

BEATRICE AND ARTHUR MINDEN SYMPOSIUM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

URBAN ECOLOGIES: IMAGINING
THE ENVIRONMENTALLY JUST
CITY

2023 REPORT



School of the Environment

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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OVERVIEW OF BEATRICE AND ARTHUR MINDEN SYMPOSIUM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

On May 5th and 6th, 2023, the University of Toronto, School of the Environment (the School) hosted the annual Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment. Convened with the theme “Urban Ecologies: Imagining the Environmentally Just City,” the conference blended keynote talks, panel discussions, and interactive workshops. The event explored Toronto’s urban ecologies and its entwined environmental, cultural, and colonial histories.

The aim of the Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment is to enable scholarly public debate, discussion, and exchange on environment-related themes of global significance. Over the years, the talks, workshops, panels, and other events included in the Symposia have considered themes of science, policy, social justice, and system change. These events have cultivated spaces for discussion and debate among speakers and attendees. As such, the Symposia have a long-lasting impact through supporting research projects, sparking new conversations and collaborations within and beyond the University, and bringing together a diverse range of participants. This report serves as a record of the 2023 Symposium and contributes to the School’s efforts to capture and convey the impact of these events.

The report also places the 2023 Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment in the broader context of the School’s portfolio of events. We begin by situating the Symposia within other School events, and then present the schedule of events of the 2023 Symposium, describe the range of participants in the Symposium (speakers, attendees, and field trip leaders), and offer a snapshot of perspectives from participants that convey the wide-ranging significance of the Symposium. The report concludes with reflections on the value of the Symposium within and beyond the University, and some recommendations on how to amplify the impact of each Symposium.

OVERVIEW

SIGNIFICANCE OF EVENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The School of the Environment hosts a variety of events throughout the academic year, including Research Day, Awards Night, and the Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment. What sets the Symposium apart is its intentional focus on the transdisciplinary essence of the School. This uniqueness is evident in several key aspects of the event's planning and execution.

01

The Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment is designed to embrace transdisciplinary perspectives, drawing across disciplines, forms of knowledge, and sites of knowledge production. This was certainly the case for the 2023 Symposium, which specifically engaged scholars from across fields of study, artists, practitioners, community activists, and more. Unlike Research Day or Awards Night—two other annual events at the School—which lean towards a focus on specific research areas or achievements, the Symposium brings together scholars and practitioners to explore environmental topics from multifaceted angles.

02

The Symposium on the Environment provides space for transdisciplinary exchange by opening up time and dedicated space for interaction and discussion. The School hosts several Seminar Series that feature individual speakers in turn over the course of the year. In contrast, the Symposium enables intensive and sustained exchanges across speakers at a one or two-day event. This approach fosters rich discussion and learning, with the format encouraging the cross-pollination of ideas. These characteristics reflect the core values of the School as a transdisciplinary and knowledge-based, action-oriented institution.

03

The Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment's structure and execution, centered on transdisciplinary collaboration, research-informed discussions, community engagement, and experiential learning, make it a standout event within the School's portfolio of events. By embracing these principles, the Symposium not only enriches the academic experience for participants but also contributes to the School's mission of fostering innovative solutions to complex environmental challenges.

DETAILS OF THE 2023 BEATRICE AND ARTHUR MINDEN SYMPOSIUM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The topic of the 2023 Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment was Urban Ecologies. Each of the two days of the symposium began with a keynote panel, which brought together expert speakers on topics related to the overarching themes of urban ecologies and just cities. The first day featured a panel on “The Greenbelt and Urban Densification,” and the second a panel on “Energy/Culture/Space/Place.” These panels were followed by a combination of short research talks, panel presentations, film screenings, workshops, and local field excursions.

The blending of more formal and experiential modes of exchange allowed participants to shift from expert to learner roles throughout the sessions. Many individuals moved from presenter to attendee positions over the two days, which enabled rich exchanges and learning opportunities. The combination of professional panels and field trips led by knowledgeable facilitators provided unique opportunities for experiential learning and engagement.

The 2023 Symposium's field trips—where participants toured parks and conservation areas, the Toronto waterfront, sites of food production and ecological change on campus, and neighbourhood faith centres—allowed for close-knit interactive sessions where participants had ample opportunities for discussion. Discussions can be challenging in large and crowded settings. The smaller group settings of the 2023 Symposium's field trips and workshops facilitated meaningful connections and fostered a sense of community among attendees.

Notably, the incorporation of a workshop on questions of place-based acknowledgements and Indigenous territories, hosted by Elder Catherine Tamaro, underscored the Symposium's commitment to recognizing and valuing Indigenous perspectives and knowledges. In a Symposium on environmentally just cities, the workshop was one mechanism for dedicating specific time and attention to questions of land, reconciliation, and good relations.

The organizing team embedded the values of the Symposium themes of environmental justice into the event's logistical elements. Symposium participants were provided meals from local Indigenous caterers, providing a direct and embodied reminder of place and belonging through shared food, and supporting community businesses.

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2023 SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE **DAY ONE**

Panel - The Greenbelt and Urban Densification

Featuring Phil Pothen (Environmental Defense), Alex Bozikovic (Globe & Mail), and Michelle Tom (Stop Sprawl Hamilton and More Neighbours Hamilton)

Short Talks

Urban Design and Culture in the Age of Climate Crisis: Housing and the Imagined Culture of Residence with Jennifer Donnelly

Restoration of Small's Creek Ravine with Matt Canaran and Alisa Metcalfe

U of T's Back Campus as Urban Ecology: Public Space and Ecological Being with Bill Kroeger

Urban Environmental Justice and Toronto's Leslie Street Spit with Jennifer Foster

The Toronto Climate Observatory as a Model of Public Climate Science with Michael Classens

For the birds? Art, Conservation, and Decolonization with Derek Dunlop

Panel - Toward an Edible Campus

Nadia Gericke and Mrinmayee Sengupta explore the opportunities, challenges, and impact of student-led urban agriculture on a university campus in downtown Toronto.

Eva-Lynn Jagoe discusses waste in campus foodscapes.

Michael Classens and students from DigIn!, Amelia Collet, Diego Arreola Fernandez, Amber McNeil, Tamara Altrac, and Jyotsna Kumar, discuss the contradictions of prefiguration in campus foodscapes, offering an ultimately hopeful appraisal of the role of student activism in realising more just and sustainable food futures.

Field Trips

U of T Back Campus: Community History, Recent Developments, and Urban Ecology

The Edible Campus? Growing Change, Showing Change

The Narayever Synagogue: Sustainability in Sacred Spaces

Fighting Floatables Waterfront Tour with U of T Trash Team and friends

2023 SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE **DAY TWO**

Panel - Energy/Culture/Space/Place

Featuring Imre Szeman (University of Toronto, Institute for Environment, Conservation and Sustainability), Eva-Lynn Jagoe (University of Toronto, Centre for Comparative Literature), Anne Pasek (Trent University, Department of Cultural Studies and the School of the Environment), Caleb Wellum (University of Toronto, Department of Historical Studies)

Land Acknowledgement Workshop

A creative acknowledgement of our lands, waters and spirit with Wyandot Artist and utrihōt/FaithKeeper Catherine Tammaro

Short Talks

Dance to Justice with Leena Manimekalai (talk and film)

Coyote is speaking, are you listening? With Lesley Sampson

Field Trips

Embodied Reflections at Taddle Creek

Toronto Field Naturalist Stewardship Partnership with City in Cottonwood Flats
Walk along Small Creek with Friends of the Small Creek & Lost Rivers

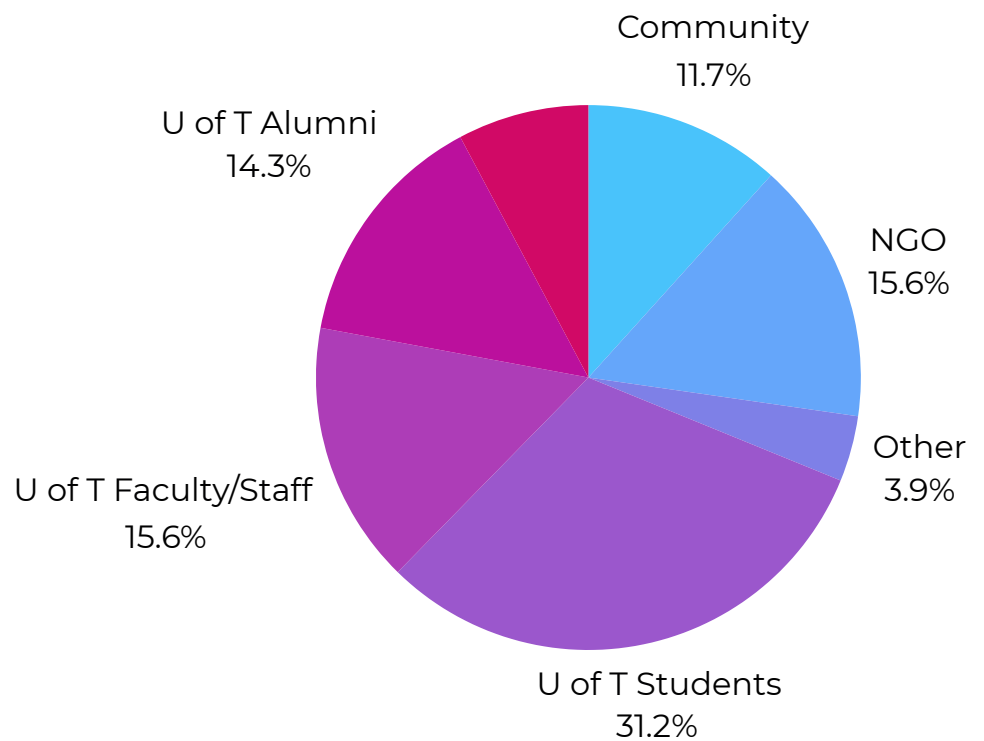
Walk along Small Creek with Friends of the Small Creek & Lost Rivers

Smythe Park - social classes sharing the same natural space

BREAKDOWN OF PARTICIPANTS

Over the two-day Symposium, 71 people attended the events. The primary audience was from the University of Toronto, drawing from faculty, staff, students, and alumni communities. A series of attendees from the wider Toronto community and non-governmental organizations were also in attendance. The breakdown of participants is represented in the following table and chart:

Attendees	
Community	9
NGO	12
Other	3
U of T Students	24
U of T Faculty/Staff	12
U of T Alumni	11
Other Students	6



76 Total Attendees

IMPACT STORIES

We conducted a series of interviews with people involved with the 2023 Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium. Our eight interviewees included community and student participants, panelists, short talk speakers, field trip facilitators, and planning committee members. We asked a variety of questions to provide a full picture of perceptions of the event. Based on these interviews, we found that the 2023 Beatrice and Arthur Minden symposium was very well received with all our interview participants describing positive experiences at the event. Summarized next are the key themes, findings, and impacts emerged in the stories we heard, reflecting the experiences, lasting impacts of the knowledge shared, and activities conducted from the Symposium.

Powerful Experiences at the Symposium


The inclusion of multiple knowledge systems, the recognition of history, and the time and space dedicated to place-based consideration at the Symposium were described by participants as powerful. The sessions valued multiple forms of knowledge, which several interviewees reflected on:

The land acknowledgement session [was] particularly impactful as it fostered a deep connection to the community while also providing valuable insights into community dynamics. While academic panels tend to be standardized, it was refreshing to witness non-traditional approaches. Despite this, they provided high-quality information. Recognizing diverse audience backgrounds is crucial, as assuming a solely academic audience can cause disconnects and disjointed experiences, making the Land Acknowledgment more insightful.

Event coordinator and graduate student Zeina Seaifan

Powerful Experiences at the Symposium (cont.)


This knowledge brought together both learning and action from participants, and drew on ecological and social elements in various forms:



Elder Catherine showed a video of owl sounds, engaging both hearing and sight, helping participants improve listening skills and express creativity. Participants were also encouraged to create their own personalized pieces, adding a personal touch to the session. Seeing her art around the city months later reminded me of the session and its importance.

Event coordinator and School of the Environment Department Manager Meghan Sbrocchi


Further, the exchange of knowledge across participants was deeply valued by attendees, and the disruption of the usual hierarchies of expertise was noted, with student presentations evoking particular attention and praise:



[Attendees] were eager to hear from the students and actively participated, showing a strong desire for interaction. Giving students a platform to share their insights was impactful. It's important to give students such spaces to express themselves and contribute to discussions. Feedback on the students' initiative was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing its importance.

Event Coordinator at the School of the Environment Emma Bernardo

Some participants described the power of illustrative examples of social change, signaling the value of the integration of theory and practice through the events of the Symposium:



I learned a lot. I really appreciated one presenter who was talking about their community organizing around a natural area that was going to be affected by a Metrolinx train. And through the telling of that story, I thought it was very powerful. And then the way in which they were connecting that to other points of resistance along the track, so that the structure of the track itself created this opportunity for other stories to be told and other links to be made between the different communities along the track.

Participant and community member Anne Keary

Lasting Impacts and Ongoing Action from the Symposium

Participants described how the Symposium has continued to inform and shape their experiences on and beyond campus, and how their time in the Symposium sparked ongoing action. Some learned of research initiatives and campus-based programs, and so have been able to interact with those projects and networks in the months since the Symposium:

I learned about organizations that I didn't know existed. The one that really stands out is the Toronto Climate Observatory. I wasn't even aware of the Toronto Climate Observatory and what they're doing, that's how I learned about them. And so I've started following them and have been in touch with them. And I learned about them at the Minden Symposium.

Steering Committee and Critical Zones member Professor Alexandra Rahr

I followed up with some of the food systems work with Dig In!. And the cafe that they started, you know, it's a free café where everybody gets to eat. And they met a bunch of times last year

Short talk speaker and fieldtrip facilitator Bill Kroeger

I think it definitely brought people together that we're all kind of interested in similar things. I met some undergrads, I met some other grad students, I met some profs and community members. So that was cool. I think I learned a lot about like things that were going on at U of T that I didn't really know about before, like Dig In." Chanen added, "I definitely was trying to find ways to get more involved in gardening or campus agriculture after the event.

Participant and graduate student Cassie Chanen

Others described conversations about the Symposium itself that continued long after the two-day event:

"People came up to me, I mean, for months afterwards and said how much they appreciate getting to hear from students in particular about the organizing work they're doing on campus in the context of like food systems and climate justice stuff. It was really gratifying to be able to include students in the event.

Panelist and field trip facilitator Professor Michael Classens

Overall, the impact stories demonstrate how the Symposium positively affected both event organizers and participants. Through documenting these perspectives, we have provided testament to the far-reaching influence of the Symposium in both academic and community circles.

NEXT STEPS

This report concludes that the 2023 Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment was a thoughtful, engaging, and well-planned event that delivered a lasting impact for participants. Our interviewees expressed their hope to see more events of this nature in the future.

Moving forward, we offer three suggestions to continue delivering impactful Symposia.

01

We suggest furthering student and community engagement. Many interviewees discussed the importance of highlighting student and community initiatives. Several also encouraged featuring students and community members more centrally in the event, rather than solely acting as participants. A few reflected on the particular value that student interventions brought to the 2023 Symposium.

02

We also advise continuing to incorporate an outdoor education component. Respondents enjoyed the field trips and other opportunities to be outside and connect to nature during the Symposium.

03

Our final suggestion is to expand documentation efforts. Multiple interview participants noted how thought-provoking the panels and short talks were, and how they would benefit from recordings which they could return to later. Establishing an archival practice where sections of the event are recorded and made publicly available online also serves to boost engagement and keep a detailed record of what took place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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