subject:

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Date: June 6, 2005

Dear Mr. Ramsay:

We are writing once again to urge you to end the cull of Double-crested Cormorants taking place on High Bluff Island at Presqu'ile Provincial Park and to review all the management activities on the island because of the ongoing disturbance to the colony.

Rationale for the Request to end the cull: We are asking for an immediate end to the cull because there are now hatched young in many of the cormorant nests. Our film footage confirms and our observers have documented cormorant feeding behaviour throughout the colony. This behaviour was first documented on May 26, 2005. Since then, the number of nests with hatched young is increasing daily,

as they are across their range and as has been true of nests for as long as egg hatching dates for the species have been recorded.

Also, numbers of Great Blue Herons are in decline as a direct result of the disturbances caused by your Ministry, and we fear for the Black-crowned Night Herons, a species that can be extremely sensitive to disturbances within the vicinity of their nests.

When we first had proof of the presence of cormorant chicks, we notified the Park's staff and the shooters on Saturday, May 28, 2005 and your office on Monday May 30, 2005 both by voice message and in writing. Despite this notification, Ministry shooters continued to cull on May 31, early in the morning and at least one other time during the last week. Culling activities seem to stop only when our observers are present to document Ministry actions. Our observers have been present at High Bluff Island every day for 15 hours since the Ministry attempted the May 31 early morning cull.

Your Ministry made a commitment in the major amendment document not to shoot parent birds with chicks. We suspect that Ministry staff are telling you that through accurate observation and management modifications cormorants with live young can be avoided. This was confirmed by our observers in a conversation with one of your park staff.

If this is the case, we respectfully and strongly challenge your staff's claim. Even naturalists and ornithologists who are experienced in the field cannot do what you staff are claiming to do – see through the bottoms of overhead nests. Tree climbing, as one park staff member has done, provides a view of the contents of only a tiny percentage of the nests present.

Anyone who has observed the complexity of the colony including massive bird activity to and from the Island, the close proximity of the nests to each other, the significant number of nests in each tree and the fact that “all the birds look alike” will know that the Ministry staff assurances are incorrect.

In fact Ministry staff can reliably give you no such assurances. They shoot from the ground into the trees at an angle that precludes them from being able to determine whether or not there are hatched young in the nests. Our observers have seen the shooters firing their guns in areas where increased cormorant chick-feeding behaviour has been documented. These observations are supported by our film footage which shows birds feeding and caring for their young with one parent dead in the nest and with multiple nests with dead birds in close proximity.

Therefore we implore you to intervene and end the cull now, otherwise the Ministry will be the cause of orphaned cormorant chicks who will be left to die from dehydration, hypothermia or starvation. We find such deliberate abuse of animals intolerable and avoidable. All indications are that the species is regionally in decline, the population having peaked in Ontario, and its major food source in at least Lake Huron, the Alewife, depleted according to your own staff. The cormorant is a species historically vulnerable to endangerment.

Rationale for reviewing the management activities: For the first time, independent observers have been present to assess the management actions of Ministry staff in controlling the cormorant colony on High Bluff Island. No longer can the Ministry make unchallenged claims about their management techniques.

Management actions are extremely disruptive: Based on past experience, we fully anticipate that Ministry staff will attempt to blame our observers for disrupting the colony and for prolonging the cull.

It is absurd to say that the actions of our observers in canoes, kayaks and small motor-boats are disruptive when the Ministry staff invade the island from March to the end in September using guns, flares, nest destruction equipment, and all-terrain vehicles to disrupt and kill the cormorants.

We have had multiple observers on the water at High Bluff Island since May 6th 2005, many in canoes and kayaks and more recently, in two in small motorboats to observe the colony and document the killing. As well, they are documenting Ministry actions through film footage and observation such as pictures of birds killed in their nests, of birds who fly away injured and the length of time the injured are left unattended. They are also there to record evidence of feeding and other nurturing behaviour indicating the presence of hatched chicks. Unless the Ministry is present and culling, our observers remain on the water, close to the shore filming and observing the colony.

They are concerned about the welfare of the three nesting heron species, and avoid proximity to them if there is no shooting near by. But it should be noted that there has been, even by Ministry staff admissions, a decline in Great Blue herons who normally nest amid cormorant nests in mixed colonies. They arrive after the cormorants, and reached their own peak abundance coincident to the maximum number of cormorants nesting there.

Our observers have documented the degree of disruption caused by Ministry actions on the island. The greatest disruption occurs when culling takes place. Unlike the description in the management reports, the shooting causes what can only be described as mass chaos in the colony, with huge numbers of birds flying to get away from the guns. Shooting takes place for approximately one hour in one location. The shooters move to another location, let the birds settle and then begin another round of chaotic pandemonium in another part of the colony. To collect the dead and injured birds, the Ministry uses all-terrain vehicles, which again are disruptive to the colony and to vegetation.

Recently, the ministry was on the island building exclosures for deer. The actions all contradict even the Ministry's own guidelines for activities around Great Blue Herons, one of the species of birds the Ministry says it is protecting. Herons and cormorants have co-evolved through tens of millions of years. They do not need protection from each other but do require protection from over-zealous management.

Disruption and pollution of High Bluff Island Habitat: Management activities are impacting on High Bluff Island habitat and on the water-bird colony in several ways.

Use of lead bullets: Despite contrary advice, your Ministry continues to use lead bullets to kill the cormorants. In the previous year, your staff unloaded a minimum of 6,000 lead bullets into what the Ministry describes as a sensitive and beautiful habitat on High Bluff Island. Lead shot is already banned for waterfowl hunting because of lead pollution and because of the lead poisoning caused to birds who mistake the bullets for the pebbles or grit they require to assist digestion. Lead bullets left in the aquatic environment around High Bluff Island are highly problematic to the many species of both breeding and migratory water-birds who inhabit the area.

Toxins found in the composter used to dispose of the dead cormorants: Tests of the compost material identified levels of mercury and selenium well above Ministry of Environment guidelines for ground spreading on the island. It is likely that the materials will have to be removed from the island for incineration. Your Ministry ought to have concerns about the results of the tests. First, your staff

should be worried about the concentration of such problem chemicals in such a sensitive habitat. This does not appear to be the case since the birds killed this year are also being composted on the Island.

Second, your staff should be worried if cormorants are carrying such dangerous pollutants in their bodies because it means that these chemicals are persistent in the environment.

Habitat disruption and non-native species introduction: As a result of the composting operation, a portion of the island's habitat has been altered. A section of the island is covered by the composter and therefore the habitat underneath changed

The nutrient load of 30,000 pounds of composting dead cormorants would surely surpass the nutrient load of the water-bird colony guano, a concern cited by your Ministry in the management plan. Again, the effect of the composter is to change the nutrient equation.

As well, non-native grasses have been introduced to the island in the straw used in the composter.

The use of all-terrain vehicles to move equipment, materials and dead cormorants around the island causes additional habitat damage.

Cruelty: The 2004 cormorant management report describes the culling process for that year. The report says that shooting takes place on one part of the island for an hour, another part of the island for another hour throughout the day. The report continues to say that the dead birds are not collected until the end of the day to minimize the disruption to the three heron species. The same process was documented by our observers this year.

Not all birds shot are killed instantly. Some are mortally wounded and die in the water or on shore. Some are just wounded and have broken wings or similar damage that will lead to an inability to migrate, or to feed and to eventual slow death. Our observers saw wounded birds flying from their nests into the water where they died either from hemorrhaging or drowning. Our observers also witnessed Ministry staff collecting the dead and dying birds at the end of the day, both tossed into the bottom of the boat without regard to the most basic level of animal husbandry as required, for example, by the Canadian Council on Animal Care. As a scientific experiment under CCAC guidelines, this level of animal abuse would not be tolerated

The 2004 report fails to deal with the incredible suffering experienced by the wounded birds who the Ministry leaves until all the shooting is complete. Leaving birds to suffer in this prolonged manner either shows a complete insensitivity to their suffering or such a disrespect and loathing that forcing them to suffer for many hours is acceptable. It is not enough to kill these birds for the sake of a relatively small number of common trees, they must be punished. These actions which would not be supported by the public can no longer be hidden by the Ministry.

Further the report fails to address how these birds are killed. Our assumption is that Ministry staff wring their necks, a procedure that the Ministry would not want documented on film

Two of our observers were veterinarians who were prepared to assist any wounded birds but could not go on shore without violating your Ministry's prohibition. If they did go ashore, the result would be arrest for trying to ease or end an animal's suffering.

In some cases wounded birds are not retrieved. The length of time between the shooting and attempts at retrieval, can allow for wounded birds to escape to the other islands. Eventually, these birds die and their bodies wash up on the park shore. Last year, park staff combed the park beaches early in the morning, collecting the bodies of those who washed ashore.

There are staff within your Ministry who disagree with your cormorant management strategy:

We know from our contacts, that there are those within your Ministry who strongly disagree with your cormorant management strategy. We suspect that you have not heard the opposing opinion from those people. In fact, we know that they have specifically been told not to talk to us or the media about their opposition to the cull and other Ministry actions. It is time that you heard from them in re-evaluating your strategy.

We understand and appreciate the intensity of the anti-cormorant lobby, particularly from the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, but as knowledgeable staff within your Ministry well know, there is truly no credible threat to the environment posed by cormorants in Ontario.

Your Ministry has launched a province wide attack on the cormorant population: Cormorant populations across the province are under attack from your Ministry and its decisions. Management techniques such as egg-oiling, nest destruction, and harassment are being executed in three significant colonies in Ontario, High Bluff Island, Leslie Street Spit and the North Channel. Culling is being used on High Bluff Island and now the Ministry will allow individuals to kill cormorants on private property. Such a planned onslaught against a native species is unprecedented since the 19th Century and dangerous, given that cormorant populations have plummeted to low levels in the past.

Additional pressures are brought to bear on the population when hoodlums kill the chicks and destroy the eggs on remote island colonies. In a recent conference, it was revealed that raccoons were being released on some of these islands to eat the eggs and the young. These actions and those threatened in the North Channel this spring are fed by the vitriolic language of a loud and politically motivated faction of the hunting and fishing community. The Ministry has done nothing to counter the vigilante threats and actions of private citizens against a provincially protected bird species.

We have consistently asked Ministry staff, if cormorants are not welcome in a bird sanctuary then where? We have yet to receive a reply but it is a question you as the Minister should be asking. We suspect that with the exception of a few stone outcroppings in the Great Lakes, the Ministry does not tolerate them anywhere else within the province of Ontario.

Conclusion: Mr. Minister, you now have an alternative evaluation of the cull on High Bluff Island from numerous observers who have been present now for a full month. We have observed the colony both before the cull started and during the killing.

We have video footage which calls into question claims made by your staff, including that there are now cormorant chicks in the nests where the Ministry is conducting the cull.

You have an opportunity to make a difference, to prevent further cruelty to the injured birds left by your staff and to prevent the slow and painful death of chicks whose parents have been shot.

Please end the cull now and review your management strategy with those who have witnessed the actions of your Ministry staff.