

Recreating the Commons

By Bob Barnett

My Dad could never figure it out. Whenever we talked about Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy's (EBC) nature reserves, he'd say, "What are you going to do with all that land?" He was an architect and for him, land was for building something on. Leaving it for nature was an alien concept. He died 10 years ago at 93 and just never understood.

In 1998, Cameron Smith, a Toronto Star columnist asked me "Why are you doing this?" I replied "I want a place for my grandchildren and their grandchildren to appreciate what we grew up with."

Commons Concept

Towns in England often had a central public green commons. Outside of town there was a larger commons where those with no land could graze their sheep. The clearances, when the aristocracy took over the common lands, caused the great migrations to North America. Europe retained a legacy of public access; landowners cannot block paths that have been used for hundreds of years.

In Ontario, land was surveyed into 100-acre blocks and granted or sold in a huge rush to settle and exploit the land. There was no concept of the commons, but there was a lot of land and landowners were pretty easy going about their neighbours wandering through the woods or swimming in the river. Urbanites, moving to weekend estates, were much quicker to fence the land and post no trespassing signs.

Ontario set up a few parks starting in 1885 including Algonquin, Quetico and Rondeau. The first idea was

to protect the forest and wildlife resources, later to allow cottages, but soon the idea of preserving nature took over. By the 1950s there were still only a few parks. Less than one per cent of southern Ontario is protected as a park today.

After Hurricane Hazel in the early '50s there was a push, not for parks, but to protect people from floods.

Conservation authorities were given funding to buy up valley lands and today they own 2.1 per cent of southern Ontario. While there are now often parks and campgrounds along those rivers, flood prevention was the idea at the time.

Charities protecting land started with the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, now Ontario Nature, in 1962 with the push to acquire Dorcas Bay near Tobermory. Mac Kirk, one of EBC's first directors, was instrumental in publicizing this effort and raising money. Nature Conservancy of Canada started up just a few years later. Today, they've protected over 40,000 acres in southern Ontario.

Land Trusts

Land trusts started in the 1990s. EBC was one of only seven in Ontario when we started in 1997. Today, 40 land trusts including Nature Conservancy and Ontario Nature have protected 100,000 acres or about seven per cent of southern Ontario. That's more than the federal government, almost as much as the provincial government and a third that of the



Bob Barnett checking signs on a trail on Manitoulin Island. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

conservation authorities.

In 2012, Canada and Ontario joined the International Biodiversity Agreement to protect 17 per cent of our land. EBC is conserving a new donated property each month! We expect to register 1,200 new acres before year end. But our funds are running out and soon we will have to stop accepting such generosity unless more stable funding arrives. Unfortunately, the land trusts are virtually the only contributor to that 17 per cent goal.

What You Can Do

Back to my Dad's question, "What are you going to do with all that land?" We think we must follow the lead of the Bruce Trail and encourage people to get out and walk on the land. We know that seeing the land up close encourages people to appreciate it. We expect it will bring volunteers and donors. What other charity allows you to donate \$50 and protect \$1,000 worth of land? That \$50 spent on land protects \$1,300 worth of ecosystem services every year, preventing floods, protecting rare species, sequestering carbon, cleaning

the air AND providing you a place to improve your health in nature AND educate you and your kids. We consider that \$50 the best investment you can make. After your income tax savings it only costs you \$30.

EBC is ramping up our trails program so you can get out and visit YOUR nature reserves. We have brochures on our southern trails and those on the northern Bruce Peninsula. We distribute a free map showing Manitoulin trails. We discussed trails with another land conservation organization. I said, our goals must be the same, "to promote trails and don't allow hunting." I was surprised to hear him say, "We're the opposite. We don't want trails and we do encourage hunting on our lands."

It is clear that even the land conservation community is struggling with "What are you going to do with all that land?" For EBC, it's clear. We invite you to join us on YOUR nature reserves.

Get brochures and maps from Bob Barnett of Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy at 888.815.9575 or through www.escarpment.ca.