

Catchacoma forest isn't "endangered old growth"

The case for sustainable forest management (Feb 2020)

OPINION 08:24 PM by Svetlana Zeran Guest columnist, Peterborough Examiner



The Catchacoma forest is neither undisturbed nor comprised only of eastern hemlock trees. - TORSTAR FILE PHOTO

This letter is in response to an opinion piece featured in the Examiner on Feb. 14 entitled "[Our changing seasons: where trees have stood for centuries in Peterborough and the Kawarthas: The case for protections for Catchacoma old-growth woods.](#)"

The opinion piece claims that the hemlock forest north of Catchacoma Lake in Trent Lakes is an endangered old growth forest, one that reaches maturity in "undisturbed conditions." An important detail missing from this article is the fact that this hemlock grove is part of a working forest and was recently logged (harvested) in 1988. This hemlock grove is managed under license by certified professional foresters, specifically the Bancroft Minden Forest Company Inc. (a Forest Stewardship Council Certified company) in partnership with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. The statement in the opinion piece that "in

these parts of highly developed southern Ontario, old-growth forests are few and far-between" is true, but the Catchacoma hemlock grove is not one of them.

Harvest history is important when determining old growth status. Every forester learns in their university forestry science classes that old growth forests (also known as primary or virgin forests) are those that have attained great age without significant natural or human disturbance. It is extremely rare to find an "untouched" old-growth forest that would meet this definition and, in fact, the Catchacoma forest is neither undisturbed nor comprised only of eastern hemlock trees. While there is a presence of old trees, forests are not managed based on individual tree ages.

Pure hemlock forests are relatively uncommon in Ontario. Hemlock trees have unique shading properties that make them ideal refuges for wildlife. They are also long-lived species and generally found in 'uneven-aged' forests (those with a mixture of young, mature and old trees) which regenerate most commonly through annual small to moderate disturbances like wind, insects and disease. This makes them ideal for selection management: a partial harvest system that removes around 30% of the canopy, retaining many of the old-growth features which emulate individual tree mortality from small-scale disturbances.

Sustainable forestry engages a registered professional forester to assess the site and collect data to develop and certify a site-specific prescription for practitioners to use. In the Catchacoma forest, the Forester prescribed a selection harvest that focuses on removal of less vigorous trees and retention of healthy trees that will benefit from a release from competition. The goal of this particular harvest is to favor retention of hemlock with healthy large crowns (stems and leaves) to create the sunlight conditions needed to build them up. This would help them grow more resilient to the likely threat of future attacks from the invasive insect: hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) which slowly depletes hemlock nutrient stores by feeding on their needles. To ensure this prescription was carried out, a certified tree marker assessed every tree and marked with paint those for removal and those with high wildlife value for retention.

On Crown land, where the Catchacoma forest is situated, Foresters are required to balance environmental and social objectives at the site level and as identified in the approved 10-year forest management plan. Crown land forest management plans (in the context of a 100 year planning horizon) are written over the course of about 3 years with the help of a multidisciplinary planning team including First Nation representatives and provide multiple opportunities for public consultation.

The Catchacoma forest has been scheduled for harvest in the Bancroft Minden forest management plan since 2011. There have been several opportunities for public consultation and input since 2009. It has also been in the approved annual work schedule for the past few years in anticipation of road work. The current harvest area is easily accessed off of Highway 507 through the existing logging roads which had grown in since the 1988 harvest to barely a snowmobile trail. These roads have since been widened to facilitate the current active operation. The area was surveyed for species at risk by MNRF biologists. Protecting species at risk and water features are important goals of sustainable forest management and area of concern prescriptions were applied to these features.

The area was harvested in 1988, is being harvested currently in 2020 and will be eligible for another harvest in 2050, all while retaining old-growth features. To the untrained eye, this forest will continue to appear "untouched, ancient old-growth forest" after a short recovery period of a few years (which may seem long to a human but is a short time frame if you're a hemlock tree). We view this as a testament to sustainable forest management.

Harvests like the current operation in the Catchacoma hemlock forest provide multiple benefits. They support the local, rural economy by providing needed well-paying jobs in skilled trades; actively manage disease and pest outbreaks by building resilience and supply our local sawmills, which turn out renewable wood products like this newspaper, all while caring for the future of our environment.

The local forest industry has an important role to play in mitigating climate change and is a sustainable alternative to carbon heavy materials like single-use plastics and petroleum heating fuels. Everyone should support their local forest workers and choose local wood where possible and remember that Farmers feed cities, but Forest workers build them.

The Bancroft Minden Forest Company holds the Sustainable Forest License to manage the Crown Land within the Bancroft Minden Forest Management Unit, an area of about 400,000 hectares just North of Peterborough. Forest Management is carried out by committed professionals in partnership with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. We act as agents of the Crown with best practice consideration for all wildlife and people of Ontario.

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