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COLUMNISTS

OPINION

Our Changing Seasons: Guardians of Peterborough County's hemlock forest

By **Katie Krelove** Special to The Examiner

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It's been one year since I first hiked into the Catchacoma Forest in Peterborough County with ecologists from Ancient Forest Exploration and Research (AFER) and [wrote about it in this column](#). We were in there to visit some of the 150- to 350-year-old hemlock trees the researchers had recently surveyed as part of a project to document old-growth forests in the region.

This is what they do — as a non-profit research group they find old-growth forests with the aim of conserving them, and yes, many of the old-growth trees we visited that day were marked for logging. I was so impressed with both the forest, situated on Crown land, and the work that I jumped on board to help local community members advocate for protection for what AFER identified as [potentially the largest mature and old-growth eastern hemlock dominated stand in the country](#).

In the pursuit of this goal we held public hikes to raise awareness of the conservation values of the forest — as a rare forest type and likely home to at least ten endangered species — and the threat to those values by planned logging operations which would remove 40 per cent of the trees.

Out of those walks the Catchacoma Forest Stewardship Committee was formed. The committee is made up of local residents, environmental scientists, teachers and historians eager to engage with the province's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) and the owner of the licence to log in Catchacoma, Bancroft Minden Forest Company and seek opportunities to have the conservation values of the forest recognized and protected.

The past year has been a trip down the proverbial rabbit hole. Navigating the bureaucracies of the agencies charged with managing our public resources has often been an exercise in frustration. Recently, much of the roadblocks we have encountered were identified as systemic problems in reports released by Ontario's auditor general on the [state of the environment in the province](#). Here are some of those issues.

Issue No. 1: How is information about ecological values compiled?

The Catchacoma Committee has repeatedly attempted to share the newly documented [old-growth and species-at-risk data](#) with the MNR and logging company — who are in the process of developing the next 10-year forestry plan for the region.

Our hope was that the new information would be added to the planning team's "value maps" that identify the non-timber values of forests — ecological, wildlife, recreational and cultural values — that are meant to be considered in planning what gets logged. According to the MNR, these value maps are updated through ongoing surveys and monitoring — and as new values are encountered they are afforded the appropriate protection.

Forest management planning teams are also required to consider new information put forward by the public and new science. In general, planners rely on photo-generated data to determine forest types and age, but on-the-ground surveys are always more reliable. In fact, the AFER studies were financed by a grant from the province in recognition of a lack of information on the whereabouts of old-growth forests in central and southern Ontario, where they are also the most rare.

So far, we have not been able to get our studies verified by the MNR through an on-the-ground visit to the site, and the 10-year management plan currently includes increased logging in Catchacoma.

Meanwhile, our requests for information about what species-at-risk surveys have been carried out in Catchacoma by MNR have been mostly fruitless. This is disconcerting given that the auditor general's report, published last month, points to a lack of monitoring of Ontario's endangered species. The audit found that for, "[a sample of 16 endangered species, monitoring protocols had not been developed and implemented for 12 of them, despite being identified as high-priority actions as long as 10 years ago.](#)" The question remains — who is doing the work to identify and protect endangered species that are known to be threatened by logging activity, such as Blanding's turtles and cerulean warblers? Both of these species have been reported in the Catchacoma Forest, yet we have not been able to find any more information for their whereabouts.

Issue No. 2: How are new candidates for protected areas identified?

Our group's efforts to find avenues to pursue protection for Catchacoma have resulted in a trail of unanswered emails and runaround responses. We have been referred back and forth between offices of the MNR and MECP without finding anyone to guide us through the process or consider our arguments for conservation. This is despite mandates to expand protected networks in both the province's Protected Parks and Conservation Reserves Act (2006) and in the current government's Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan (2018).

As it turns out our experiences are not unique — the auditor general discovered the same problems, reporting, "[The province is not identifying lands and establishing new provincial parks and conservation reserves in fulfilment of its legislative responsibilities.](#)" The auditor identifies a lack of staff, funding and clear processes for this, and finds that though both the Environment Ministry and the Natural Resources Ministry are involved in this mandate, "not one branch or staff in either ministry is responsible and accountable for expanding the protected areas network."

As a result, while the area of protected places across Canada increased by 8 per cent in the last five years, Ontario added only 0.003 per cent over the same period.

There are good reasons for adding more protected places. Protected areas are society's most effective tool to conserve nature and the services it provides, including water purification, refuge for wildlife, and carbon-storage in trees and soils. They are also meant to preserve representative natural heritage — for our children, grandchildren and seven generations down the line to enjoy.

A [recent report](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature on nature-based climate solutions for Canada found "The most effective short term action is to protect intact carbon-dense/high biodiversity ecosystems." Canada has committed to protecting 25 per cent of lands by 2025. Our committee has a vision for conservation of the Catchacoma Forest that also emphasizes forest education, research and low-impact recreation for the area.

Issue 3: What is the role of commercial logging in ecological protection?

Ontario's forestry industry is often cited as being renowned for its sustainable practices. It is certainly true there are logging practices that are more or less sustainable, and the province's policies for forestry are meant to balance timber-values with other noncommodity values, and to the extent that they can mimic natural disturbance processes such as fire and wind.

Ultimately, though, no logging practice achieves the same public interest and ecological goals as setting aside more forests for protection — especially when those forests are rare and mature, such as the Catchacoma stand. There is a reason, after all, that logging is not allowed in protected parks.

The auditor general's report affirms that logging, among all human activity, has had the most impact on biodiversity in central Ontario — and while the logging industry can minimize that impact, it has yet to be able to reverse it. Alarmingly, the current Ontario government has recently exempted forestry operations in the province from the Environmental Assessment Act and is in the process of doing the same for the Endangered Species Act.

These exemptions remove the last resort tools for concerned citizens to intervene in commercial logging — to request an individual environmental assessment for specific forests, and to request the Environment Minister to intervene when species-at-risk habitat is threatened.

That is why it is more important than ever for the public to get involved in the last remaining opportunity for input into logging operations on Crown land — during the development of the 10-year management plan. Public consultations for the management

plan that includes the Catchacoma Forest have just been announced to take place in January 2021. To sign up for email notifications for these opportunities email jennifer.card@ontario.ca.

To write in support for protection for Catchacoma check out our [action page](#) and to find out about future hikes in the forest email katie@wildernesscommittee.org.

The Catchacoma Forest is located on the traditional territory of Williams Treaty First Nations.

Katie Krelove is an Ontario campaigner for the Wilderness Committee/member of the Catchacoma Forest Stewardship Committee. She's filling in for Drew Monkman this week.

Climate crisis news

To be inspired to take an active role in addressing the climate crisis, people need to feel alarmed at how serious it is but also feel encouraged by the many reasons for hope, hence these news items from both perspectives.

HOPE: The federal fiscal update this week provides a number of climate measures. They include grants for homeowners to improve their home energy efficiency (up to \$5,000); providing affordable financing to make deeper home energy retrofits (details to be announced); increasing the number of recharging stations for electric vehicles; providing funding for planting 1 billion trees; issuing Green Bonds in 2021-2022 to help finance the government's investments in green infrastructure; and studying the establishment of a carbon fee on imports from countries that do not have carbon pricing. For more information, go to <https://bit.ly/36xChAK>

ALARM: According to an article in The Guardian from November 23, climate-heating gases have reached record levels in the atmosphere despite the global lockdowns caused by the pandemic. The estimated drop in emissions is between 4.2 per cent and 7.5 per cent in 2020 due to the shutdown of travel and other activities. But the World Meteorological Organization said this was a "tiny blip" in the continuous buildup of greenhouse gases in the air caused by human activities, and less than the natural variation seen year to year. More details at <https://bit.ly/36xChAK>

ACTION: To see a list of ways YOU can take action on addressing climate change, go to <https://fourgrandchildren.ca/> and click on the ACTION button.

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