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You can't see the forest for the desks in the way

By Bob Barnett

Roger Ulrich wrote, “In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches.” Elizabeth Kolbert writes “The sixth extinction will continue to determine the course of life long after everything people have written and painted and built has been ground into dust and giant rats have – or have not– inherited the earth.” Few of us realize we’re in the middle of that extinction. We’re so close to it we can’t see it. Richard Leakey has warned that, “Homo sapiens might not only be the agent of the sixth extinction, but also risks being one of its victims.”

I spend all my available hours travelling around to events like Toronto’s Green Living Show, fall fairs in towns like Wiarton, the pumpkin festival in Port Elgin and woodlot conferences in Elmwood, to meet families who own land in this part of Ontario so blessed with rare and endangered species. Many of them invite me to see their forest or wetland. We spend sunny and rainy afternoons together turning over leaves, looking up at the endangered butternut tree with its black fungus at the base and finding little orchids just poking above the leaf litter. Afterwards we head back for a warm bowl of soup beside the woodstove and talk about protecting that land forever.

A recent visit took me back to my youth paddling the Mattawa River when I visited a couple who bought almost two square km of rocky woods on Boom Creek with a 65-foot waterfall, to see it protected during their lifetime. They live off the grid with a wood fire and a small solar generator. Every day they

walk the property getting to know as much as they can about the trees and animals in their domain.

City People & Nature

After soup, we draft up an agreement that prevents future owners from ever turning that land into a gravel pit or more urban sprawl. I head back to Toronto and over the four-hour drive, my friend and I get into a long discussion about the need to protect nature and how so few people from the city have a chance to get into a forest.

Roger Ulrich, quoted above, was one of the first recent researchers to document the health benefits that nature brings. Our children are losing that health to computer devices

protect her wetland with showy orchids. Just up the road lives a man who’s bought 800 acres of land and planted 300,000 trees because he wants it to soak up our carbon dioxide. Each of these refuges is a potential nature reserve. Their owners know about the sixth extinction we’re causing and want to do their part to protect part of our forest.

Failure to Protect

We have failed to protect much of this area. Southern Ontario has only four per cent protected in parks or nature reserves. That is far below the 17 per cent agreed by 146 countries, including Canada as well as Ontario. That protection is supposed to be focussed on areas like southern Ontario where

for appraisals and legal fees to turn the dreams of these families into permanent agreements and reserves to protect their land with its species. We debate instead the fine details of which lands can be exempted from property taxes. Our donors must pay municipal taxes on top of the appraisals and legal fees we pay to receive donated land. And we get grief from some municipalities because our nature is exempted from their property taxes. Biodiversity seems to be something that someone has to pay to look after.

Then, I head off to northern Toronto to talk to the federal government. They grant landowners generous income tax benefits if they donate land or agree to protect their land in perpetuity. But they argue for months about how a landowner should not remove enough wood to heat their house. A normal project takes six or eight months to approve. Right now I have 11 families waiting less than patiently to make their way through the federal eye of the needle. For me, it’s not easy to explain the gap between the federal and provincial agreements to protect nature and the lack of funding and the months it takes to get a project approved.

So I go back to what I do best. Visiting the 40 square km of forests, cliff-top walks and shoreline solitude we’ve created so far, thinking about the ten square km waiting for various approvals and trying not to think about this sixth extinction we’re causing today. **NEV**

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We’re causing the sixth extinction.

and the perceived need for safety and security. Nature is becoming a sideshow and we, like our conquering heroes from the Mayflower, feel compelled to cut down the enemy, our forest. We want to live in safe compounds, not so different from medieval walled towns. Sometimes we surround our personal compound with lots of grass and imported flowers. All of this pushes nature further back from our cities and erodes our forest with its quirky and sometimes rare species.

Another weekend I have soup with a family who wish to see their farm near Durham conserved. Nearby, I visit a woman who wants to donate her 75-acre wetland. Near her is a retired missionary who wants to

rare species are common. We’ve instead built most of our parks far away from where my family can visit. We’re still nostalgic about walking the Bruce Trail when the kids were young, but that was a lot of driving. The nearest thing to nature is an hour away from my house, unless you count the few river valleys running through the city with cars in sight and certainly audible.

There is no provincial money to protect nature. There does seem to be money to study a rare species, but not to protect the land where it lives. I travel another road to Peterborough to discuss the possibility of more money to help these families protect their land. The vaults are closed when it comes to paying