

Sacred Farmland/Aquifers

John Bacher/Danny Beaton



Few Canadians know or appreciate the watershed of Midhurst's Willow Creek, which while marvelous in itself as a wildlife migration corridor and a template for wise ecological recovery, is even more important for its downstream outlet, the Minesing Wetlands. The Minesing Wetlands provides a sense of the beauty and sacredness of an environment guarded by native peoples since the retreat of glaciers over 10,000 years ago. This wonder, however, is now at risk from the massive urban sprawl blessed by the monstrosity called the Midhurst Secondary Plan. The Willow Creek watershed is on the eve of becoming the focal point for

bitter battles over subdivision proposals at the Ontario Municipal Board. (OMB)

The Minesing Wetlands which Willow Creek feeds is Ontario's Lost World. The famous fictional book and movie, which imagined explorers deep in the Amazon discovering giant species from a distant past, approximates the reality of this 6,000 hectare refuge for native species. It gives a glimpse of what Ontario was like before the ecocidal invasion of what is now our province by Euro-Canadians.

The word Minesing in Ojibway language means island. This illustrates how it is a haven for wildlife in a denuded and biologically sterile environment, at risk of being washed over by shock waves of urban sprawl unleashed by a storm of developers' greed.

Minesing is the last home for entire ecological communities in Ontario, such as the Burr Oak and Hackberry swamp forests. Such ecosystems are a refuge for rare plants as the Beaked Spice-Bush and the Eastern Prairie and White Fingered Orchids. Minesing has southern Ontario's largest Fen, providing refuge for the rare Least Bittern. Its large expanse of forest makes it a breeding home for the Threatened Cerulean Warbler. Careful documentation has found that 135 species of birds nest in the Minesing Wetlands.

The Minesing Wetlands provides nesting places for some of the most spectacular birds to be found in Ontario, such as the Bald Eagle, Trumpeter Swan and Sandhill Crane. The two heronies of this refuge are the oldest documented breeding grounds for the Great Blue Heron in Ontario. Minesing has a breeding colony for the threatened Black Tern. One of the biggest and most threatened fish in Ontario, the Lake Sturgeon, swims through the wetlands. While the Snapping and Painted Turtle are abundant here, it is also a refuge for threatened Wood, Map and Blanding's Turtle. It is a staging post for the return of the river otter to southern Ontario. It mingles with another restored shaper of wetlands, the beaver, and the muskrat.

While the big birds, fish, reptiles and mammals of the Lost World of Minesing are impressive, the glory of the wildlife refuge is its being a haven for threatened insects. The wetland is so vast and formidable that it was never burnt out and subsequently farmed, like the ecologically restored, but originally once desertified landscape of Willow Creek around Midhurst. Now insects are threatened by agricultural pesticides. These are not used in a refuge which is controlled by public agencies and the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

Minesing is haven for the rare Giant Swallowtail Butterfly. It is the largest Butterfly that lives in Canada. It is most significant for being the only place in Canada where an Endangered Species, Hine's Emerald Dragonfly lives. It was thought to have been extirpated from Canada, but was discovered here in 2007 and listed as Threatened in 2012. It is also Endangered in the United States. The nearest population of this species is 180 kilometres away in Michigan.

Hine's Emerald Dragonfly endangered status in both the United States and Canada is illustrative of the idiocy of European colonization and exploitation. This did not take place through the rigours of contemporary environmental reviews. It survived in Minesing since the tough wetland was too difficult and wet to be burned away, like the surrounding source contributor of Willow Creek. Its forest were burned away for ashes to make soap. The species has quite exacting needs for its survival. These were only discovered in recent decades by scientists working to rescue the shining emerald green dragonfly from extinction.

Hine's Emerald Dragonfly is what scientists in the last forty years have become to appreciate as a vernal pool obligate species. Vernal pools are specialized environments that dry up usually by August. They provide habitat for tree frog species, such as Wood and Spring Peeper Frogs, which in the early spring, turn Minesing into an astonishing symphony of musical calls. During the late summer when the pools usually dry up, Hine's Emerald Dragonfly survives by crawling into damp excavations made by crayfish.

The Willow Creek watershed that pours its flow into Minesing, had its population of Hine's Emerald dragonfly wiped out by Euro-Canadian invaders. By 1900 most of the land here had been stripped of forests and degraded to marching sand dunes that threatened to bury Barrie, as they had done to an earlier seat of Simcoe County, Angus. However, through determined political leadership, guided by expert scientific advice, this was reversed. The lessons of history are now being ignored however. The watershed of Willow Creek, once buried by sand from burning trees, is now at risk of being covered over by the cement of sprawl.

In October of 1905 the future Premier of Ontario, Ernest Drury, and the future Chief Forester of Ontario, Edmund Zavitz, went on a tour of the sand dunes of Simcoe County. While walking through the desert they came upon an important contributor to Willow Creek, a bubbling spring. With an abundant aquifer of pure clean water, similar to that which spawned the struggle to stop Dump Site 41, lead by Danny Beaton, (Mohawk Turtle Clan) Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians, Stephen Odgen and Elizabeth May, they decided that the spring provided an excellent place for a tree nursery to reforest the spreading desert. This nursery eventually become the 192 hectare Springwater Provincial Park. The park became a staging place for the reintroduction of the Trumpeter Swan and Beaver, which now restored, thrive in nearby Minesing.

The battle to rescue Springwater Provincial Park from closure is illustrative of the difficult struggle ahead to stop sprawl in Midhurst. Following closure a year round Objivay struggle led by Beth Elson of occupation followed. It eventually, successfully resulted in the park being reopened under an arrangement between the provincial government and the Beausoleil First Nation.

Springwater Park is only one example of how Willow Creek watershed has benefitted from one of the most massive efforts at ecological restoration in Ontario. It has 21 Simcoe County Forests, which restored 2,039 hectares of blow sand wastes. The forested corridor along Willow Creek is substantial enough to provide a migration corridor for daring bear and moose to enter Minesing. This corridor could expand if it was properly protected from sprawl. The landscape is now an excellent example of how nature and agriculture can co-exist well, with an astonishing mosaic of Class One farmland and interconnected and slowly growing forests. The forests are especially thick in protecting Willow Creek and its tributaries.

The wonders of the struggles of ecological protection and restoration of the past are now threatened by the sinister prescriptions of the Midhurst Secondary Plan. As it stands currently, the plan calls for the construction of 10,000 housing units enough for 30,000 people, on +1,000 acres of the Class One and Two farmlands in the Willow Creek watershed. This will have an enormous environmental impact. Storm water will be dumped, laced with road salt, oil and other toxins into Willow Creek and eventually into

Minesing. Building on top of the aquifer that provides recharge water discharged into the Minesing wetland, will also help to dry it up.

The struggle that stopped Dump Site 41 gives an appreciation of the magnitude of the effort to rescue Willow Creek and Minesing. The public servants who attempt to guide the provincial politicians with ecological folly know that it is folly to permit sprawl in Midhurst. The Growth Plan that is supposed to guide land use planning in the most rapidly growing part of southern Ontario, originally attempted to confine urban growth in the Simcoe County region to the current municipal borders of Barrie. This would have kept sewage pollution out of the Minesing wetland.

The Growth Plan's provisions were not changed on any rational basis, but simply to bow to potential developers. An aroused Ontario public would convince provincial politicians to listen to their land use planning advisors to impose a Ministerial Zoning Order under the Planning Act, to stop sprawl in Midhurst.

Elder Danny Beaton, Mohawk Turtle Clan is an internationally recognized protector of Mother Earth. Dr. John Bacher is a researcher for the Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society (PALS). Danny and John were central in the successful defense of Dump Site 41 and the Mega-Quarry in Melancthon, ON and denying the residential development of Springwater Provincial Park. They continue as important members of the Advisory Council of the Midhurst-based Springwater Park Citizens' Coalition.