

**NIAGARA
ESCARPMENT
Views**

Spring 2014 (March, April, May)

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Annual Special Issue**

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View of Land Conservation: Walk with Us

By Bob Barnett



▲ The Barnett children on the Bruce Trail.

One Sunday in April 1984, our young family started hiking the Bruce Trail at the cairn at Queenston.

My six year-old son and eight year-old daughter walked 10 km, stopping to swing on vines and hiding behind rocks to scare us. Then as the sun set, we rode our previously positioned bicycles back to the van along a quiet side road.

That trip changed my life. Over the next two and a half years, we hiked the whole 750-km trail to Tobermory through a bit of mud, a few mosquitos, and not enough rain to melt us. We invited the kid's friends, ate a lot of trail mix, dangled our feet over the edge of the Escarpment, pushed hay bales, identified plants, watched Turkey Vultures, porcupines and snakes while having a family-changing experience as we shared a bit of adversity but achieved a huge goal together. Despite having our shuttle bicycle stolen one day, we reached Tobermory while my son was still eight years old; at that time the youngest to complete the whole thing.

Today I run Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC), a land trust with 9,350 protected acres on 123 sites. I read books like *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, about how we need to spend time in nature to be healthy. When we started EBC, the philosophy among land trusts was to protect pieces of nature from people and provide sanctuary for rare species. After 16 years of working away in the shadows protecting "sort of secret" reserves intended for only our initiated friends who watch birds, I've now concluded that we have to interest people in our project if we are to get support. We have to find a way to get families out into nature if we are to reverse government funding cuts and build our base of support to the point where we can sustain our work with landowners to protect more and more land to

recreate a commons we can visit to restore our health.

Nature Heals

I wondered what it was that made me feel good when I visited the woods. Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan explained that in *Your Brain on Nature*. After centuries of exploiting nature and living and working in dimly lit, poorly ventilated workplaces and houses, the notion of nature as a natural healer again gained popularity in the mid to late 19th century. Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir of Thornbury fame who started the American parks system, voiced their concerns about urban life and described nature as essential to well-being. Muir reported that "tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people" could benefit from wandering in wilderness. Doctors prescribed natural retreat centres with walks in nature as the cure for all sorts of ailments.

Lately, doctors have prescribed pills instead. Since TV, watching football has replaced walking in the woods. Our children play video games because it is reported to be dangerous to let them outside or even walk to school. All this has resulted in a 50 per cent drop in visits to U.S. national parks and probably the same in Canada.

Wake-up Call

Science caught up with the notion that nature has value when in 1979 Michigan's Roger Ulrich began studying the science of nature's impact on health. First there were a few scattered studies showing that students who had viewed natural scenes had increased feelings of affection, playfulness, friendliness and elation.

More and more studies followed which showed that not only looking at nature, but being in nature brought increases in serotonin production, lower stress, higher

creativity, less muscular tension, and lower heart rates. The Japanese call it "forest bathing," but walking in nature has been shown scientifically to improve mood and vigour. By decreasing psychological stress, depressive symptoms and hostility, nature increases cancer-killing cells, anti-viral cells and improves the functioning of the immune system.

Patients recover better in a room with plants or a view of nature while students learn better in a classroom with a view and better still outdoors in nature. Sick leaves are reduced if there are plants in the workplace. In short, green spaces produce better health and learning.

"The brain is absolutely influenced by nature, and it is no longer an option to write off philosophers and poets as mere romantic dreamers," write Selhub and Logan. "The results of the scientific investigations ... should serve as a wake-up call for all of us. The mortality of individuals, nations and even the planet itself is dependent on the recognition and acceptance that nature is part of us. Our perception of stress, our mental state, our immunity, our happiness, and our resilience are all chemically influenced by the nervous system in its response to the natural environment."

For more information, read *Sustaining Life: How Human Health Depends on Biodiversity*, edited by Eric Chivian and Aaron Bernstein.

Our EBC has produced the brochure "Walk with Us" to identify 16 places where our Conservancy encourages walking in nature. These walks were also described in the last two issues of *Niagara Escarpment Views*. Please join us in the woods. **NEV**

Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy
escarpment.ca rbarnett@escarpment.ca 888.815.9575

