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LIVING

'Trust' is key to conservancy

Kawartha-based group aims to add 3,000 acres to land is already stewards

"The time is coming when it will be hard to find within a day's journey of our large cities a single spot capable of stirring the soul of man to speak in poetry"

— Charles Eliot

Last week I explained how natural ecosystems, along with their associated flora and fauna, supply human society with what amounts to free services. These range from wetlands providing flood control and water purification to bees offering up benefits like food and pollination. The Kawartha region is especially blessed when it comes to natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Located as we are in a transition zone between the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Lowlands to the south and the Canadian Shield to the north, the Kawarthas is home to deciduous and mixed forests, wetlands of all kinds, beautiful lakes and rivers, rare tallgrass prairie and alvars, vast rock barrens and rich agricultural lands. When you also add iconic cultural and historic features like the Petroglyphs, the Rice Lake burial mounds, the Trent-Severn Waterway and the numerous century farms that dot the region, it is no surprise that the Kawarthas has long been celebrated by residents and visitors alike.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

As we are well aware, however, our natural environment is under intense pressure from an ever-expanding human population and all of the development that population growth entails. We are rapidly losing critical habitat, and the integrity of ecosystems in many areas is threatened. This loss of 'natural capital' compromises both the economy and our quality of life. At the same time that this loss is occurring, government at all levels - but especially federally - seems to be stepping back from protecting natural lands. It is now clear that this function will need to be assumed to a much larger degree by private individuals and organizations. No one else is going to do it. Fortunately, there is one local organization that is already playing a key role in this regard - the Kawartha Heritage Conservancy (KHC) and they are poised to make an even greater contribution.

TRIED AND TRUE MODEL

The KHC is a land trust that preserves land in Peterborough and the Kawarthas in its natural state. Land trusts are a tried and true model for conservation. They are non-profit, non-governmental, charitable organizations that acquire land or interests in land (such as conservation agreements - legally known as conservation easements) for the purpose of conservation. Land trusts are made possible by volunteers, by financial support from members of the community and, of course, by the landowners themselves who want to see their land conserved. In this way, they are a promise to our children and grandchildren that in 10, 50 or even 100 years from now, intact natural spaces will still exist and will continue to provide priceless ecosystem services. Established in 2001, the Kawartha Heritage Conservancy works with



PAT DUREY Special to The Examiner



SURESH V. KANDASWAMY Special to The Examiner
Salmon Lake Cottagers Association members take part in the KHC Vincent Woods Property Stewardship Day.



DOUG VAN HEMESSEN Special to The Examiner

A typical winter farm scene in the Kawarthas (top), the kind of vista Kawartha Heritage Conservancy hopes to preserve; and members of the New Canadians Centre on a fall walk at a KHC property.

landowners and community members to identify and protect key ecological features of the Kawarthas. It acquires a protective interest in land by receiving land donations or managing properties, many of which also have significant cultural value. It can also enter into long-term conservation agreements and provide professional advice about creative land conservation approaches.

Community engagement is a big part of the role of the Conservancy. This begins with increased public awareness of, and support for, KHC activity. By meeting with focus groups such as cottagers, rural landowners and urban residents, it has strived to make its vision for the future as community-based as possible. So, what is this vision? The KHC wants to see a connected system of protected, ecologically-rich natural areas extending across both private and public lands and cared for primarily by members of our own local community. A connected system of adjoining lands affords much greater protection than simply a patchwork of isolated islands of green, surrounded by development. The system that KHC envisages will provide a degree of resiliency against the inevitable forces of change that are already upon us. Ecosystem services and our "natural capital" will remain in place and much of the landscape will look similar to how it looks now. The sense of place that is so strong in the

Kawarthas will have been protected, too, and not degraded to the soulless, urban sprawl that we see from Oshawa to Niagara Falls.

Over the past few years, KHC has worked with other conservation partners through the "Kawarthas, Naturally Connected" project to identify the most significant natural, scientific and cultural features in the Kawarthas. I wrote about this undertaking last June. The project has already led to a detailed "preferred solution" map of these lands in both the City of Kawartha Lakes and Peterborough County. The map also shows how they can be linked together in a connected system.

TARGET IS 3,000 ACRES

Within this larger, Kawartha-wide initiative, KHC is focusing its conservation efforts in specific areas such as Bethany Hills, Emily Creek (south of Bobcaygeon) and Stony Lake - all of which are areas where the conservancy has already preserved some lands. Over the next three years, KHC hopes to preserve an additional 3,000 acres through land donations or conservation easement agreements. Since 2001 KHC has received four gifts of donated land (991 acres) and negotiated six conservation easements (795 acres). These lands are valued at over 2.2 million dollars.

Donating land or interests in land (conservation agreements) on how your

land can be used in the future has advantages that go well beyond simply doing one's part for conservation. First of all, there are important financial incentives in terms of income and property tax relief. Many different arrangements are of a given gift of land are possible. For example, outright ownership can be transferred to KHC. In this case, the benefits for the donor include exemption from capital gains and an income tax receipt for the value of the property. If the owner wishes to "retain" an interest such as the right to live on or use the property in some other way, this is also possible in an agreement with the KHC.

Another common arrangement is to negotiate a conservation easement. This is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its natural values. It allows you to continue to own and use your land, to sell it to whomever you wish or to pass it on to heirs. Future owners will also be bound by the easement's terms. The land trust (conservancy) is responsible for making sure the easement's terms are followed. The agreements developed also ensure that the values of the individuals and families involved with be guaranteed for future generations. Take the example of the 140-acre Elliott property on Stony Lake, which includes the lake's largest wetland. The Elliotts,

along with any future owners of the land, can rest assured that their property will remain in a natural state forever. In return, they have received an income tax receipt for the value of this gift of land conservation. The Elliotts have also reduced their property tax burden, thanks to a managed forest plan.

You don't have to be a landowner to become involved with the Conservancy. The help of volunteers and financial supporters is equally as crucial. This is because KHC must care for its donated lands through ongoing management and stewardship. Currently, volunteers form teams of stewards whose job it is to monitor, maintain and enhance the natural values, use and enjoyment of the properties. Stewards do everything from building trails and planting trees to identifying flora and fauna and leading walks. Some of these walks focus on reaching out to new Canadians in the area through KHC's partnership with the New Canadians Centre and other local groups. Given our increasingly pluralist society, many of the conservationists of the future will need to be recruited from the ranks of immigrants. But, how do you make a conservationist? All of the research shows that people must have meaningful experiences in the outdoors. KHC wants to give new Canadians these experiences. One way they are doing so is through regular walks on KHC properties that are led by enthusiastic volunteers.

RELY ON DONATIONS

Doing the necessary legal work to prepare a land donation or conservation easement - KHC must assure that all donations meet the guidelines established by the Canada Land Trust Alliance Standards and Practices - requires time and money. Although the Conservancy does receive periodic support from various foundations, the business community and a limited amount from government (on a per project basis), the bulk of the support must come from individuals through bequests, special gifts and annual giving to the organization. This creates quite a challenge. According to the latest figures, only two percent of charitable giving in Canada goes towards conservation. Not surprisingly, health care takes the lion's share of each donation dollar. Although this is a worthy cause that benefits all of us personally, health care is not the only component of quality of life. I doubt that we can be truly happy when the integrity of the natural world around us - the world that sustains so much of our economy and our sense of the aesthetic - is in jeopardy. It, too, needs our financial support.

By giving time as a volunteer, making a financial contribution or considering an ecological gift of land by talking to the KHC, all of us can help make the vision of a protected landscape of linked natural areas in the Kawarthas a reality. The KHC's office is located at 156 McDonnell St. in the attractive yellow brick building at the corner of George. Visit their website at www.kawarthaheritage.org or call 705-743-5599 to speak to executive director Mike Hendren. The email address is conservancy@kawarthaheritage.org

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