

Protected parks and forests are more than just a pretty view

By Michael Ball

Depending on where you live, the view out your back window could be a variety of different things.

Those living in the country will observe more greenery and uninhabited land than those who live in densely populated cities.

As the world's population continues to grow and urban development intensifies, the amount of green space is decreasing rapidly.

City centers are becoming so dense that people are moving out to the suburbs, resulting in urban sprawl. Small towns outside the city are slowly becoming cities themselves. I'm certain that somewhere in your town, what was once an empty field or an untouched forest is now a housing development or a strip mall.

Thankfully hope is not lost. There continues to be protected areas that are being conserved in and around even the most densely developed cities and towns, which provide the lavish views that would otherwise be missed.

But these areas offer far more than just a pretty view. Their value is almost immeasurable, and far too often overlooked.

The United Nations describes protected areas as "geographical space, recognized, described and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values."

They can be in the form of National Parks, Provincial Parks and Conservation Areas, as well as other privately-managed lands. In an article published in 2011 by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forests (MNRF), the average distance between protected areas in Ontario was 2.2 to 5.5 kilometres. This means that no matter where you are, there could be a pristine and lush environment right outside your door.

Some people may think that this statistic can only be true in the far north, away from major city centers. This is not the case, however.

The number of protected areas in Toronto continues to grow each year, as concerns about the environment become progressively more pertinent. Recently, municipal officials commissioned a scientific study which located 68 new "environmentally significant areas" within Toronto's boundaries. In October, City council voted to insert them into Toronto's conservation plan, and develop strategies for their management. The Province of Ontario has not protected many of these areas, so it is important that municipal governments continue to actively protect what is left of the natural environment, and ensure their preservation for the future.

The benefits of protected parks and forests are far more than just pretty views. They can be used as a tool to shape the growth and development of towns and cities in a more sustainable manner and also serve as protection from severe weather events.

As urban development continues, these areas also act as refuges for native plant and animal species, which are vital to the stability and maintenance of biodiversity. But what is the real value of biodiversity?

In a 2010 study conducted by MNRF, it was determined that biodiversity provides \$84 billion each year in ecosystem services within Ontario. These services consist of flood and erosion control, water filtering, drought management, crop pollination, green space value, and reduction of carbon emissions. In Mississauga alone, trees remove approximately 430 tonnes of air pollution annually. This service alone equates to approximately \$4.8 million a year. The protection of forests is vital to ensuring that there is clean air to breathe in our cities.

These numbers and statistics do not come close to encompassing the total value of protected areas. No monetary figure can be put on the improvements green spaces have to human health and well-being. It has been well documented that nature is essential to human health and happiness. Protected areas promote recreation and social interaction in the outdoors. They relieve stress, and allow people to escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life. This is even more true when it comes to children. Children's direct experience with nature can be critical to their physical, intellectual and emotional development. It encourages them to be active, and interact with nature. It also promotes them to socialize and interact with friends and family, away from their television and computer screens. It is tremendously important that all of society recognizes the value and benefits of protected areas to ensure their preservation for the generations to come.

After reading through the information in this article, I urge you to seek out protected areas where you live and re-visit ones that you have already been too. Enjoy the beauty of nature, but also think about all of the benefits they generate. There will never be a factory, a housing development, a parking lot or a garbage dump there. Through management and conservation efforts, that area will remain the same and continue to provide the same benefits for generations to come. Protected areas are vital to urban development in the future. It takes active participation and ongoing care by every individual to ensure that more environmentally significant areas continue to be protected in the future. The amount of new development and urbanization will not stop, but as long as governments, municipalities, and the public continue to support the protection of important natural areas, their will continue to be beautiful views and a breath of fresh air for years to come.

Michael Ball is and resident of Mono and an ecosystem management technology student at the School of Environmental and Natural Resource Sciences at Fleming College.