

Notes for discussion: A Better Bargain in the Woods

Rob MacLean

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The Issue

The native forests of PEI are being whittled away by harvest practises which are profitable and understandable, but which convert the Acadian forest to a different type of cover. When this happens, the communities of living things which proliferated there in the 9,000 years since the last Ice Age - the fungi, bushes, mammals, amphibians, birds, insects and trees, dwindle. If we value this forest habitat, then we need to ensure that some significant portion of it remains on the Island. We can only do this by working in it in ways which allow it to thrive.

The picture is complicated by the Island's land ownership patterns. P.E.I.'s forests are 85% privately held. Governments which want to make province-wide policy have no choice but to work with a multitude of groups and citizens. These groups and citizens have varying, and sometimes conflicting, values and goals. This makes forest policy a challenging negotiation.

In Brief

The basic idea of this paper is that government doesn't need to buy land to protect it. It also doesn't have to force onerous laws on landowners. Instead, it can offer landowners in ecologically significant areas fair market value (i.e. stumpage) to leave the trees standing on their property. As assurance, landowners would agree to put a covenant on their land restricting harvesting practises to those appropriate to the Acadian forest type. This program would only apply to that portion of PEI forests crucial to protecting PEI's natural heritage.

Suggestions:

1. Narrow the focus. This doesn't need to apply to every woodlot on PEI, only a subset. Use good science to identify crucial areas of native forest – areas rich in native species of trees, birds, bushes, fungi, mammals, insects and so on. Aim to create blocks large enough to provide habitat for creatures who are adapted to the deep forest. Join blocks to create wildlife corridors. Protect crucial parts of waterways.

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2. Justify these costs by framing forest policy as natural infrastructure. Healthy forests, well-managed fields, pure waterways and clean air undergird our other forms of wealth. Our society currently spends money to keep fields, water, et cetera healthy – why not forests?

3. Pay fair market value to landowners. Most landowners consider their woodlot a savings account which they have the right to cash in at their discretion. Respect this right by paying them to enter into legal agreements to forgo inappropriate practises.

4. Make it voluntary. What is proposed here is a good deal, but if someone prefers to clearcut a beautiful woodlot, so be it, they own it. Even if only 75% of landowners took the deal, it would move the ball a long way towards the goal of keeping the native forest of PEI healthy.

The Cost

The 2004 forestry discussion paper, Creating a Vision for the Future, identified 380,000 acres of “unploughed” land as particularly significant for maintaining a rich web of life. For the sake of argument, let’s say the province is bargaining for clearcutting rights on roughly half of that land – 200,000 acres.

A contractor friend of mine said stumpage for hardwood would vary greatly from stand to stand, but that \$25/cord was in the ballpark. Volume might be about 25 cords/acre. If the Province matches that withdrawal from the “savings account,” the dollars per acre would be \$625. Let’s give ourselves a margin of safety and round it up to \$1000. 200,000 acres at \$1000 per acre is \$200 million dollars. A lot of money. But suppose the goal was to reach 200,000 acres over ten years. The amount per year becomes \$20 million.

Still a very significant sum, but let’s compare it to some other costs taken from the PEI 2024 Capital Budget:

Healthcare Facility Upgrades	\$125.5M over 5 years
More Social Housing	\$176M over 5 years
Building and Expanding (schools)	\$176M over 5 years

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Granted, these are larger items in the budget, but given the significance of our forests, \$20 million per year for ten years seems proportionate.

Protecting the Investment

In addition to placing a covenant on the land, it might be prudent to require landowners to also take part in the (excellent) ecological forestry program the province's forestry professionals have developed for working in the Acadian forest. This would avoid disagreements about appropriate working methods in the woods and provide a way of checking on compliance.

Further Remarks

- An example of this approach is the payments New York City makes to landowners to protect the watershed from which it draws its water.
- Making selective harvests in the Acadian forest profitable is an ongoing challenge. However, landowners who received a flush of money would probably use some of it to buy small forestry equipment to create trails and roads and to carry out other work. Contractors who could cater to their needs would find employment – at least for a time.

In Closing

A minority of people will always want to keep native forest healthy for its own sake. But to maintain the native forest area beyond the holdings of this minority, other landowners have to either be persuaded, or forced, to stick to appropriate treatments in the woods. Forcing is a no go for political and ethical reasons. That leaves persuasion.

Paying landowners a fair market value to put a covenant on their properties still leaves them free to buy and sell land. They can also remain very active in the woods. Firewood, sawlogs, thinnings et cetera can all be taken within the framework of PEI's Forest Enhancement Program. In exchange, the people of P.E.I. get peace of mind and the assurance that the basic cycles of life on our beautiful island are being safeguarded in perpetuity.

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Full disclosure: I am a woodlot owner and would probably benefit under this plan. In my defense, my family has owned some of our woods for 160 years, so if money was my motivation they would probably have been gone before now.

- Rob MacLean, May, 2024