

Grassroots Reconciliation through Habitat Restoration

Habitat restoration has become a form of ‘grassroots reconciliation’ in Ontario’s Georgian Bay region. “Take two people from very different backgrounds into the bush to plant trees together and they’ll discover how much they have in common,” says Larry Ferris, a citizen of Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO). “It’s no longer us or them. That’s why I call it ‘grassroots reconciliation.’”

Ferris, a former chair of Georgian Bay Métis Council, has been involved in a number of reforestation and habitat restoration projects over the past ten years. The work is done by a wide range of volunteers including Métis members, sports fishermen, environmentalists, youth groups and so on. “People love to help out,” he says. “They all want to work for the good of Mother Earth.”

Lake Huron’s Georgian Bay covers approximately 15,000 square kilometers, making it nearly 80 per cent the size of Lake Ontario. The Georgian Bay area has the largest concentration of self-identified Métis in Ontario. Under the Charter with the MNO, the Georgian Bay Métis Council (GMBC) speak for Métis citizens in the area.

The GMBC has played an important role in rebuilding natural habitat throughout the Georgian Bay area—as participants, planners and partners involving hundreds of volunteers. By restoring the health of streams and

riparian areas, waters now run cold and clear and fish populations have increased. In re-forested areas, birds are now nesting in the trees, and turkey and deer tracks are on the ground.

Recently, GBMC worked on a stream reclamation project near the village of Lafontaine. Volunteers planted trees along the bank to help prevent erosion and to stabilize the soil. They also created a buffer zone between the stream and the adjoining farmland to protect it from runoff. The stream is part of the Lafontaine creek system, which is important for trout spawning.

“It was especially nice to see youth out and involved with this project as they will be the protectors of these trees and this area in the future,” said Ferris.

Previously GBMC youth and members helped different organizations plant about 10,000 trees at Simcoe County’s Millennium Tract, near Barrie. Native species were planted including traditional medicine trees, such as butternut and walnut, as well as other trees Métis ancestors would have valued, recognized and used. The butternut plantings also had an important role in preventing a proposed waste transfer center from being built in the reforested area said Ferris. Butternuts are an endangered and protected species in Ontario.

The GBMC is now well known for tree planting and remediating stream and fish habitats and have no trouble finding volunteers to do the labour. “We’re well organized, non-political and make sure everyone has a good time and are appreciated for doing this important work,” says Ferris.

Strong partnerships with a wide variety of organizations from governments and industry, sports fishermen and environmental organizations, among others, have been essential and co-operation has been “outstanding” he says.

The key to obtaining high-level co-operation from a wide range of people was getting involved in other organization’s projects. Ferris, who was a local member



La Villageoise LaFontaine Creek Stream Remediation before the plant.
Photo Credit: Larry J. Ferris.

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of the Canadian Coast Guard, began volunteering with organizations and local clubs on their restoration projects. “I ended up saying that I had a lot of Métis friends who also wanted to help out.”

Eventually, Ferris set up a committee under the Council to do their own projects and to find sponsors to fund their work as well as work with other non-Indigenous groups. He said an important element to getting funding is a clear vision of what the end result will be: how planting trees and bushes along an eroded stream banks can improve water quality and trout spawning. Another key component is a clear, no-surprises plan about how much it will cost, the partners involved, and how to get volunteers out. “We want it to be a positive experience for everyone.”

One big group of volunteers are local youth. Many students are aware of environmental issues and want to do something to help Ferris says. Offering them a vision of how their restoration efforts will create new forests and mean more fishing opportunities in the

future is important. Equally important is giving them positive feedback and sincerely thanking them for their work he says.

Ferris takes a lot of pictures before, during and after the project to show what was done and how much fun the volunteers had. “I want people to see what they’ve accomplished.” He also writes articles about the projects and tries to get publicity. At the end of every project all volunteers and sponsors are invited to a big BBQ and thanked for their effort and support. It’s very important for people to feel appreciated he said.

These restoration projects have also been a great opportunity for sharing historical and cultural knowledge about the Métis. “So often people say to me, ‘I didn’t know that.’”

Best Practise:
*Advancing Reconciliation
through Shared Priorities*



*La Villageoise LaFontaine Creek Stream Remediation after the plant.
Photo Credit: Larry J. Ferris.*

