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# OPPORTUNITIES FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, CARBON SEQUESTRATION, AND RECREATIONAL CANOEING IN THE SPANISH FOREST OF ONTARIO

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The Lower Spanish Forest of Ontario has been recognized since at least 1990 for high concentrations of old-growth white and red pine forests and a large contiguous pristine landscape. However, provincial parks that were created at the start of the millennium to protect the area leave out important recreational canoe routes, confirmed pristine watersheds, and significant tracts of old-growth forest.

Henry & Quinby (2018) mapped a proposed expansion of Rushbrook Provincial Park that incorporated current scientific knowledge of the area and the recommendations of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Round Table made during the Ontario Living Legacy Process (OLL). The proposed expansion would protect pristine watersheds as well as an important canoe route loop, and it nearly doubles the amount of old-growth forest protected in the existing Park. While it was a useful starting point the proposed expansion represented the minimum viable park size, missed protecting significant old-growth tracts, and lacked connectivity to the Spanish River Provincial Park and surrounding old-growth forests. Although the proposed expansion has not yet been implemented it is already outdated, and I propose additional protected areas to help complete the protected areas network in the Spanish Forest.

For Canada to meet its international obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity we need to act with vision. Canada failed to meet Target #1 of its 2020 Biodiversity Goals and Targets, that “By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10 percent of coastal and marine areas, are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.” By 2020 only 13 percent of Canada’s land was protected, with wide variation between provinces. Ontario and Newfoundland both received the lowest grade (F) in a report card by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Committee (CPAWS, 2021), with Ontario adding less than one percent protected area, for a total of 10.7 percent protected area.

The Spanish Forest is unique in having large pristine watersheds dominated by white and red pine, which remain unprotected. It also has tremendous untapped recreational canoeing potential. While the Spanish River is known as an excellent open-canoe river, with long stretches of class one rapids, the interior lakes are largely undiscovered despite offering a world-class flat water canoe destination that links to the Spanish River. Developing the recreational canoeing opportunities will relieve some of the pressure on heavily used areas such as Algonquin Park and Temagami, while indirectly promoting biodiversity conservation, and protection of remaining old-growth forests. Old-growth forests also store large amounts of carbon and play an important role in climate mitigation for both the short and the long term.

Since the area has a short history as a recreational canoe area, portages and campsites are often in poor condition. Portages exist between most of the major, and some smaller lakes - many have fallen into disrepair, while others have seen steady use for fishing, hunting or trapping and remain in good condition. In recent years volunteers have reclaimed several old portages that had nearly vanished, only visible by piecing together overgrown blazes on trees and sections of trail worn into the duff. Campsites are sparse on smaller lakes and are often in poor condition on larger lakes (overgrown from intermittent use, or littered with garbage or toilet paper from heavy use).

Figures 1&2 show existing and proposed parks relative to canoe routes. These are aspirational maps, the proposed parks have no formal recognition and some of the portages and campsites are in very poor condition. There is a lot of work to do!

FIGURE 1 EXISTING AND PROPOSED PARKS IN THE SPANISH FOREST

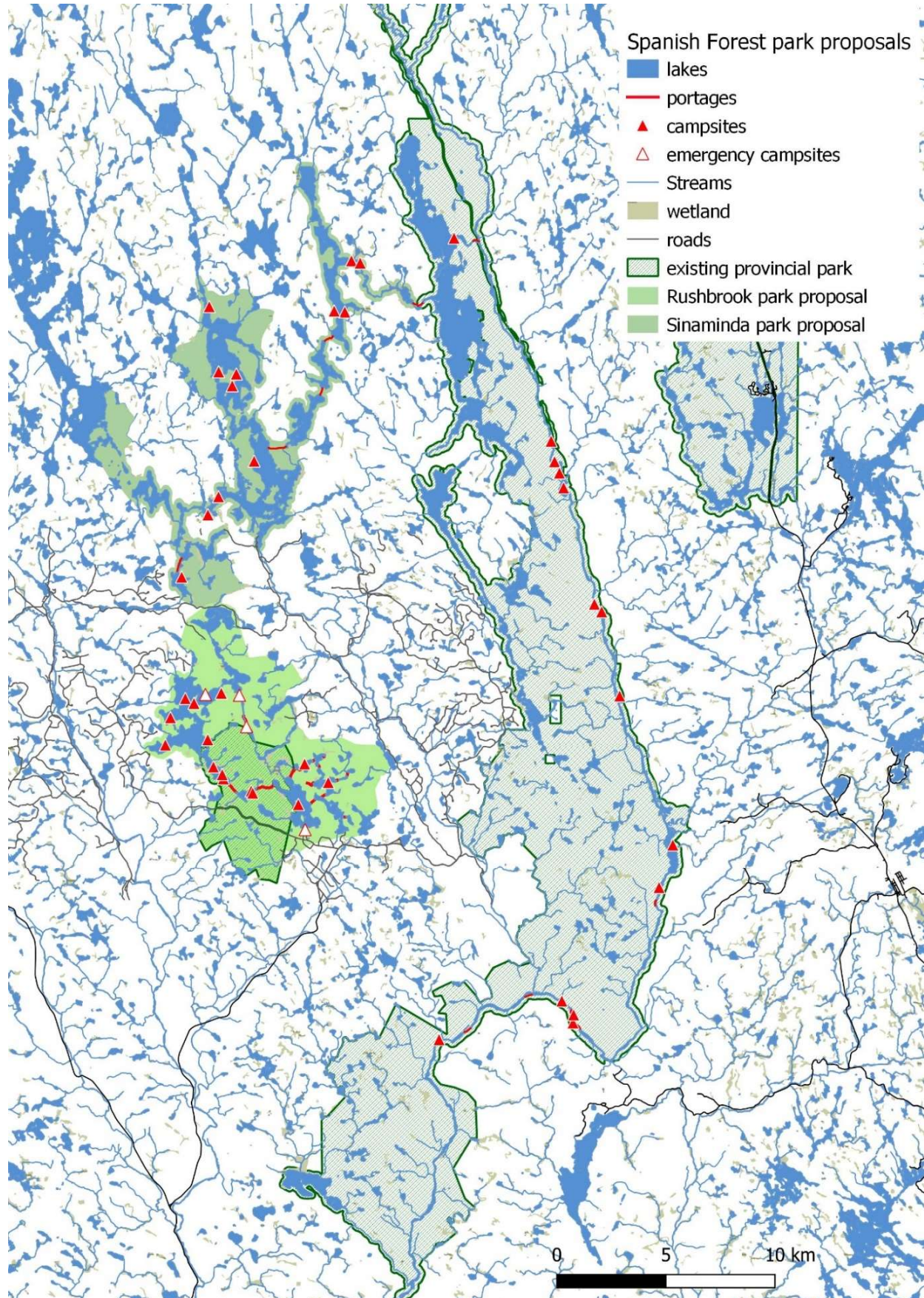
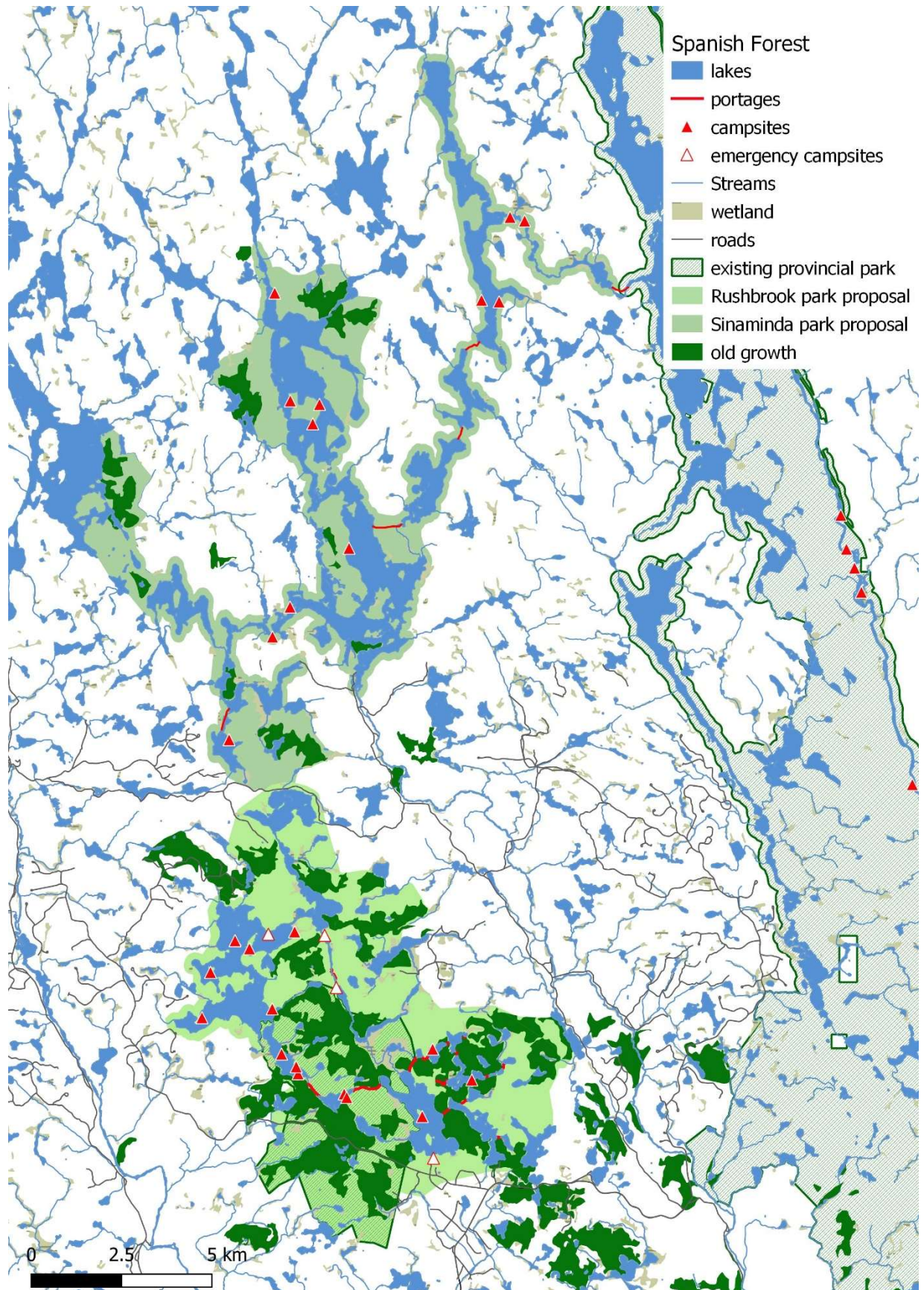




FIGURE 2 PROPOSED PARKS CANOE ROUTES, AND MAPPED OLD GROWTH IN THE SPANISH FOREST



## NEXT STEPS

### Professional activities

- Proposed parks should be ground-truthed to confirm old-growth forest locations.
- Mapping of proposed parks should be finalized and detailed in a new report.
- Good quality recreational canoe maps should be created for the area.
- Web resources should be developed to promote canoeing and eco-tourism in the Spanish Forest.

### Volunteer activities

- Locations of additional portages and campsites in the Spanish Forest should be mapped, including connections to Mozhabong, Indian Lake, and the option of a loop via Sinaminda Creek.
- Significant clearing and marking is needed for the portages between Rushbrook and Lower Shakwa.
- Campsite maintenance is required for the majority of campsites on Rushbrook, Shakwa, and points in between.
- The Spanish Forest should be promoted as a destination and as a cause on social media.

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

There is no stable funding to support conservation in the Spanish Forest and mapping of canoe routes. Volunteers have contributed both time and money that has supported the project, Ian Jackson and Nadurra Wood Corp have contributed significantly, and Michael Henry and Tom Lee have provided some pro-bono labour. A more robust funding model needs to be developed. In 2022 Michael Henry created the [Save Ontario's old-growth forests](https://gofund.me/a56f4dc9) GoFundMe campaign (<https://gofund.me/a56f4dc9>) for this and other unfunded old-growth forest work.