

Niagara Escarpment Visionary: **Bob Barnett**



Bob Barnett at one of his favourite EBC reserves, Freer Point on Manitoulin Island.

Photo by Ted Cowan.

Bob Barnett deserves to be recognized as an Escarpment Visionary because of his unwavering dedication for 16 years, to preserving and protecting natural lands close to the Niagara Escarpment. He was one of the founders, in 1996, along with Bob Adams, Ted Cowan and Robert Wilson, of the Escarpment Biosphere

Conservancy (EBC), a land trust charity with a mission “to establish nature reserves in the Niagara Escarpment area and to educate the public about conservation and preservation.”

Through Barnett, EBC is achieving their goal. Since 1998, 114 reserves totalling 8,768 acres have been protected from Caledon East to Manitoulin Island. Barnett has done this by

convincing landowners of the importance of conservation.

“This and unceasing effort by Bob is what underlies EBC’s acquiring a property a month for eight years in succession, with what would appear to be minimal resources,” declares Ted Cowan, a co-founder and former chair of EBC.

Barnett first became aware of the Niagara Escarpment in 1968 as an architecture student at University of Toronto, when he joined their Outing Club, which hiked, climbed and caved near Metcalfe Rock in the Escarpment south of Thornbury. Barnett and friends even designed and built the cottage that is still used there by students.

He also became involved with the Bruce Trail, hiking from end to end in the mid ‘80s with his wife Anna and their two young children. “This really solidified my interest,” he says.

In 1996 his group “decided that an ecological corridor was needed to protect the whole Escarpment,” he adds. “Now our mission has expanded beyond the rivers and forests of the Escarpment itself to the Huron shore, through the Saugeen Valley and up to the Manitoulin’s escarpment, which is the whole island.” EBC has secured 3,000 acres on Manitoulin alone.

“Bob has acquired jewels such as the Cup and Saucer feature and created a hiking trail system and guide to 20 trails on Manitoulin Island,” says Robert

Patrick, president of Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE).

“I remember acquiring the Cup and Saucer and thinking ‘This can’t be real,’” notes Barnett. “Here we are a hundred reserves later.”

“Several of the EBC nature reserves were in areas that made them open to potential resort or cottage subdivision development,” adds Patrick. “Upon acquisition of properties such as these at Cape Chin and Dyer’s Bay, Bob had the lands re-evaluated through the Ministry of Natural Resources and re-designated to Escarpment Protection or Escarpment Natural where applicable. EBC is the only agency I know of, that has reduced the amount of Niagara Escarpment Plan land designated Recreational. CONE commends EBC for this very valuable deed. Many of the EBC acquisitions are wetlands now under protection from inappropriate development.”

Gunter and Vicky Springer are landowners who have worked with EBC. “Bob made it possible to protect our land without any bureaucratic fuss,” they say. “His work conserves thousands of acres of Escarpment and related lands and retains them in as natural a state as possible. Future generations will thank him for his initiative.”

Barnett is not yet content, though. “Southern Ontario only has 3.8 per cent of its land protected as a park or reserve. That should be brought up to 12 per cent to fulfil Ontario’s and Canada’s commitment through the International Convention on Biodiversity. Ontario’s Environmental Commissioner wants that raised to 17 per cent by 2020. I believe that people will create the political demand to expand Ontario’s commons, places we can all visit, places where our children can learn to love nature. Our commons will make life in our cities and developed lands more healthy, less expensive and way more attractive.” **NEV**