

We're not out of the woods yet

A section of forest in Ste. Anne de Bellevue has been saved from development - no easy feat. Here are some tips from the experts about saving an urban forest near you

By MICHELLE LALONDE, The Gazette January 12, 2009
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Conservationists fought hard to save "the southern section of Woods No. 3".

Preserving urban forests is a tall order, especially on this densely populated island where pressure to build luxury housing in the few remaining wooded areas is so high. Local conservationists estimate that since 1990, more than 1,000 hectares of forests have been cleared on Montreal Island, mostly to make way for housing developments. This city now has the lowest percentage of protected natural areas of any North American urban centre. Only about six per cent of the island's land mass is unspoiled wilderness - woods, shoreline and wetlands - and about half of that remains unprotected by any law or statute. Much of the unprotected half is owned by private developers.

But just before Christmas, Montreal quietly moved to purchase an eight-hectare piece of wooded land from a developer in Ste. Anne de Bellevue for just over \$5 million. The developer had been preparing to begin construction on 60 new homes. The city will now preserve this ecologically valuable forest, adding it to a patchwork of green space along the Rivière à l'Orme, the only inland river on Montreal Island. Local conservationists have been fighting development along this river corridor for more than two decades, and the purchase of this little forest, known rather unromantically as "the southern section of Woods No. 3," is cause for hard-won celebration.

What was remarkable to me about this news was just how little opposition there was to the idea of spending public money to leave a forest standing. Five million dollars is not chump change these days, yet the purchase plan was easily approved by Montreal's executive committee, its city council and then by the island-wide Agglomeration Council, even though all the politicians on these councils are painfully conscious of the dark economic climate.

Times have certainly changed. Back in 1992, when the economy was also hurting, the island-wide council, then called the Montreal Urban Community, actually called for a moratorium on green space acquisition. Spending money just to keep forests standing was seen as a romantic luxury not to be indulged in during tough economic times. And so the trees came down.

But now, we seem to have passed some tipping point of public awareness. News about the terrifying pace at which plant and animal species are being wiped out across the planet is convincing people how vital forests are. Forests improve air quality, provide habitat for birds and animals, and, on a planetary scale, help to fight climate change. These green spaces are finally being seen as precious, far too rare and intrinsically more valuable than any housing development.

But saving an urban forest is still no easy feat. It takes dedication, know-how, determination and hard work. To find out how it's done, I talked to a couple of experts. David Fletcher and Ryan Young of the Green Coalition have been working to save bits of forest in and around Montreal for years.

They helped me put together these tips for anyone who lives near an urban wood and wants to see it remain intact for future generations.

Find out what's at stake. It helps if you have some ecologists or academics on your team who can do a biodiversity inventory to help you identify what is unique, ecologically valuable or threatened about the forest you are trying to save.

Get the public involved. The Green Coalition regularly conducts tours and nature walks in the places it is trying to save. They invite university students,

elementary school kids, politicians and the media to get to know what's in the woods and why it needs protecting. People who have walked in, smelled and touched a particular forest are far more likely to react when it is threatened.

Be persistent. The Green Coalition simply would not let go of the southern section of Woods No. 3, even though politicians kept pointing to the much larger northern sector that had already been preserved. "This one was considered just a small piece of woodlands that could be let go," Fletcher said. "They thought it was under the radar." But the group kept arguing that this pristine forest was essential to provide a contiguous year-round habitat for deer and other animals, and they simply would not let it go.

Be vigilant. You need a lot of eyes on the ground to pay attention to what's happening in the forests. Sometimes, politicians and media won't act unless there is an impending threat or deadline. But it's impossible to fight for trees that have already been cut down, so make sure your team is watching for signs that development is imminent. If a developer owns the land, pay attention to the developer's website, Fletcher advised.

Get to know the politicians. Find out who supports preservation of green space and who is in tight with developers. Make sure your allies know that you will hold their feet to the fire and make sure they keep their promises, but also that you will give them public credit where credit is due. Fletcher made sure to tell me that Montreal executive committee member Helen Fotopolos deserves credit for making good on her promise to protect lands within the L'Anse à L'Orme eco-territory.

Get to know the bureaucrats. Young had praise for Daniel Hodder, a city of Montreal bureaucrat responsible for natural spaces policy. Sometimes these people are even more important than the politicians, because they are the ones advising the politicians.

Get media attention. This is not as easy as it sounds. Few newspapers, and fewer radio or television newsrooms, have dedicated environmental reporters. Make note of who is doing environmental stories and contact them directly, by phone and email. The more research you do beforehand about why your forest is important, the more likely a reporter will take up the story. Be ready to show that you are not alone in your concern. Go door to door and explain to your neighbours why they need to get involved. Start a petition. Organize an event.

Get educational institutions involved. Young asked biology teachers at John Abbott College, where he teaches, to get their students involved in doing biodiversity inventories. Get nearby elementary schools involved by offering to organize educational outings in the woods. The more aware the community is of the forest, the more likely its members will be to get involved in conservation efforts.

Get some inspiration. I once asked Sylvia Oljemark, a founding member of the Green Coalition, what could possibly keep her so committed after decades of council meetings, letter writing, and protest organizing. She told me she was carrying a torch she'd been passed by her mother and she wasn't about to drop it. Fletcher talks of the light in the eyes of children when you introduce them to the creatures of the forest. Every effective activist I've spoken to has a passionate reason for doing what they do. When the going gets tough and tedious, they never lose sight of that passion.

Don't stop at activism. Young is a board member with the Green Coalition, but he also got himself onto his town's environment committee, where he can have a lot of influence. He has also run for town council, and though he did not win, his campaign helped focus more public attention on the need to preserve forests.

Find allies. Fifty-four different conservation groups in the Greater Montreal area have joined forces to persuade the government to create a giant protected area around and including Montreal island. They want to conserve 12 per cent of a huge, 13,500-square-kilometre swath of land between the Laurentians and the American border and the Yamaska River and the Ontario border. If your forest is within those boundaries, contact this new coalition for help. For more information about the Partnership for the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park project, go to: www.greencoalitionverte.ca.

We like to hear from you. To comment on this column, go to the Gazette's Green Life page www.montrealgazette.com/life/green-life/index.html or write to me at mlalonde@thegazette.canwest.com.

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