

Workshop: Watershed management – a holistic approach

Presenter: Ben VanderBrug

Ben VanderBrug, manager of the Hamilton Conservation Authority (HCA), emphasised in his presentation that wholes are greater than the sum of individual parts. The HCA is one of 36 local watershed authorities in Ontario; about 90% of the population in Ontario lives within the jurisdiction of such an authority. Although the watershed authorities in Ontario were begun with the purpose of flood control in the 1950's, their task has become much broader in scope, encompassing aspects such as watershed management, protecting and acquiring environmentally sensitive areas, providing recreational opportunities for local citizens, and educating the public. When initially started, the conservation authorities received about half of their funding from the province; today, very little money comes from that source and so finding alternative sources of income has proved to be a major challenge. The HCA has been very successful in its fund-raising ventures through its Conservation Foundation and charging fees for recreational users. As a result, it has been able to continue the acquisition of lands within the newly amalgamated City of Hamilton, currently holding just over 8% of the lands within the boundaries of the city, more than most other cities in Ontario. These protected lands are a catalyst for a healthy community.

VanderBrug emphasised the importance of a sound environmental foundation for a healthy economy, even though many may consider spending money on environmental programs a luxury in times of economic downturn. As a result of provincial cut-backs, outdoor education centres used by elementary schools were closed in 1996. However, the need to educate the general public as well as land owners within the watershed remains a high priority. Through the efforts of the local conservation authorities in Ontario, flood control has been very successful. According to data cited by VanderBrug for 1986, Michigan (with no comparable program) spent \$307,000,000 on storm damage compared to only \$350,000 in Ontario. Controls pay!

Another area the HCA is looking at are brown fields within the city. These are often abandoned industrial sites in need of remediation. VanderBrug suggested that some of these sites would be ideal opportunities for phytoremediation and would provide much needed green spaces within the heart of the city. His vision is for a corridor of green spaces linked together within the boundaries of the city.

How does his Christian faith influence his work? VanderBrug sees his role as HCA manager as one who has been given the responsibility to be a guardian of a small part of God's creation. For him, protection of environmentally sensitive areas as well as land acquisition must be done within the context of future generations – we need to think in terms of 100 or 200 years from now. What advice does he give fellow Christians? Speak out on issues that you really believe in! Rather than tackling big projects, begin with something specific, such as adopting a river or creek that needs a major clean-up. Involve the community in such a project so that they take ownership of the project.

Environmental management on a watershed basis is considered the world's most innovative, accountable and cost effective approach to protecting our water and other natural resources. For more information contact Ben VanderBrug at: vanderbw@hamrca.on.ca.

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