

Doug Makaroff: Grounding ourselves in nature

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Whether in the city or a forest hamlet, Mr Makaroff thinks we'll all be healthier knowing and caring for the natural world.

“What watershed do you live in?” Doug Makaroff, president of Living Forest Communities, asks me. I shift nervously. My once-sure knowledge of this place suddenly feels superficial. People in Jordan River are frantic about the prospect of losing theirs, and here I can't even name mine. Storm sewers make this city girl forget that humans have relied upon watersheds for orientation, transportation, sustenance and habitat health for thousands of years.

Makaroff's interest in watersheds began indirectly, as an urban planning student at the University of Saskatchewan, where his British professor dismissed his interest in New Urbanism's emphasis on dense, mixed-use villages, scoffing, ironically, “that was for before the war.” Over the past 20 years, Makaroff has partnered with like-minded people like David Butterfield, founder of the Trust for Sustainable Development, with whom he has been involved in green projects like Victoria's Shoal Point and Loreto Bay, a mixed-use village in Mexico with 6000 of its 8700 acres left as a nature reserve.

So when author and musician Ann Mortifee and her neighbours on Cortes Island pooled their life savings and purchased 150 acres of forest bordering their properties from Weyerhaeuser, she recruited Butterfield and Makaroff to help them create a self-financing model to preserve forests through ecoforestry and sustainable development.

With deep admiration for Mortifee's vision, Makaroff later applied this “free-market alternative to industrial deforestation” to Elkington Forest near Shawnigan Lake. Aerial photos from 1999 and 2007 show swift, heart-wrenching deforestation encroaching upon the 950-acre property.

On one aerial photo, Makaroff points to a clearcut, then a grey smudge at the mouth of the lake. “When the water from these slopes would go into Shawnigan Creek,” he explains, “it would turn Shawnigan Lake into chocolate milk. But when the water comes off these barren hills and goes through our property and the three wetlands that are part of the lake, it's completely pure,” he claims.

In order to keep it that way, 85 percent of Elkington Forest will be placed in protective covenants for conservation or ecosystem-based forestry. Having the Cowichan Valley Regional District and The Land Conservancy as co-signatories will ensure their perpetuity. The 15 percent of the property that has been disturbed will bear the only major human footprint in the form of a mixed-use residential hamlet with about 77 home sites and related businesses (timber-frame home construction, wooden toys, eco-furniture, ecotourism) or organic food production.

Wildcrafting, harvesting from natural habitats “everything from medicinal herbs to honey to hazelnuts,” is also a possibility. Salal for floral arrangements, Makaroff tells me, is a 90-million-dollar annual industry. Rather than attracting fair-weather call centres or Nike factories, Makaroff says this kind of “locally authentic economic development” happens when a forest is managed for more than the trees. He cites as a mentor Merv Wilkinson, whose Wildwood Tree Farm near Ladysmith has actually increased in board feet since he started selectively logging in the '40s.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

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When I ask if we shouldn't concentrate growth in cities to eliminate sprawl and protect wild areas, Makaroff argues that “Between existing communities, there is a need for very densely clustered residential hamlets that provide services to the resources. Instead of a fellow commuting to the forest every 30 or 50 years with a truck and knocking everything down, there are people who are actually [living and] working in the forest.”

Continuing, he notes, “if you dumb down smart growth, you come up with a statement that says, ‘no new pipes in the ground anywhere.’ That means there is no investment in any rural areas, including First Nations.” The BC Sustainable Energy Association's Victoria chapter chair Michael Nation says 66 percent of BC is forested, and the same proportion holds true for Vancouver Island. “If we don't have a well-thought-out model for a sustainable community in a forested rural setting, then we are not applying sustainable principles to the majority of our region,” he argues, and Makaroff agrees.

On that note, Makaroff is studying ways to decrease emissions and single-occupancy vehicle trips from the development, such as carsharing, electric vehicles, and carpool vans, among other options. Thrifty's will deliver groceries to the hamlet thrice weekly. Practices developed over the past 20 years in urban environments—clustered density, mixed use villages, green building technologies, walkability—are what Makaroff is interested in applying to rural settings.

I, on the other hand, wonder what happens when you return this flow of ideas, freshly bathed in country streams, to the city. What would Makaroff's dream city include? His answers lead us to rooftops and back to watersheds. “In the urban centre,” notes Makaroff, “we have hundreds of rooftops that are empty. I see agriculture.”

“Nature deficit disorder is a real issue,” he adds. As I had proved with my ignorance about the watershed I inhabit, “We don't know some of the basic things about the biology going on around us. Kids need access to larger areas of forest that are close to urban areas.” He believes we can and should build upon work being done in places like Bowker Creek

and Cecelia Ravine, and use Beacon Hill and Pemberton Woods as areas to bring back the wild. “We need to allow those to expand, then work on the corridors between them,” he says, envisioning swales of running water and wildlife corridors connecting public and private land throughout the city.

Re-exposing watersheds has powerful effects: irrigation, flood mitigation, increased habitat (our urban deer would have to do less shopping on Government Street). “Psychologically, it gives a much better sense of the biology going on around us. Getting to know what it is we have within the city, whether on private land or public, is important.” Already our neighbourhoods are so distinct, but having the same awareness of shifting ecosystems in the city that you experience when hiking a wooded slope, from cedar wetland to fir to alder, to arid Garry oak and exposed rock, is truly grounding, says Makaroff, who is on the City of Victoria Urban Forest Master Plan Steering Committee.

In the larger region, this translates to “an epic trail where you start at Mile Zero and end up at Nanaimo, then cross to Horseshoe Bay and beyond. Like the Compostela in Spain, the Chilkoot Trail, or a more urbanized version of the Juan de Fuca trail. That is part of my dream city, to create a trail where your summer would be two weeks of walking from one bed and breakfast to the next, spending a couple of days working on an organic farm, picking apples for a cidery, or just buying the produce of the land.”

Elkington Forest's B and Bs would be on that trail, and Makaroff's plan has just passed third reading at the Cowichan Valley Regional District. He keenly anticipates construction starting this summer and has received over 20 letters of intent from buyers seeking intentional community. They will be “the streamkeepers.” Ultimately though, “you can't put it into a bylaw.” In Makaroff's Dream City we all become streamkeepers.



Aaren Madden lives and writes in the Gorge Creek watershed, near what was once Skinner's Bog.

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