

Hidden Benefits of Conserving the Escarpment

By Bob Barnett

Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) is starting our 25th year. We have 45 Niagara Escarpment properties protected with 5,500 acres (23 sq km). I remember hiking my first Bruce Trail end to end in 1986 with our young family. We absorbed the sights of Raccoons, Hawks and snakes, the rain and spectacular views that the kids ran toward, scaring us. It made us a family unit that is strong today, 35 years later. That started me conserving land, first for the Bruce Trail and now for the Conservancy. It deflected me from my architectural career to the extent that I'm now the anti-architect: protecting land from buildings.

It's hard to determine which reasons for protecting land are most important. How can we balance these "hidden" benefits against the municipal race to add new property taxes?

1. Ontario, Canada and 193 countries are striving to protect 30 per cent of our land, especially in areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services and to prevent the extinction of known threatened species. The Escarpment has a very high concentration of rare, threatened and endangered species. We have now identified 70 species of conservation concern on our reserves. Nature provides value by removing pollutants from our air and water and preventing floods. EBC's 208 reserves protect \$35 million of such services annually. But we never see that money. The value of nature's services is rarely included in the cost/benefit of projected development.

2. Connectivity is extremely important and not just for the Bruce Trail. Species depend on getting from one property over the fence to next door. Buildings, roads, lights and people break that flow. Birds can fly over and around barriers, but plants and many animals aren't so lucky. The Niagara Escarpment Plan defined a continuous natural feature and that has brought economic health to communities from Queenston to Tobermory.

3. Grey County is developing a climate action plan. There must be two dimensions for any climate plan to succeed: reducing carbon and absorbing it. EBC suggested Grey County emphasize the importance of protecting our mature trees which absorb so much carbon. Only 15 per cent of harvested wood lasts 100 years while almost half is designated for immediate disposal as toilet paper and other household uses. EBC has sequestered 733,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide in our trees so far. We've only managed to monetize about \$500,000 for that removal. We must both reduce carbon use and absorb it to stave off the crisis which is already here. We must adapt to more heat, floods and winds. Trees and wetlands mitigate those problems.

4. The Bruce Trail brings hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Escarpment. EBC owns half of the park at Heathcote, just down the Beaver River. The next river over is the Bighead. There we now own the Trout Hollow reserve where John Muir lived while in Canada. We know that



View from Cup & Saucer Trail on Manitoulin Island. PHOTO COURTESY OF CLEMENTPHOTOGRAPHY.CA

with Beautiful Joe Park and the conservation authority lands in Meaford, we host thousands of people every year. What is our Cup and Saucer trail on Manitoulin's Escarpment worth as it brings 20,000 visitors a year?

5. For 50 years, academic literature has shown that seeing nature reduces one's time to recover from illness or injury. There have been dozens of books written about how time in nature improves both mental and physical health. The Japanese call it *Shin Rikyo* while locally some call it forest bathing, but I can personally testify that my time in nature is healthful. And it's not just exercise which creates better health, it is seeing the birds and animals and the views. Just thinking about nature makes many worries disappear. What's that worth? How many people stay out of hospital or take fewer drugs or cause fewer crimes? Does the government value the reduced need for services or the insurance industry reward us for saving lives? Not directly, or even indirectly, I think.

6. Early in my conservation career a journalist asked why I do it. I responded, "So my grandchildren can appreciate what I grew up with." People want nature, animals, trees, birds and plants and are often willing to pay for it. We raised \$1.7 million to save Heaven's Gate last spring when people saw the potential to protect the mountains, lakes painted by the Group of Seven.

Accountants call the type of things I've listed above as "externalities" because they consider them in a different league or "external" to financial consideration. Property tax revenue will beat out the well-being of residents, tourists and the needs of the broader community in municipal decision making until we have a better decision model. Somehow, we have to build these factors into economic impact studies. We have values from books and academic studies. We need new rules forcing decision makers to use them.

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