

# Ten steps to Protect Nature's "Factory"

By Bob Barnett

Nature can be viewed as a giant factory producing both essential goods and things we love. Trees convert carbon dioxide to oxygen which is essential to life. Swamps soak up water after a rain, preventing floods, and remove silt and chemicals while cleaning rivers and refilling aquifers. Nature provides houses for birds in the trees, and holes for mammals and reptiles. Meanwhile an army of worms, spiders, snakes, birds, bats and insects clean up things we don't like. Mosquitoes, dead things, including us, poop and even invasive plants like Purple Loosestrife, all feed beneficial things, creating functional worth as well as beauty and health. We capture this beauty in photographs and travel the world to see it. Forest therapy is known to quiet our minds; we recover from injury and illness faster if we can see a tree.

This amazing factory generates services that economists in a government report, say is worth \$85 billion dollars a year in southern Ontario alone. They have valued things like climate regulation provided by trees. Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) has found corporations like Desjardins which are willing

to pay \$100,000 per year for us to remove carbon dioxide and store it long term in trees and ultimately soil.

## Who Benefits?

Who owns this amazing factory? About 90 per cent is owned by people like you and me and sometimes by corporations and the people we elect. Municipalities, provinces and the federal government own about 10 per cent as parks and nature reserves.

Elinor Ostrom, who summered on what is now an EBC nature reserve, won a Nobel prize for describing how groups of people self-regulate the use of nature for the benefit of the entire group. Lobster fishermen regulate the number of traps and where individuals can set them. She called it regulating the commons after the shared pasturelands in England. The English House of Commons then decided it was better to privatize those lands to let individual owners make a profit.

There are few rewards for protecting the nature we all need, but financial incentives for draining swamps to grow more crops, cutting trees to pay taxes or feed lumber products into the economy, or simply building a house. Homeowners don't like mosquitoes so they replace trees with lawns. It is

in every landowner's interest to sell resources and reduce the value produced by the commons. You can't convince most people to be altruistic when offered thousands or millions of dollars for their trees, rocks, water or the land itself.

Ecological restoration is a very poor substitute for protecting what exists. Quarries filled with water are not as good as natural lakes. Planted trees take centuries to develop a well-rounded ecosystem. Canada's current forest harvesting emits more

carbon than it sequesters. Few people know or care that only 15 per cent of forest products sold will last 100 years like mature carbon-absorbing trees.

We should set rules to protect nature's factory and prevent individuals from stealing our common inheritance for their personal benefit. Famous ecologist E.O. Wilson calculates that we need half of the surface of the earth to provide the services we need. Canada and 193 other countries aspire to protect only 20 per cent today and 30 per cent by 2030.

## Ten Steps

Will we and our elected representatives have the courage and foresight to head off the loss of nature's services and prevent catastrophes like climate change, lack of fresh water, loss of biodiversity and nature's health-giving and aesthetic powers? Here's a list of what we need to do.

1. Tax lands only when developed or resources are extracted (property and capital gains taxes).
2. Award constitutional rights to nature as Ecuador, Bolivia, India and some U.S. municipalities have done.
3. Restore the office of environmental commissioner.
4. Empower senators with an environmental mission or create a House of Natural Rights to review legislation.
5. Include forest carbon sequestration in climate recovery programs.
6. Provide more financial support to nature conservation initiatives.
7. Ensure that regulations to protect nature are upheld strictly and vigorously.
8. Support measures to fight invasive species.
9. Remove subsidies and support for programs that reduce nature's services, while supporting programs that increase these services.
10. Include the addition or loss of nature's services when making decisions and budgets which impact the environment.

EBC is contesting, through Ontario's Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, the rezoning of this north Bruce Peninsula property from a protected designation, to "resort residential," which allows development. PHOTO BY BOB BARNETT.



Please join us in the fight to make these changes. Our elected representatives are like factory managers. They shut down nature's production when, for example, tar sands are developed or subdivisions are built. They increase nature's production when they protect nature.

You can help them make wise decisions by participating in your community's planning decisions.

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