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What is Land Worth?

By Bob Barnett

In June I helped a group of botanists visit the shore of Lake Huron west of Miller Lake in Bruce County and about 20 km south of Tobermory. We spent the day looking at Hill's Thistle and other botanical rarities on a property owned by Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC). Among the finds were a Massassauga Rattlesnake and a rare dragonfly.

Only a week later I found that there is an application to build a house right beside the very nature reserve we had visited, right on a globally rare type of land called an alvar, within metres of our reserve and the Hill's Thistle. I let my new botanical friends and EBC contacts know and 22 letters flooded in to the municipality to object to the rezoning. We objected that the land was rated a provincially significant (PS) Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) and that such a development would erode EBC's nature reserve next door and the alvar on the subject property through physical destruction, invasive species, human recreational use and domestic pets.

Just Another ANSI

The applicant's consultant reported there would be no negative impact on the ANSI, that there were plenty of similar alvars and that neither the Hill's Thistle on our property nor the Massassauga nor the Wood Thrush on the applicant's property would be affected. The applicant pointed out that this was just one of 225,000 hectares of PS ANSI. I countered that PS ANSIs

were rare enough to represent only one of 1700 equal parts of southern Ontario.

I contacted Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry but they stated that such decisions, despite the provincial designation, were to be made locally. Ultimately a decision was delayed until the Saugeen Ojibway Nation could weigh in with their thoughts about the desirability of the project.

right beside a PS wetland. Unfortunately, biology is an unregulated profession.

Value of Land a Failure

Also unfortunately, with our system of a market economy, land has become a commodity, like labour and manufactured goods. Even the concept of private land is relatively recent and supports our economy's real

protection, clean air, water, carbon sequestration, recreation, tourism and biological diversity.

Instead, we value land and tax it based on its highest and best commercial use. Just as in the example in Bruce County, it's often zoned "planned development", not "environmental protection" the way it should be. Development of such lands should be strictly prohibited and not need to rely on the efforts of poorly funded community groups to fight development.

It's hard to rely on wise municipal decisions when they depend on tax dollars from development. Given that ten years ago the province reported that ecological services from nature brought \$85 BILLION worth of benefits to southern Ontario, there should be a designation called "environmental services" and we should revert to the old system where a landowner was rewarded for leaving those services alone. Incidentally, EBC provides \$25 million of services every year, but we have only been able to turn about \$100,000/year into revenue by selling carbon offsets.

The jury is still out on both the Bruce County and Hidden Quarry decisions. In the meantime, I hope we can afford to keep protecting a property a month to keep them out of the clutches of quarries and houses. It's a lot less expensive than fighting developers.

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Development of [provincially significant] lands should be strictly prohibited and not need to rely on the efforts of poorly funded community groups to fight development.

Only last month, right next door to another EBC reserve near Rockwood, I found out at the Hidden Quarry hearing that the developer's and community's biologists' opinions on the acceptability of the proposed quarry seem to vary almost diametrically. The developer's experts felt there would be virtually no negative impact from a 30-m deep hole

estate market. By comparison, First Nations land today is owned communally and supposed to be governed for the best outcome over seven generations.

The whole idea that land is only valuable if it makes a living is a great failure of our society. We do not value most of the components of ecological services that land provides like flood