

# Do Profits Trump Nature?

By Bob Barnett

**N**ature is defenceless against bulldozers, chainsaws and industrial fishing. Our capitalist system rewards those who make the greatest use of natural resources and spew pollutants like CO<sub>2</sub> into the air. There is a fundamental battle in our politics between people who believe less regulation is better and others who think business and industry ought to be regulated to provide both a high standard of living for people and the least harm to nature.

As a charity trying to protect nature for future generations, we walk a fine line by depending on both generous donors and government regulation. Laws and bylaws prevent loss of important natural areas before we have a chance to protect them. Sometimes developers give us the edges of properties they can't develop.

Many of us blanched when we heard about oil exploration in the Alaskan wildlife refuge or opening Indigenous lands in the Amazon to development without the residents' consent.

## Conservation Changes

Here in Ontario, the latest budget took away the regulatory powers of conservation authorities (CAs) including their capacity to stop unauthorized work and to present evidence at Ontario's environmental tribunal. It also denies municipal members of the CAs' boards the right to evaluate applications according to the CA's mission and instead ONLY allows them to represent the interests of their municipality. This is far from the powers granted the CAs after Hurricane Hazel in 1954 killed 82 people

by sweeping away houses built in flood plains. Every spring we read of flooding in Manitoba and Quebec. Having an authority to regulate land use in Ontario's watersheds and flood plains has been recognized as a world-leading approach. Yet developers dislike such regulation which reduces profits from wetlands.

As David Crombie, chair of the Greenbelt Council before he resigned, and former mayor of Toronto says, "This is not policy and institutional reform. This is high-level bombing and needs to be resisted."

The provincial government has decided to trump watershed, municipal or provincial land use restrictions by issuing municipal zoning orders (MZOs) to sweep aside objections, cut red tape, give development priority over nature and, I would argue, common sense. This reduces the role of citizens in the established procedures for evaluating environmental impacts. These MZOs, now in frequent use, have been used to approve a huge casino and housing project in the previously protected wetland where Duffins Creek joins Lake Ontario south of the 401 and Ajax.

Projects turned down years ago are re-emerging. The quarry Sarah Harmer fought on the Escarpment at Mount Nemo, the housing on Silver Creek in Collingwood and the GTA West expressway through the Greenbelt in Caledon and Halton have all been brought back to life.

To start this chain of deregulation, the present government fired the environmental commissioner, supposedly an independent officer of the legislature. The commissioner's reports have helped keep

three governments on track for 25 years.

## Save Nature

At another scale, Grey County's draft climate adaptation strategy highlighted reduction of fossil fuel use, but ignored the fact that Grey County houses a huge forest which could contribute substantially to the absorption of carbon

paper, use them for heating or heave them into landfill as old furniture. That's where 85 per cent of our harvested wood goes. I've suggested Grey County should add forests to the climate-action plan and start selling carbon offsets like EBC.

Nature needs help! We need to save important natural features from development not only for safety from floods, but



Only some of the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Hazel in 1954. These ruins were along Humber River east of Woodbridge. PHOTO BY JAMES VICTOR SALMON, COURTESY WIKIMEDIA.

into trees and ultimately the soil. Conventionally harvested forests absorb three tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per acre annually while mature, unharvested forests absorb more than five tonnes. Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) alone absorbs 63,000 tonnes a year, much of it in Grey. Grey County and Grey Sauble Conservation Authority could easily absorb 200,000 tonnes every year. That would offset a lot of gasoline, fuel oil and natural gas. But the county is keen to cut and sell its trees rather than collect carbon offset revenue.

We must not ignore reduction of fossil fuels, but we should be using all the tools at our disposal and encouraging landowners to keep their trees, not flush them as toilet

also to protect biodiversity, to provide the oxygen we breathe, help us fight climate change and provide landscapes for relief from stress.

Saving nature needs rules. Free enterprise won't do it alone. We need to elect politicians who make sound rules and enforce them. We can't just let business do what comes "naturally." Until economists include externalities like nature and human health in their models, we will have to keep firm reins on what they suggest we do to make more money.

*Bob Barnett of Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy can be reached through [www.escarpment.ca](http://www.escarpment.ca), [rbarnett@escarpment.ca](mailto:rbarnett@escarpment.ca) or 888.815.9575.*