

Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust celebrates 25 years of conservation

Citizens came together at the dawn of a new millennium to raise concerns over a spate of building and construction on the Oak Ridges Moraine, a geological feature integral to the local ecosystem.

Since then, the resulting Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust has safeguarded more than 5,300 acres over 68 properties spanning from Durham in the east to Peel in the west, and well beyond ? and last week, they gathered in Uxbridge to mark 25 years of success.

Susan Walmer, CEO of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, says the roots of the Trust were first planted in 2000 as a result of rampant construction in Richmond Hill.

They wanted to have a formal organization that would work to protect the Moraine ? and this work just happened to coincide with the Provincial Government of the day drafting legislation to help do just that.

?At the time there were a lot of pressures of development, which, of course, we still see and I think many of the people that were involved back then [asked], ?What's going on here and how do we protect this?' That coincided with the fact the government was starting to realize [the importance of the Moraine] and as that was percolating, the original members of the Trust said, ?Let's form an organization and get something official so we can start protecting land.?

It was just a handful of people at the time, Walmer adds, but their advocacy work helped build momentum ? particularly as they took the time to explain all the Moraine provides communities like these for water protection.

The undulating hills of the Moraine were carved out by glaciers during the last Ice Age, leaving a number of unique geological features in their wake, including aquifers and kettle lakes.

?I think one of the most important things is raising awareness with people across the Moraine. We now protect 68 properties across the moraine, and more to come,? she says. ?All of those properties are either donated, there's a few that we've purchased, there's some that have conservation easements on them, and it's that whole aspect of making sure that we protect significant lands, and also raise awareness and do education.

?We do a lot of educational seminars, we do a lot of restoration now on some properties? we've got a couple of properties out in Northumberland area where we're doing restoration work, taking a farm field, and we don't want to get rid of farm fields, because a lot of our properties have farms on them, but in this case we wanted to restore it for habitat for a species at risk called the Kirtland Warbler, along with a whole list of other critters that need that type of environment. Those have been very successful for both, I think, creating new environment and getting other volunteers and students involved. We had farming college students come out and help with that project. It's just getting that awareness and then getting people in the dirt and dirty, and really understanding how important the dirt, the soil and the land is to us as human beings.?

As much as celebrations like these are about looking back, the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust has their collective eyes trained on the future.

Walmer says the Trust would like to double the properties they have protected in the next 25 years, although she admits that's a ?lofty goal? amid rising land prices, and says projected population growth will be a significant challenge over the same time period.

?Some of our purchases are wonderful properties that we've been able to [secure] with the support of the provincial governments, the federal governments, foundations and other supporters who recognize how important protecting the environment is and actually obtaining land, whether it be with an easement to protect it or actually purchasing it,? she says. ?Our last couple of properties have been purchased properties where we've done this restoration. I see that continuing for the next 25 years. We're very careful as we assess properties to make sure that they are key significant areas that do need to be protected, because as the value of property

continues to rise there's obviously limited funds from all of the funding bodies and the public. We do get support from the public as well.

?We know the population of the world continues to grow and impact climate change and impact everything, and that's happening very much so in southern Ontario. We probably are one of the fastest growing areas?. I know when we get on the highways, it feels like there's way more cars than there used to be. I think that's going to be a real challenge for any land protection over the next 25 years, and particularly this area here on the Moraine that's so close to the big Toronto populace. That's going to be a challenge. I think it's a challenge because the development community also sees how beneficial this area is from a perspective of people wanting to live here.

?We need to be careful and make sure that those developments aren't sort of happening patch quilt all over the place; that if they are going to happen, because the population is growing, that it's well-analyzed, well looked at by the communities to make sure that they're being put in the right places and they're protecting the right environments around it to make sure that there is still going to be support from the environment for the nature and everything else that we need as human beings in terms of water and land.?

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