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If a tree falls in the forest, does anybody hear?

By MARK CRIPPS
Signal-Star Staff

A group of Huron County residents are turning their love of the environment into a passionate plea to save an area forest from possible logging.

Represented by the Maitland Trail Association, the Menessing Bridge Association, the Huron Fringe Field Naturalists, the Colborne Snowmobile Club and some private individuals, the group plans to make a presentation to the Huron County Agriculture and Public Works Committee tomorrow (Thursday), in an attempt to quash the county's plans to allow logging on the Morris Tract.

"The Morris Tract is not just one among many county forests, but a critically strategic, though small part, of the lower Maitland River Valley," said HFN member Dave Kilgour of Benmiller. "Its value is not measured by the value of its standing timber. Its value is not even measurable in dollars. Some idea of the true value of the Morris Tract can only be had by those who walk through it quietly during the four seasons."

"What's at stake here is much bigger than the Morris Tract. The big issue is Rio de Janeiro's resolutions on biodiversity. The county and its planning department have an opportunity to provide leadership to other municipalities."

The Morris Tract is a roughly 140-acre parcel of land located just west of the Falls Reserve Conservation Area near Benmiller in Colborne Twp. The southern edge of the tract runs along the Maitland River, and the Maitland Trail Association and Colborne Snowmobile Club have routes through the county-owned land.

In 1994, the County of Huron proposed that a harvest cut be considered on the Morris Tract to coincide with current excellent timber markets.

The Morris Tract is part of one of the largest wooded areas in Huron County. It is in the top 0.1 per cent in terms of woodland size.

The tract contains a number of hardwood species, including a variety of Carolinian species at the extreme northern limit of their

range. There are also a number of red oaks, one of the premium hardwoods for logging.

On Thursday, Jan. 12, 7:30 p.m., a consultation process concerning the Morris Tract will begin at the County Court House.

The group among at saving the Morris Tract from logging is preparing a number of presentations to convince members of the Huron Planning and Development Department that the Morris Tract is worth saving. They have also retained the services of a well respected ecological consultant who is

'The Maitland Trail would like to see the area left in its natural state. That means no logging.'

Rod Lafontaine - MTA

familiar with the Morris Tract and the Maitland River Valley watershed.

"We as a group have a chance to make our views known," said Maitland Trail Association executive Rod Lafontaine, at a strategy planning meeting last Thursday, Jan. 5. "But we need to get a plan and get some numbers out to the meeting."

"The Maitland Trail would like to see the area left in its natural state. That means no logging."

Local organic farmer, Bob Budd, who is also a member of the HFN, voiced his concerns in a letter to the editor published in the Goderich Signal-Star on Nov. 23, 1994.

"The 140 acres of the Morris Tract is unique in that it is an impressive mixture of mature hardwoods situated on a landscape that is nothing short of spectacular, with its deep ravines and beautiful view of the Maitland," wrote Budd.

"A little over a year ago, three professional biologists and two of our club members explored a portion of the river valley adjacent to the Morris Tract stretch."

"They discovered 29 species new to Huron County, 22 rare in Southwestern Ontario and 14 rare in Ontario."

"If the Agriculture and Roads Committee that deals with county

forest issues is actually serious about timber harvest from the Morris Tract, it strikes me as bad judgement."

Another member of the group hoping to save the Morris Tract is John O. Graham of Goderich.

In a letter prepared for Huron County Planning Department director Gary Davidson, Graham said, "It was only recently that many residents of Huron County became aware of the possibility of lumbering the Morris Tract as part of the Ministry of Natural Resources' forest management agreement."

"Many who are familiar with the Morris Tract felt that the forestry management practices that are used in most MNR tree plantations would not be appropriate in such a historic and unique property as the Morris Tract."

"We feel that any intrusion on this small pocket of Huron County uniqueness could never be restored."

When the group meets with county representatives at Thursday's consultation meeting, their main objective is to inform the public of the value of the Morris Tract, and to secure answers from the committee as to its plans for the 140-acre property.

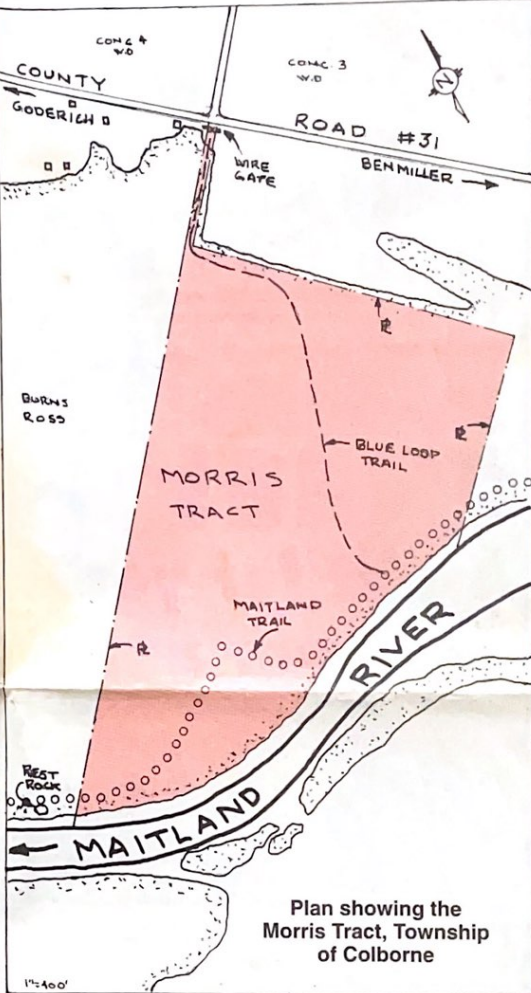
"We don't know exactly what the county's intentions are," said Kilgour. "MNR forest manager Marvin Smith said there is no plan to do any logging. On the other hand, his demonstration to us of MNR's actual silvicultural tentative plans to do an initial cut on a selective basis and to wait for 15 years to do a second cut."

"The first step should be to ask council for a clear statement on what action, if any, is intended."

One thing is for sure when the Morris Tract Consultation Process begins this Thursday - the committee members should be ready to listen.

As well as the nature and recreational clubs concerns, the group heading to the County Court House tomorrow packs the punch of local environmentalist and doctor Jim Hollingworth, and local high school teacher and environmentalist Dave Cloet.

Their aim is clear - to show people that the Morris Tract should be viewed not in terms of fibre value, but in terms of environmental and historic importance.



Ecological consultant says Morris Tract unique to Ontario

The following report was prepared by ecological consultant and biological illustrator Jane M Bowles, PhD, of Thorndale, Ontario. Bowles has worked previously as a consultant for the Maitland Valley Conservation Authority. Last Thursday, Bowles conducted a walk through the Morris Tract and prepared the following report in response to plans by the Wingham MNR and the County of Huron to log the Morris Tract this winter. The decision was made to coincide with current excellent timber markets.

The Morris Tract is part of one of the largest wooded areas in Huron County. It is in the top 0.1% in terms of woodland size. Large woodland size is important for protecting woodland integrity and maintaining habitat for forest interior species.

Only about 13% of land in the Goderich area retains its original forest cover. Of this 13%, a large portion is represented by swamp and lowland forest.

All woodlands in the Maitland River watershed that are larger than the Morris Tract woodland, are dominated by lowland swamp forests.

The Morris Tract is therefore part of the largest and most intact upland woodland in the region. It

is the only naturalized upland woodland property owned by Huron County. As such, it creates special natural heritage responsibilities, to protect it in a naturalized condition, and provides unique management opportunities, to allow it to continue maturing as a natural forest.

To most of the current human population, large trees, and especially old growth forests full of large trees, are rare and remote things, seen in special places after a long journey, viewed on television shows, or imagined from the stories of grandparents.

Logging in the Morris Tract would effectively forestall the possibility of development of such a forest for more than another generation.

element are Carolinian species at the extreme northern limit of their range. Plants of cold limestone seeps grow only metres away from rare prairie species and unusual hybrids. This astonishing mixture makes the area quite unique, but because the site was only recently discovered, it has so far been overlooked for special attention and protection. Oldham et al (1993) recommended that the area should at least be recognized as a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI).

The consequences of both past and future logging in the Morris Tract cannot be fully assessed, especially since no detailed inventories have been done. Changes in composition and age structure of the dominant forms (the trees) affect the plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms in the forest, as well as the interactions between them and their

relationship with the environment. These relationships are often long term, fragile, quite subtle and very poorly understood. The effects on endangered, threatened and vulnerable species or populations is almost impossible to estimate.

Forests and climate change: Humans have a history of altering and manipulating the environment for their own immediate purpose. In temperate climates with rich soils and reliable rainfall regimes, the environment has proved to be remarkably productive even after the dominant vegetation has been largely removed. Most of Huron County falls in this category, but the history of clearing and intensive land use is relatively recent (only about 150 years). The local climatic and hydrologic effects of the initial forest removal are quite well documented, and most

land is still quite productive, but the future of the remaining forests, as they adapt to human-induced climate changes, is less certain.

Some of the more obvious and immediate changes which would result from logging can be reiterated from an abundance of low-light adapted ground flora with a more vigorous mixture of tree seedlings and weedy plants.

Native woodland species (plants, animals, fungi and microorganisms) are adapted to high light levels in spring, but low light levels in summer. Small gaps, due to tree fall, are a natural part of forest function. They allow a long-term tree replacement cycle to occur. Dense growth of tree saplings takes place in the gap. The saplings compete for light and space, and eventually the most successful will grow and fill the gap.

rather open forest interior. After logging this would be replaced by:

- a) more open canopy
- b) lack of most or all of the largest trees
- c) dense growth of saplings and shrubs especially in the gaps
- d) replacement of the existing low-light adapted ground flora with a more vigorous mixture of tree seedlings and weedy plants
- e) abundance of undecayed, detached tree tops lying around, making average very difficult except along paths
- f) the presence of stumps and scarred and damaged trees
- g) an increase in the number of opening, trails and muddy tracks

Gaps created in the forest canopy:

Removal of particular tree species targeted by logging also changes the species composition and diversity of the forest.

The aesthetic and biological character of much of the Morris Tract is due to the presence of medium sized trees forming a closed canopy over a dark and

'...the area should at least be recognized as a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest'