

Manitoulin Musings on Protecting Nature

Written & photographed
by Bob Barnett

Tonight I watched a beet-red sun go down across the North Channel on Manitoulin Island. The majesty and the intimacy of this protected landscape hit me hard. This could have been a long row of cottages with roads, chain saws and sea doos. Instead, you can walk for an hour along the shore all by yourself, although I was surprised to meet another solitary walker in our savannah. The terns noticed me as they wheeled overhead and the Canada Geese distracted me from their chick, motionless along the shore. That sun just grew and grew as it touched the horizon.

I spent today with an 89-year-old who wants to protect the town site of Michael's Bay on the Island. In the late 1800s it had 400 people feeding its sawmill. He told me of drownings and baby deaths. Today the once-

biggest town on Manitoulin is nothing but gentle pits in the ground where the coffins have collapsed. Not one original grave marker remains among the spruce and cedar. Only six months ago I was in Cambodia viewing a lost civilization, but Manitoulin has its own ghosts. The only trace of an entire town is a few root cellar hollows, and graves, all overgrown.

A Shadow on Earth

We are just a shadow, a flicker upon the earth. I'm reading about our ancestor apes which evolved 17 million years ago. I saw the silica hill in Sheguiandah where our First Nations ancestors may have chipped out stone tools 11,000 years ago. Or was it 20,000? We can't protect everything, but we should protect enough to remind us how small we are. And we must protect nature which has been evolving for billions of years. We are just one species and we have so much to learn by observation.



▲ At the mill ruins.

That's why Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy protects every piece of nature we can. We build trails so you and your family can see the motionless Bald Eagle in a tree and the White-tailed Deer run for cover in the forest as I did today.

I took Mark Zelinski around Manitoulin Island recently to prepare photos for his book on the Niagara Escarpment. Gloria and Mike of *Niagara Escarpment Views* joined us for part of that day. That guided tour made me think how important our conservation has become. It's not just a few disjointed woodlots and swamps, but tiny perfect examples of what needs to be protected. I wish I could take everyone, with their children and grandchildren, on the same tour.

Need to Protect Nature

We have protected rocky shoreline, alvars, crevices, savannah, rock faces and sand beaches. Our last project was a wetland right on the Niagara Escarpment. Our next project has a waterfall, wetlands, springs and Escarpment outcrops. I hope you can visit.

I hope we can protect the town site, right on the Manitou River where it joins Lake Huron. I hope that ghost of a town can be retained so we can all feel our place in the world



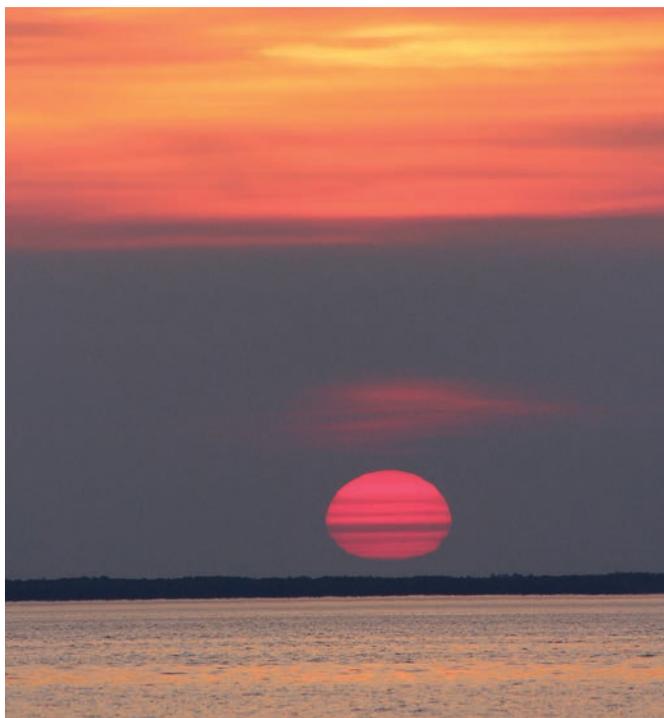
▲ Silica rocks possibly used by our ancestors for tool-making?

and get an inkling of how those people lived and died.

The same 89-year-old is extending a trail in Little Current to an abandoned mill. Today we saw young people meeting there with their friends, climbing the abandoned concrete piers and getting away from the rest of the world, just as I did as a kid at an old fort dug by the previous generation of kids in the woods. We need places in nature if we and our children and their children are going to know how it gives us life, comfort and understanding.

Niagara Escarpment Views and Mark's new book will give you but a quick glimpse of what is there. You need to sit in that scene to understand.

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▲ Beet-red sun setting over Manitoulin Island's North Channel.