

**By Hap Wilson**

Next month marks the first anniversary of the McGuinty government's decision to axe the 68-year old Ontario Ranger Program (ORP). The move – done in the name of deficit reduction – saved a staggering \$1.5 million (from a budget of \$135 billion) and put an ignominious end to a summer program for youth. The defunct program – formerly known as the Ontario Junior Ranger Program – counts 70,000 alumnae, including former Toronto Mayor David Crombie and federal MP Olivia Chow.

The ORP was a youth program run by the Ministry of Natural Resources. There were two requirements: you had to be 17-years old and a resident of the province. Selection was done by lottery. Rangers earned the minimum wage *and* paid for room and board out of their own pocket.

The program consisted of work, education and recreation components in a wilderness or rural environment. The range of work was wide and eye-opening for most participants. They cleared trails, planted trees, cleaned latrines, maintained canoe routes and fish and wildlife projects. Oftentimes they would collaborate with local Aboriginal communities.

Despite tossing the ORP and its rich history overboard the government insists its replacement program – the Stewardship Youth Ranger Program – fills the gap. It doesn't. It's akin to a day job not the eight-week, away-from-home experience of the ranger program. Participants commute to their work and return home each evening to a familiar world of shopping malls, the internet and television. The ORP encouraged independent living and skills training in large teams of 20 or more. Its replacement program typically has small teams of five.

But those are merely the facts behind each program. They fail to explain what made the ORP so special and why the provincial government's decision to kill it in the name of austerity is puzzling at best.

The ranger program was, for thousands of young people, a life-altering experience for all the right reasons. For most it was their first introduction to the natural beauty and splendor of Ontario. The job of a ranger was to keep it that way for the benefit of residents and visitors alike. The program built teamwork and comraderie. It instilled pride in selfless public service.

By drawing together kids in their mid-teens, the ORP broke down social and economic barriers. Urban mixed with rural; minorities with majorities. Lifelong friendships were formed. More than one ex-ranger has confessed their experience, “turned my life around.”

Donna Fry, an educator from northwest Ontario and a ranger in the 1970s, described it this way: “We were faced with challenges every day and not just physical challenges. We were away from our families and needed to cooperate and co-exist with seven others in our cabin. We sought to be successful and to learn from each other. And at the end of the eight-weeks you could say ‘I can do it.’”

That ‘can do’ attitude is a vanishing commodity in much of today’s world. But that is what rested at the heart of the Ontario Ranger Program.

In late August hundreds of former rangers and supporters will meet for a one-day, eco-trail building event in Huntsville. Undoubtedly participants will swap ‘war stories’ from their ranger days. Plans will be made to mobilize a campaign to bring the program back in its original incarnation.

It’s a pity that David Oraziotti, minister of natural resources, isn’t expected to attend. He needs to hear first-hand the immeasurable value the one-time ORP brought to the lives of tens of thousands of Ontarians. He must be told the stewardship program is a pale replacement.

The minister needs reminding that his government’s decision to eliminate the ORP was a sad example of acting ‘penny-wise; pound foolish.’

*Hap Wilson, a Temagami-based author and environmentalist, was associated for eight years with the Ontario Junior Ranger Program. To learn more about the ORP and efforts to restore it in the 2014 provincial budget visit: [www.savetherangers.ca](http://www.savetherangers.ca)*