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Opinion | Ontario needs to grow protections for nature

A golden opportunity for Ontarians to take stock of shared priorities.

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Visitors try forest bathing in the CATCHACOMA Old Growth Forest. The goal of forest bathing is to live in the present moment while immersing all of your senses in a natural setting.

Katie Krelove photo

By Katie Krelove

Katie Krelove is the Ontario campaigner for the Wilderness Committee, a national charitable conservation organization. She works with the CATCHACOMA Forest Stewardship Committee to pursue protections for an old growth forest in Peterborough County. Katie is grateful to work in the treaty territory and traditional homelands of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and Chippewa Nations. She can be contacted at katie@wildernesscommittee.org.

Drew Monkman was unavailable to write this week. In his place, this week's column is from Katie Krelove, Ontario campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

Just over a week into a snap provincial election, it seems trade issues are poised to dominate the discourse in the lead-up to the polls Feb. 27.

While dealing with unpredictable tariff threats and the jobs they threaten are certainly important, it's also vital this distraction doesn't leave other key responsibilities of the Ontario government on the sidelines.

As a longtime advocate for strong environmental protections, I've been advised to sit this one out. I've been told issues to do with conserving nature, wetlands, wildlife and a livable climate will not resonate with

voters, who are only concerned about affordability and ensuring a strongman is in charge. I've been told Ontarians will sacrifice all other values to secure short-term economic goals.

Here's the thing: I don't believe it. Maybe I'm naive, maybe I'm stubborn, but my experiences tell me Ontarians are deeply invested in the protection of nature and are aware that healthy ecosystems and the life-preserving services they provide are inextricably intertwined with the quality of life they want for themselves, their children, and their children's children.

Indeed, as the impacts of climate change are felt more and more in increased flooding, forest fires and extreme weather, it is the conservation of local wetlands, oxygen-producing and carbon-storing forests and rich agricultural soils that contribute to making Ontario a livable and prosperous place.

Case in point — the Catchacoma Forest Stewardship Committee (CFSC) is marking its five-year anniversary as a grassroots group of local citizens that have worked tirelessly and passionately to pursue protected status for a 662-hectare old growth forest located in Trent Lakes, Peterborough County, north of Catchacoma Lake.

While the Catchacoma forest borders the Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park, it is currently zoned as "general use," provincially-managed Crown land and leased for logging.

In their advocacy for protection for this, the CFSC has navigated intricate webs of government bureaucracy at the Ministries of Natural Resources (MNRF) and Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP). They have met with politicians, staff biologists, planners and industry alike to make the case the conservation values of this rare and declining old growth forest type far surpass the minimal profits associated with logging it.

Old growth forests provide unique habitat for biodiversity and sequester and store more carbon than younger forests, making them an important nature-based climate solution. They also offer priceless opportunities for education, research and healthy lifestyle practices.

The CFSC has demonstrated these values by bringing hundreds of people to the forest to experience the old growth, including high school classes in the Peterborough-based Youth Leadership in Sustainability program and working the non-profit Ancient Forest Exploration and Research (AFER) to continue scientific research.

They have received support for protection from the Municipality of Trent Lakes, the Rotary Club of Peterborough, the Peterborough Foundation and most recently, from chief and council of Curve Lake First Nation, whose treaty and traditional territory the Catchacoma Forest falls under.

While the group has achieved some key successes on the pathway to protection, such as winning a temporary pause on planned logging from the MNRF, the main obstacle continues to be political will on the part of the province.

Again and again, the minister of environment has refused the group's request to consider Catchacoma Forest as a candidate site for adding protections through annexation with the adjacent park.

The unwillingness to seriously consider protecting this Crown land with clear conservation values is indicative of a larger problem.

For decades, Ontario has fallen behind other jurisdictions in dedicating resources to expanding protected areas. Despite some small recent steps, such as provincially regulating the 532-hectare Uxbridge Urban Park, Ontario still sits at under 11 per cent protected, ranking a rather dismal eighth in line compared with other provinces and territories.

Meanwhile, in 2022 Canada joined 196 other countries in signing onto the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework, which commits us as a country to protect 30 per cent of lands and waters by 2030 as part of the global goal of halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

Ontario has yet to adopt or recognize this important target and has not developed a strategic plan to grow protected areas, even though both were top recommendations from its own appointed Protected Areas Working Group in a report the environment minister has refused to acknowledge. By lagging behind, the province is missing out on substantial federal funding, such as the \$500 million committed in the tripartite "Nature Agreement" signed with the government of British Columbia and First Nations leaders.

To compare, Ontario received a mere \$10 million from Canada to work to finally add lands designated for protection over 20 years ago in the "Living Legacy Land Use Strategy" — the last time the province made a concerted effort to grow protected areas.

But even this will increase our protected area total by under one per cent.

There's a lot more to do to safeguard what remains of the province's biodiversity hot spots and natural heritage, such as remnant mature and old-growth forests like Catchacoma. It will require identifying and seizing every opportunity available and working with communities, municipalities and, crucially, First Nations, who have a proven record of biodiversity conservation. But firstly, it will require public will.

This provincial election is a golden opportunity for Ontarians to take stock of shared priorities and what is needed to protect our quality of life in a way that benefits everyone. It's a good time to take a walk in the woods and reflect on what we expect of our provincial government to provide — which includes not only economic security, but also public protections for education, health and the environment.

For more info on the Catchacoma Forest Stewardship Committee, visit catchacomaforest.org.

Climate chaos update

From Alan Slavin: The artificial intelligence (AI) data centres that drive interactive computer applications, such as Google Gemini on cellphones, require an enormous amount of computing power, which necessitates a

corresponding amount of electricity. Some say that a single AI generator could require as much electricity as a small city.

Already, asking ChatGPT a question uses nearly 10 times as much electricity as one Google search. The good news is that a new AI platform, DeepSeek, uses only about one-tenth as much electrical power for some of its operations, which could reduce energy demand dramatically. However, not all experts agree on this reduction, and more experience with DeepSeek will be necessary before we know the final result.

CO2 levels: The global atmospheric carbon dioxide reading Feb. 1 was 426.00 parts per million (ppm), compared to 422.2 ppm a year ago, almost a one per cent increase! The highest level considered safe for the world's climate is 350 ppm. We surpassed this level in the 1990s. Source: CO2.earth.

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