

A Clear Cut Need to Protect Intact Forests

Erna Buffie and Emma Durand-Wood

Over the past year, we've been doing a lot of interviews about the pests and diseases decimating our urban forest, and the city's chronic underfunding of its urban forestry department, two threats that have contributed to the loss of more than 20,000 public trees in just the last three years.

While there's no doubt that these threats are of grave concern, lately, we've started to wonder if the greater threat to our urban forest infrastructure isn't our seemingly, endless desire to expand our city beyond its limits and its means. Evidence for that can be summed up in just two "did you know" comparisons:

How many of you knew, for example, that Winnipeg, a town of just 750,000 people, has a footprint 4 times larger than Paris, a city with a population of more than 2.2 million? Or that our big-footed prairie town has 3 times more roads, per capita, than New York City?

Safe to say, in this case, being big and having more isn't something to boast about.

Winnipeg's suburban expansion, and the construction of the new roads that service it, have come at an incredibly high cost. Not only in terms of the financial burden to the city in maintenance costs that far exceed our ability to pay, but also in the loss of farmland and intact forests.

And sadly, it doesn't look as if Winnipeg's expansion addiction is about to end any time soon.

In fact, over the next year, just two of the proposed or approved provincial and city construction projects could result in the loss of more than 9 hectares of intact forest. Now, that may not seem like a lot, but when measured in tree loss, it's huge. The St Mary's perimeter expansion, aka the St Mary's Interchange, will likely decimate some 4,000 trees, while development proposed in the area of the Lemay Forest could wipe out as many as 6000.

The felling of 10,000 trees would far exceed what we have ever lost in a single year due pests, disease and attrition combined.

And these aren't the first forests to fall to the development ax. Since the 1970s, urban expansion has eaten up large tracts of trees, including an estimated 15 hectares of aspen forest, 15,000 to 17,000 trees, in an area once adjacent to the Metis community of Rooster Town, clear cut in 2018 to make way for development.

When those forests disappear, so too do the ecosystems they sustain. In the case of the St Mary's Interchange, the affected forest includes resident and migrating birds, amphibians and a

host of plant and mammal species, from coyote and deer to racoons and jackrabbits. Also at risk may be bird, aquatic and plant species that are already of conservation concern.

So, forgive us if we find it deeply ironic that the environmental report for the St Mary's project concludes that the greatest risk to public safety and health is "associated with vehicle collisions and vehicle-wildlife collisions." No mention of the risks associated with destroying a forest to expand roads and increase traffic, in the middle of a climate crisis. No mention of the reduction in overall urban biodiversity or the loss in benefits these trees provide, from carbon capture and storage to air pollution reduction.

So where does that leave us? Well, it seems to leave us in a position where we need to re-examine what we really value.

Maybe the days of endless car commutes from new and increasingly remote suburbs can and should end. Maybe we should embrace high density living and celebrate the appearance of a couple of multi-unit dwellings on our residential streets, if it means fewer forests are mowed down to make way for yet another single-family housing development.

Maybe we need to demand better, high speed public transit, facilitated by designated bus lanes, instead of Perimeter expansion projects that cost billions, not only in construction fees but also in dollars lost, when forests and farmland are destroyed. Not to mention the buckets of future dollars these "expansion" projects will cost in maintenance.

Oh, and here's a thought. Maybe the city could also consider applying to the Federal Natural Infrastructure Fund for half of the money needed to purchase our few remaining intact forests, such as the Lemay.

In short, perhaps we need to stop equating progress with an endless supply of single-family dwellings and urban roads and start equating it with those things that give life real value. Like parks, hiking trails and intact urban forests that are rich in biodiversity and provide millions of dollars in benefits.

Maybe we need to stop expanding and take care of what we have.

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