

News and Comment

The Cult of the Red Pine – a Useful Reference for the Over-Afforestation Period of Ontario

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In 1971 Doug (C.H.D.) Clarke, former chief of Wildlife Branch, Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, wrote a very forward-thinking popular article in the Ontario Naturalist magazine about the problems that are faced by native flora and fauna as a result of planting trees (Clarke 1971). I just rediscovered this article, which is an important reference for the over-afforestation period. The “Over-Afforestation Period” of Ontario refers to a time between 1950 and 1970 when extensive planting of conifers in the province led to the widespread loss of native open habitat. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, there was a compelling interest in tidiness, productivity and erosion control. Open land, especially sandy open land, was viewed as wasteland that had to be converted to pines. Afforestation became widespread. Tree nurseries modernized and were soon producing more pines than there were places to put them. The oak savannas of Pinery Park, on the east shore of Lake Huron, were planted with pines, and so were many open sandy places throughout southern Ontario. Clarke (1971, p. 14) described the impact on wildlife: “I have seen a world of Field Sparrows and Grasshopper Sparrows in Whitechurch and Ganaraska Country disappear.” He provided several examples and noted the loss of duck nesting habitat around the newly created Luther Lake. In eastern Ontario, biodiversity-rich sandy meadows were replaced by Red Pines. Afforestation had gone too far and had claimed many special habitats.

Historically, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) was responsible for many of the afforestation programs in the province. Through the Agreement Forest Program, which began in 1922, it is said that 147.5 million trees were planted on over 120,000 hectares of land in southern Ontario (ECO 2010). MNR also operated a number of nurseries across the province that provided trees free of charge or at low cost. Between 1905 and 1996, MNR nurseries supplied landowners with 792 million seedlings (ECO 2010). The agreement program was terminated in 1998 and most nurseries were sold or closed by 1999. Despite the withdrawal of MNR, much tree planting continues due to

the desire to protect watersheds, decrease atmospheric carbon, recover natural habitat and provide people with a rewarding pursuit. Planters are included in Stewardship Councils, Conservation Authorities, Trees Ontario, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, the Ontario Forestry Association and the Wetland Habitat Fund to name a few. There is also currently a major MNR-supported program called “the 50 million tree program” that intends to plant 50 million trees in Ontario by 2020. Although much tree planting continues, it is now much less of a threat to significant habitats because of: (1) the decline of the major MNR programs that were without sufficient conservation guidelines; and (2) the fact that special habitats are now widely recognized as a result of Species at Risk Legislation and science-based protective organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Consequently, there is a trend toward the protection of significant natural features on a local and individual basis. Nevertheless it may still be useful to have a well-advertised and conservation-oriented site selection guideline for tree planting that would guide land managers to be cautious to ensure that the open land intended for planting is not a biodiversity-rich native habitat with rare species that deserves protection.

There is little detailed documentation of the huge and almost unbelievable destruction of special habitat due to afforestation that went on during the Over-afforestation Period. In the Ottawa Valley the decline of the sandhills at Constance Bay (Catling and Kostiuik 2010, Catling et al. 2010) and the recent efforts to restore an open sandy dune in the Pinhey Forest (Catling and Kostiuik 2013) provide examples. Doug Clarke would have been well-satisfied today to see some of this being corrected with the removal of planted pines and restoration of diverse natural ecosystems. Although the impact of the over-afforestation period is not something that we are proud enough of to ever want to document in detail, an overview of this historical, less enlightened period is important in helping to understand the loss of open sandy habitat. Doug Clarke’s reference to it 42 years ago is thus of great interest.

Literature Cited

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