

One Conservation Thread

By Bob Barnett

As the sun rises over the LaCloche Mountains near Manitoulin Island, I find it strange that Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) has managed to protect 85 sq km of nature like the North Channel view I'm looking at now. What's strange is that my personal life's thread is just part of a whole tapestry of donors, board members, volunteers and staff who have pieced together 214 reserves over the last 25 years.

I grew up at Bayview and Eglinton in Toronto. At that time, Bayview had a one-lane bridge and Eglinton stopped at the Don River. I played in the swamp at the corner and jumped off the sand cliffs which were later replaced by Canada's first shopping centre. We had a small farm behind the house my Dad had built on an unpaved street. We spent Julys on Lake Scugog where I'd paddle down to the swamp and watch frogs and turtles.

As I studied architecture at University of Toronto, I joined the UofT Outing Club and started hiking, caving, climbing and canoeing with a group of outdoorsy people who slept under poly sheets and braved the snow and cold water. As I graduated, we started the white-water arm of the club and kayaked rivers as close as the Don, Humber and Credit, but more often the Madawaska, Petawawa, Ottawa, Rouge, Ste. Anne and once the Snake in Idaho.

When our kids arrived, I cut out the death-defying stuff and Anna and I introduced them to the Bruce Trail. We hiked the whole thing in stages over two and a half years and my son was the youngest to finish it in 1986. Urban

development was closing in each time we drove through St. Catharines and Brampton. I could see fewer fields and forests with every trip.

That pushed me to join the Bruce Trail where I found 15 properties for sale as I went out to complete two more end-to-ends. I got to be chair of their land committee as we bought those and other properties with Ontario funding. Later I chaired their fundraising committee and became a board member as we protected as much trail as possible. But not everything was smooth. The government would only protect 100 metres of trail corridor and the Bruce Trail's executive director at the time wanted to divest the land to reduce tax and insurance liabilities.

Escarpment Land Trust

So, I collected some allies and thought up an alternate plan: a land trust for the whole area of the Niagara Escarpment. A few months later, 44 invitees joined us at Halton Conservation and we agreed to start a trust. With the help of Doug Larson, we held our first official meeting at Henry Nordin's and added "Biosphere" to our name. Terk Bayly of Ontario Heritage Trust and I discussed who should be the first chair. He suggested me, with him as vice. Unfortunately, he died six months later. He, incidentally, placed Ontario's first conservation agreement on his land in Meaford. EBC is now working with the Almond family to protect the land right next door, sharing Workman's Creek.

Mac Kirk was a big supporter in those days. He assembled 19,000 acres for the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority. He and I travelled Grey County meeting his friends as he mentored me



▲ Bob and his grandson Jack preparing found animal bones for an EBC display. PHOTO PROVIDED BY BOB BARNETT.

about trees and wetlands and how he raised money.

Those were good days. In 1999 Tom Ashman and Dee Cherrie from Rural Rootz helped us with our first agreement on the Escarpment, between quarries in Warton. Charlotte Vansickle sold us our first reserve at Dyer's Bay. From four reserves in three years, we went to four more in 2001 alone, to nine reserves in 2002 with the help of supporters like Bill Murdoch and Ontario funding. Now we have reached a frenetic pace with seven reserves in March 2022 alone and a projected 42 more reserves before March '23 with funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada. This week alone, I visited 11 existing or proposed reserves, met with four landowners and deposited the funds to create our 213th reserve!

Very strange, this path that has led us here. We now

have over 5,000 supporters, 600 annual donors, 100 land donors, 300 members, three full-time staff and roughly 60 volunteers supporting our 14 board members. We have 214 nature reserves today, 48 on the Niagara Escarpment alone and the rest protecting the Escarpment ecosystem from the rivers that flow out of it, like the Nottawasaga and the Saugeen watershed where its tributaries all join, then end at the Huron shore.

We have about 120 reserves open for public visits and 96 km of trails. We all hope you will visit, take the kids, watch nature as I did over all these years, lower your blood pressure, and start the cycle all over again.

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