

Workshop: Restoring native habitat in urban areas

Leader: Richard Ubbens

After seeing a spectacular display of the northern lights, Richard left an engineering program to enter a forestry program despite discouraging words from others. He sees the complexity of creation highlighted in the "living soil" in which trees are rooted. He noted that the creation is all there for God's glory and we are to manage it. The cultural mandate tugged at Richard's heart. Quoting from Genesis 1, Richard noted that after God had finished each day of creation, He declared it good. On the last day, after the creation of man, an adjective was added to declare creation very good. These words emphasize God's pleasure in his creation and also remind Richard that creation includes people. This drives his passion for quality urban habitats.

Richard noted the many aspects of maintaining an urban forest, and enjoyed relaying his drive for doing it well. He listed the many benefits of having a canopy of trees throughout an urban environment: trees filter particulates; a tree canopy brings the towering city scale to a personal level; the canopy filters sunlight providing a healthy outdoor environment; people gather and community is formed under tree-lined streets; tree-lined streets improve aesthetics and attract tourists; businesses know that aesthetically pleasing street-scapes attract customers; tree canopies reduce noise pollution; etc. Tree planting in communities provides opportunities for environmental education, to teach about the complexities of soil and air, and to wonder aloud about what God has done.

Richard noted that education is an important part of his work since city planning and policy has a huge impact upon the urban forest. When a developer takes out hills and fills valleys for the ease of creating a new subdivision, the developer also destroys nutrients, air pockets, etc., which are necessary for mature trees to develop. Richard believes that trees planted in these neighbourhoods will not likely grow to maturity. Further, with the pressure to pack homes on smaller properties, less room is available for trees in the front yard. After taking into account bylaws making room for underground utilities, sidewalks, large driveways for two-car garages, the front yard of new subdivisions with crammed-in housing does not have enough room for a tree! Interestingly, city planning for urban forests is readily noticeable from an aerial view. Since the city of Toronto, before amalgamation, had better urban forestry practices, the boundaries between the York region and the former city of Toronto are clearly delineated when viewing the tree canopy from above!

Richard spent some time discussing some of the specifics of maintaining such a canopy. He described the work of an urban forester, and described work with invasive species, ravine forest management and the rare black oak savanna in Toronto.

Invasive species such as garlic mustard ruin the balance of plants and insects in an environment. Richard exclaimed "there is a vacuum of information," noting that little research has been done with invasive species. Hence controlling these species is difficult. Many methods such as spraying or controlled burns, sometimes produce conditions in which the invasive plant comes back more vigorously than before. He has participated in an Ontario Invasive Plants Working Group which did some of its own research and created a strategic plan for managing invasive plants in southern Ontario. The Urban Forestry program also focusses on ravine management. Richard discussed various issues related to maintaining natural environments in the ravines around Toronto. In particular with neglect, development perched on ravines, private land owners clear-cutting, and storm sewers flowing into ravines, erosion is a major obstacle to sustaining diversity in the ravines. He described ways in which his department attempts to overcome these obstacles and replenish these natural ecosystems with Toronto.

Richard described the work being done to sustain the rare black oak savanna within Toronto. This rich ecological resource had recently been discovered in the park areas. The department eliminated grass cutting in these parks to allow native prairie grasses and flowers to sprout. In some cases controlled burns were done since without the additional heat, some seeds remain dormant and do not germinate! Native plantings were also done

in these areas to sustain the forest. In fact, the department encourages native plantings in neighbouring private gardens as well for the health of this urban forest. This provides many opportunities to also educate the public about the importance of maintaining urban ecosystems and for Richard to share his enthusiasm for his work.

He pointed out that people would wonder aloud where he gets his drive to protect and serve the urban forests. He explained that his Christian upbringing developed his awareness of the complexity and awesomeness of the creation. He noted Romans 11:36, "... for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things." Richard declared that his drive is being rooted in his responsibility to look after creation.

Reporter: Kevin Vander Meulen