

Natives Are Defending Ontario Forests

Dr. John Bacher (PhD) and Danny Beaton



(l) Dr. John Bacher and Danny Beaton, Niagara Council 2016, Photo: Carla Carlson

Our Mother Earth is protectively robed in a cloak of beautiful forests, but in southern Ontario they are threatened by urban sprawl. Most of the remaining forests away from the northern taiga bogs and the rocky Canadian Shield are wetlands that farmers have gained the wisdom to understand are unsuitable for agriculture. These vital wildlife refuges are now threatened by a policy review that has escaped coverage in the mainstream media, outside of the Niagara Region.

The cornerstone of public policy in Ontario, whose concepts have emerged from the United States' Clean Water Act and subsequent battles by environmentalists in the courts, is protected achieved from the wetland policy mandated in 1992. It was achieved following a process triggered by the New Democratic Party, (NDP) government of Ontario, initiated by the previous Liberal government.

The core of the wetland policy is that once it achieved a scoring of 600 points, a wetland is considered "provincially significant", and therefore legally prohibited from development and what is technically termed, "site alteration." Apart from having plant species that thrive in wet environments, what pushes generally the point score to the needed threshold is the presence of species at risk.

The wetland policy was one of the achievements by the NDP government when it was intensively consulting with native peoples on needed environmental reforms. During this time the respected Iroquois Confederacy Chief, Arnie General, would complain about the need for better mileage allowances, although he tried to economize through getting around in a mini two seat car.

During the early 1990s when the wetland policy was being developed Danny Beaton a Mohawk of the Turtle Clan, worked closely with General and other environmentally concerned native leaders such as Norm Jacobs. This experience stood put him in a good position, when in 2015 brave public servants sent alarm signals privately to environmentalists that two disturbing changes in public policy were being made to open up southern Ontario's wetland forests to developers.

The two changes that were being proposed to open the gates to developers were to the Conservation Authorities Act and the Provincial Wetland policy. Currently wetlands are evaluated by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. (MNRF). The policy change was to change the Conservation Authorities Act to permit the staff of municipally appointed Conservation Authorities, subject to influence from developers, to evaluate wetlands. The other change was to allow currently protected provincially significant wetlands through having them destroyed by developers if compensation in the form of what was called in a provincial consultation paper, "bio-diversity offsetting", was made.

In September 2015 Beaton journeyed to Newmarket, where the consultation on the Conservation Authorities Act was taking place with environmental groups. Beaton's inspiring words denouncing the firing of conservation authority staff who had worked to protect wetlands woke up the environmentalists present. This discrediting of proposed alterations to the conservation legislation had the impact of developers putting even more pressure on the province to implement bi-diversity offsetting.

Developers targeted the 500 acre Thundering Waters Forest in Niagara Falls for what they termed a "pilot project" in bio-diversity offsetting. The old growth predominately oak forest is a refuge for a number of endangered species. These include three species of bats, the rare Black Gum, the Wood Thrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Chimney Swift, Monarch Butterfly, the Nine Spotted Lady Beetle and the Snapping Turtle. The forest is rich in vernal pools that provide critical habitat for obligate species, such as the Blue Spotted Salamander, and the Wood, Chorus and Grey Tree Frogs. It also contains rare Buttonbush and Rufous Bullrush communities.

On April 12 Beaton went to the Niagara Falls City Council to rescue the threatened Thundering Waters Forest. He spoke about the dangerous precedent that was attempted to be set at Thundering Waters, which could spread destruction to forests throughout Ontario.



Danny speaks about the sacredness of Creation and Mother Earth at Niagara Falls City Hall Council, 2016, Photo: Sandy Devih Heeralal

Beaton's words helped to inspire an Oneida resident of Niagara Falls, Karl Dockstader. He mobilized his extended family in Niagara Falls to take part in the struggle to save the Thundering Waters Forest. Dockstader also subsequently played a major role in mobilizing native leaders in the struggle on both sides of the Niagara River.

Dockstader played a key role in organizing on July 7, 2016 in front of the City Hall of Niagara Falls a rally by the Indigenous Solidarity Coalition of Niagara. Here native leaders who took part included Celeste Smith, Allan Jamieson, Lester Green and Kelly Frantastic Davis. Smith, who is of the Wolf Clan of the Oneida of Grand River, called for a "moratorium on the development of the Thundering Waters Forest until a clear, transparent, public process can decisively establish a full social, environmental and economic benefit of this forest remaining completely intact."

In his many writings in defense of the Thundering Waters Forest Dockstader penned the moving essay, the "Life Cycle of a Niagara White Oak Tree." The essay is a tribute to the tallest and oldest tree discovered in the threatened forest. It is estimated by an expert, a Mohawk ecologist of the Turtle Clan, Dr. Barry Warner, to be 250 years old.

Dockstader wrote how, "Almost 250 years ago then Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson stood only a few miles" from the now great oak, when it was just a seedling. Then in the Treaty of Niagara of 1763 Dockstader explains, Johnson "planted the seeds for a covenant of peace that became formative in the country now called Canada. This agreement, the Treaty of Niagara, which came on the heels of the

Royal Proclamation, laid the foundation to formalize the importance of Niagara as a traditional land of peace, strength and integrity. Johnson understood better than any of his contemporaries that the only path to peace was by including the principles of people original to the land. Those legally affirmed principles of land stewardship-such as equal access to resources like water and air for all living things-now tower over the Western cultural appetite for endless exponential growth.”

Beaton and Dockstader woke up the residents of Niagara and a few leaders of environmental group. It is to be hoped that their message of the urgency to protect threatened forested wetlands and the wildlife that they depend on is heard more widely.