

The Catchacoma forest and climate change

Climate columnist Tricia Clarkson wants to save what could be the largest old-growth eastern hemlock stand remaining in Canada, near Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park

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Climate columnist Tricia Clarkson. - Courtesy of Tricia Clarkson

The Catchacoma forest is a unique, unprotected area of Crown land buttressed against Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park, located at the north end of Catchacoma Lake.

Ancient Forest Exploration and Research (AFER) concluded that this area may be the largest old-growth eastern hemlock stand remaining in Canada. One of the oldest hemlocks is over 375 years old, and is slated to be cut down.

This stand is slated for logging by the Bancroft Minden Forest Company (BMFC) this fall and winter, so AFER is currently developing an Ancient Forest Conservation Strategy to protect this endangered ecosystem.

Currently, the Ontario Wilderness Committee is pushing to have this stand considered for “conservation status” through the Forest Stewardship Council of Canada, which is a

certification body under which BMFC is licensed to log in this area. The committee is therefore requesting a moratorium on this year's logging until the conservation status has been evaluated.

“We know old-growth forests are huge carbon sinks as well as home to many species – and land conservation is key to the current ‘Made in Ontario’ environmental plan,” said Ontario Wilderness Committee campaigner Katie Krelove. “If the Ontario government wants to meet its conservation targets, they must act to protect precious forests when confronted with research like this.”

The Wilderness Committee, AFER and Youth Leadership in Sustainability are also raising concerns about the potential effects of logging on the endangered ecosystem and on the species at risk that habitat here, including the five-lined skink and the eastern wood pewee songbird. They have written to the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, John Yakabuski, and the Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks, Jeff Yurek, to put a moratorium on logging and designate the land as a nature reserve or annex it to Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park, because old-growth forests are worth more intact than harvested.

In recent months, the Ontario government has put forward proposals to remove the requirements for logging companies to adhere to both the Endangered Species Act and the Environmental Assessment Act, leaving forests vulnerable to not taking ecosystems into account.

Increased protection for intact old-growth ecosystems is an undervalued and necessary component of our urgent and multifaceted approach to climate change mitigation. Old-growth forests are important carbon sinks and preserve key wildlife habitats and wetlands that aid in climate change adaptation. Unfortunately, Ontario's current approach to forest management is out of date and has not addressed the need for a reassessment of practices, given our current climate and biodiversity crises.

BMFC is putting together their 10-year logging plan, which is reviewed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and will be open to public consultation in the next few months. This is an opportunity for public input that only happens once every 10 years. It is imperative to participate in these consultations to protect our local forests. Please email Jesse.VanAllen@ontario.ca and ask to be put on the email notification for the date of these consultations.

Trees help absorb CO₂ from carbon fuel emissions, so every tree counts when it comes to global warming. Each hectare of mature forest in Ontario can absorb six tonnes of CO₂ per year. With an increase of raging wildfires across Canada caused by climate change, we must think more seriously about protecting our forests.

The Wilderness Committee is inviting the public, government officials and media to attend a “Hike and Learn” in the Catchacoma woods on Monday, Aug. 24, from 1 until 3 p.m. Hikers are to meet in the parking lot of County Road 507. For more information, please contact Katie Krelove at [647-208-4026](tel:647-208-4026) or katie@wildernesscommittee.org.

For more information on updated reports from the Ancient Forest Exploration and Research on the Catchacoma forest, please visit www.peterborougholdgrowth.ca/catchacoma.

Tricia Clarkson is a freelance writer and journalist who has written columns, features and articles for the Ottawa Journal, Okanagan Sun, Vernon Daily News, Peterborough Examiner, Peterborough This Week, Greenzine Magazine and Running Room Magazine, as well as the feasibility study for the Peterborough Sport and Wellness Centre.