

## Original article

## The Sherriff Creek Wildlife Sanctuary: Further evidence of mine-site repurposing and economic transition in northern Ontario

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## ABSTRACT

Economic transition may extend the lifespan of municipalities that depend on a non-renewable resource. In a recent article, we created a 'Transition Template,' comprised of five components (stage, approach, mechanism, trajectory and base), to guide studies of economic transition in formerly resource-dependent territories. We applied the template in Atikokan, Ontario, to demonstrate how a particular transition mechanism (mine site repurposing), which reflects a particular development base (place), unfolded in this Canadian municipality. In this article, we apply the template in a second, potentially higher risk, locality (Elliot Lake), to demonstrate how a uranium tailings management area has been repurposed into a nature sanctuary and passive recreational setting (the Sherriff Creek Wildlife Sanctuary). Similar to the Atikokan study, we uncover at what stage repurposing emerged in Elliot Lake's lifecycle, the approach that drove and enabled its implementation, and, its impact on the municipality's various economic trajectories. We contrast our findings with those documented in Atikokan, and other international settings, and conclude by questioning what impact (creative destruction or enhancement) the anticipated return of a former space-based trajectory (i.e. mining) might have on its current place-based development paths (i.e. tourism and retirement living).

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## 1. Introduction

Research on economic transition in mine-dependent territories has captured the interest of scholars drawn from many academic disciplines. Each brings a different perspective to the process and individually contributes much to our understanding of how resource economies respond to external shock. In a recent article (Mitchell and O'Neill, 2016b), we combined these contributions in a 'Transition Template' to encourage systematic, holistic, and comparative study of these transforming spaces. We then applied this template in Atikokan, a township in northern Ontario, Canada, which formerly supported several iron ore mines (Mitchell and O'Neill, 2016b). In this article, we apply this organizational structure in a second, potentially higher risk, setting that has undergone significant change since closure of its uranium mines. Our specific intent is to document how a particular transition

mechanism (mine site repurposing for recreation and nature-based activity), which reflects a particular development base (place), has unfolded in Elliot Lake, Ontario.

Elliot Lake is located halfway between the cities of Sudbury and Sault St. Marie, approximately 550 km north of Toronto (Fig. 1). The townsite is part of the traditional territory of the Ojibwa of the Serpent River First Nation, which, by the terms of the Robinson-Huron Treaty, was surrendered to the Crown in 1850 (Leddy, 2011). The town, itself, is a "planned, model community" (Leddy, 2011, p. 2), constructed in 1955 to house workers employed in the uranium industry (Heard, 1999). Since closure of this productive sector in 1996, Elliot Lake has transformed into a consumption-oriented settlement, focused on retirement living services and tourism (Hardy Stevenson and Associates Ltd., 2014).

Although providing significant economic benefits, negative externalities accompanied the extraction process. Derelict land, contaminated waterways, and destroyed (indigenous) livelihoods are among the outcomes recorded (Leddy, 2011). In this article, we focus on one response to these impacts—the repurposing of a uranium tailings site to accommodate recreation and nature-based activity. Our specific interest is in unravelling the process by which the Milliken Mine Tailings Management Area was converted into the Sherriff Creek Wildlife Sanctuary (SCWS).

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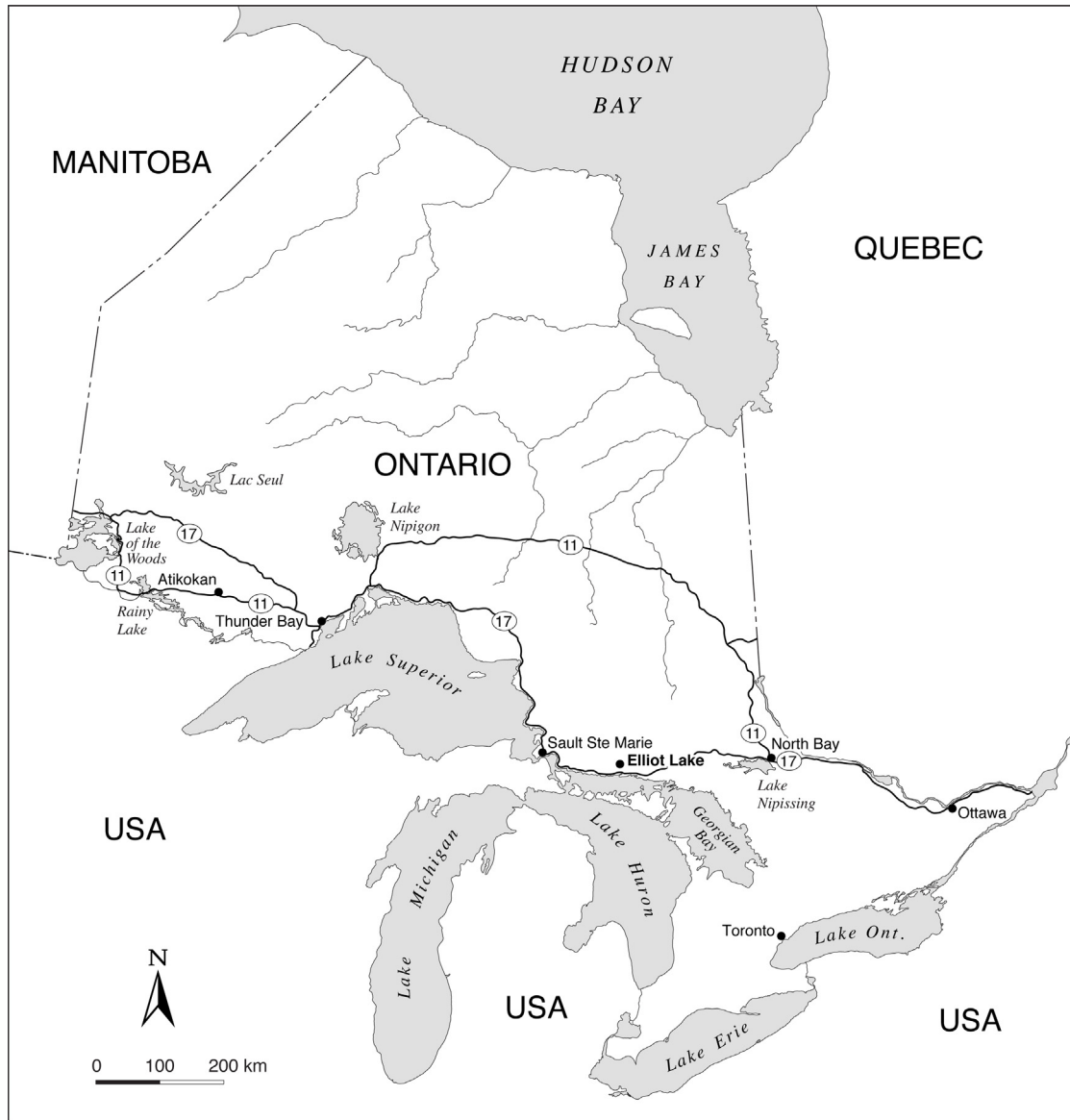


Fig. 1. Location of Elliot Lake.

We structure our discussion of this process around three components of the Transition Template, which mirror those examined in our earlier study (Mitchell and O'Neill, 2016b; Table 1). We first use the Resource Dependency Model (Mitchell and O'Neill, 2016a) to establish the timing of repurposing during Elliot Lake's lifecycle (pre-dependent, dependent, post-dependent

or independent). We then describe the approach used to create this transformed space (endogenous, exogenous, neo-endogenous or neo-exogenous). Finally, we consider if this landscape of nature appreciation and recreation is contributing to Elliot Lake's various functional trajectories (path-dependent, path-emergent or branching innovating). Before embarking on this exploration, we

Table 1  
The transition template.

Components	Types			
Stages:	Pre-Dependent	Dependent	Post- dependent	Independent
Approaches:	Endogenous	Exogenous	Neo-endogenous	Neo-exogenous
Trajectories:	Path-dependent	Path-emergent	Branching innovating	
Mechanisms:	Self-reinforcing effects	Path-in-dependent innovation through creation	Path-dependent innovation through: layering, conversion, recombination/ repurposing	Place
Development bases:	Space	Welfare		

Source: Mitchell and O'Neill (2016b)

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