

# Community Lands and Deep Ecology

“The earth does not belong to humans.” Arne Naess (1912-2009), *Deep Ecology For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 74

“A man should no more be allowed to own the living soil than he now owns the air he breathes.” John Livingston (1923-2006), *Canada: A Natural History*, p. 223

(This is my response to the *Nova Scotia Community Lands Trust Discussion Paper* being presented by the Department of Natural Resources at a series of public meetings throughout Nova Scotia, starting in Truro, on September 21, 2010. Visit [www.gov.ns.ca/natr](http://www.gov.ns.ca/natr) to view the government discussion paper. The Truro meeting, where I gave this presentation, revealed that a public relations firm is running the consultations meetings. The Department of Natural Resources was nowhere to be seen. Only 16 members of the public attended the Truro meeting. The Friends of Redtail Society, mentioned below, "was formed with the aim of protecting a 313 acre parcel of land through purchase." The Society has to raise \$250,000 by December 2010.)

## Community Lands Need to Combine Deep Ecology Awareness and Social Justice

By David Orton

### INTRODUCTION

I moved to this province from the West Coast in the fall of 1979. For about the last 26 years, I have been living with my family in the community of Saltsprings in Pictou County, on an old hill farm of about 130 acres which has returned to being a forest, and, we believe, a wildlife sanctuary – insofar as the very limited control of this is in our own hands. Since living in this province, I have tried, to the best of my abilities, to participate in various public discussions concerning wildlife, forests and forestry, and land ethics, as for example in the Royal Commission of Forestry in 1983, and in the off-highway vehicle discussion in 2003.

From my perspective, the overall theme of all these past discussions has been, as tonight with this discussion paper, on how we humans use land here in Nova Scotia in a respectful manner. Respect has meant trying to uphold the interests of all the other species, animal and plant, with which we share this planet with the basic idea that wild places and their inhabitants have a right to exist for their own sake. And respect has also meant upholding human interests. For example, rural Nova Scotians have a right to not accept that their immediate environments be destroyed in the name of so-called progress, as happens with existing forestry and mining. Rural Nova Scotians have a right to believe that they should be able to live in place and earn a respectful living from the natural environment without destroying it.

I personally have been totally unsuccessful in preventing the destruction of forested lands surrounding

where we live. (When we first moved to our place in Saltsprings, we did stop one forest spraying situation on our doorstep the year we arrived, but the sprayers returned about twenty years later.) Such forest destruction, carried out by the pulp companies and by those whose immediate economic interests are to serve them, have of course been presided over and publicly defended by the same Department of Natural Resources which is hosting tonight's community lands trust discussion meeting. (We use the human-centered term "resources" because it implies that Nature exists to be put to our use. Also, the frequent use of the term "stewardship" in the discussion document, while appearing benign, still implies that humans remain in charge of the natural world. Our language of discourse embodies a mostly unquestioned world view.)

## **FRIENDS OF REDTAIL SOCIETY**

Why are there a number of initiatives in the province towards community land trusts? I think these can be understood mainly as a response to the destructiveness of existing forestry practices. The existing deforestation situation in Nova Scotia can seem oppressive and overwhelming. But people are exploring various ways to turn things around. I am a member and strong supporter of the Friends of Redtail Society (FRS). This discussion paper invokes the work of this group as one possible model for the way forward. The Friends say in a pamphlet that they are giving out this year:

"Friends of Redtail Society derives its inspiration from the deep ecological values instilled at Redtail Nature Awareness, a nature education centre close to the land at stake. FRS continues to draw support from the diverse network of people who have come to know this land through their experiences at Redtail." (*Sheltering Forests* pamphlet, Summer 2010.)

The Friends of Redtail Society has come together to raise money to protect forest lands from being swallowed up by industrial forestry, and, along the way, have pledged to show how to "live in better harmony with earths processes."

Billy MacDonald's work with Redtail Nature Awareness clearly has a winning formula, recognized by the many who have gone through this experience, and who have maintained their support in one way or another over the past twenty years. It was such community support, in the past, plus the articulation of the applied deep ecology work being done at Redtail Nature Awareness, which compelled the National Energy Board, in a rare decision, to force the Sable natural gas pipeline to be moved away from the Redtail Camp.

I am somewhat familiar with the work of Redtail Nature Awareness, as I have known Billy MacDonald during this time and shared with him many discussions and an enthusiasm for the philosophy of deep ecology and its practical application. So what are some of these core beliefs from MacDonald which have come to inspire the Friends of Redtail Society?

1. The forest community of plants and animals must continue to fully function. Human entry into this community must be respectful of this and this entry is primarily for educational purposes. This is very far from industrial society's "norm" of looking at trees and other plants, and wildlife, as "resources" for human exploitation. This educational purpose must not undermine the forest community. For example, trail construction, camping arrangements and human conduct within the forest must keep this in mind. Apparent conflicts between humans and the forest community must be resolved in favour of the forest.

2. The forest is the great teacher but, to learn, humans who enter the forest must open themselves to receiving its lessons and this means conducting oneself in a respectful manner, endeavouring to leave human-centeredness and the distractions of the modern technological world behind.

3. Involvement with Redtail Nature Awareness is generally enjoyed by its participants. The forest experience must be enjoyable, yet Billy always stresses that he is not providing entertainment, but an opportunity to integrate with the forest, and perhaps learn some of its teachings and mysteries. Entering the forest community is a spiritual experience where we try to leave human-centeredness behind, so that the forest becomes part of our self-identity. Individual selfishness can become transcended so we can come to have an inter-species self, as for example in the Council of All Beings organized at Redtail. The large number of campers who come back for more shows that this overall “enjoyment but not entertainment” message is generally accepted.

4. MacDonald has been acting as an eco-caretaker, actively keeping an eye on MacBeth Road (which accesses Redtail Nature Awareness), to stop deer jacking, night hunting of racoons, the dumping of animal carcasses from farms, garbage, night parties, clear cutting in the immediate area, etc. Billy strongly feels that all of us must be prepared to personally intervene to uphold the ecological integrity of the neighbourhood. This, for him, also involved developing relations with members of the local community and, where necessary, lobbying to change dysfunctional behaviours. The local community rapidly came to have an awareness that there were human eyes and ears looking out for, and prepared to intervene, to protect the health of the local area. Active eco-caretakers, on a voluntary but committed basis, will also be required when the Wagner forest lands pass into the Society’s overall control.

5. MacDonald uses his Redtail base to speak out in the media against environmental atrocities. This also helped build support for his work and the ethical values he is trying to impart. The Friends of Redtail Society needs to follow a similar path, for example by speaking out on the industrialization of nearby Dalhousie Mountain with its existing and soon to be expanded wind turbine site.

6. Billy MacDonald is interested in providing an economic base for rural communities, where one can make a simple living from the forest without destroying it. He has said we need working relationships with the land, using practical life skills and appropriate technologies. His interesting preliminary ideas can be seen in an article on the Redtail Nature Awareness web site: [Return to Rural Community](#).

All of the above, which are derivative from the work of Redtail Nature Awareness, have helped to give legitimacy and community support, as well as inspiration, to the fund raising activities of the Friends of Redtail Society.

## **CRITIQUE OF THE DISCUSSION PAPER**

a. Without belabouring the point, the Department of Natural Resources, due to its historical institutional track record as defender of the deforestation practices of industrial forestry, will have trouble “getting” what groups like the Friends of Redtail Society are all about. It also has a serious problem of moral credibility. Likewise, those who have closely followed forest issues in Nova Scotia would have a lot of difficulty in turning over “ownership” of saved forest lands to the province, notwithstanding any

“funding contributions” from the province.

b. The discussion paper nowhere challenges the assumption that the Earth and all its creatures can be “owned” by humans and corporations. While this might be the existing situation in Nova Scotia, as elsewhere – as Arne Naess, John Livingston and others have pointed out – this is really only human self-serving fantasy. It should at least be theoretically challenged in a discussion document, where new attitudes towards the natural world are supposed to be on the discussion table.

c. The discussion paper takes the existing forest industry domination of land in Nova Scotia as a given. In the age of ecology, where we all start to become conscious of how interdependent the welfare of humans is with the natural world around us, this domination is no longer acceptable. For example, why is it allowed that crown leases of forest land to pulp companies can just be “rolled over”, without public discussion of the past record of land use with at least the possibility of revoking the license for bad ecological and social conduct, when a corporation changes ownership? This happened with Scott, who, after several corporate shuffles, eventually became Northern Pulp; or with Stora, who eventually surfaced as New Page. Corporate shuffles often seem to result in large amounts of debt being accumulated, as seems to be the situation with New Page, according to recent media reports. This high debt could lead to more exploitive cutting practices, e.g. as in proposed so-called biomass harvesting, to generate higher economic returns for the corporation. But it will be society (people) and the forest ecosystem (nonhuman life forms) which bear the increased costs.

d. This point follows from the previous discussion concerning existing forest land use in Nova Scotia. However, here I am referring not to leases but to “ownership” claims by such companies as J.D. Irving Limited – referred to in the discussion paper – and also New Page and Wagner. John Livingston, I believe Canada’s deepest eco-philosopher, made the distinction between ideological and environmental approaches to nationalization: “When nationalization of primary resources comes, as it inevitably must, it will be on grounds which are ecologically oriented. The grounds will not be ideological.” (One Cosmic Instant, p. 207) What I am saying here, is that on ecological grounds we cannot allow in Nova Scotia large corporate land “ownership” to decide for all of us humans – and for the nonhuman life forms which occupy such lands – what will happen on the lands they have acquired. These lands should be nationalized for ecological reasons. The thrust of this discussion paper, to accept the current status of such lands which we can then “buy back”, must be at least up for discussion.

e. The discussion paper seems to set up a dichotomy or contradiction between lands for “ecological preservation” (p. 3) and “the purchase of land for community purposes.” (p. 3) Why cannot the two views be combined, but with priority given to ecological preservation? Why is it, that this discussion paper cannot understand that ecological preservation can be part of “community purposes”? Here in the discussion paper, community is basically defined from a human-centered perspective: “recreation, hunting and fishing, forestry, conservation, agriculture, general access and use.” (p. 2) This would not be the position of the Friends of Redtail Society, which is seeking a citizen-based community forest which puts the forest and wildlife in first place and the interest of humans as a necessary part of, but subordinate to this overall priority. Locally based citizens must become vocal defenders of the forests and wildlife in their own communities. At the same time, “community” as a concept must become enlarged beyond just the needs of humans, in any satisfactory land ethic. Aldo Leopold instructed us on this point so long ago, in *A Sand County Almanac* (p. 239): “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” Stan Rowe (1918-2004), a Canadian forester and eco-philosopher, expressed well what needs to be our

basic orientation in these discussions: “We are Earthlings first, humans second.” (Earth Alive, p. 21) Our consciousness must change away from human-centeredness, which is promoted by an ever expanding industrial capitalism, which has commodified Nature and despiritualized the world around us.

f. It remains unclear to me in the discussion paper whether the government maintains “ownership” or whether control remains with the government, if it contributes some of the money which a lands trust is endeavouring to raise to purchase desired lands. Where government can contribute money, the paper speaks of “The trustees appointed by government.” (p. 4) In another place in the paper we are told “If funding contributions were made by the provincial government, the ownership of the land must be turned over to the province.” (p. 6) On the same page it also states “If the province contributed funds for the purchase, then the land could be owned by the province or by the community organization, depending on the funding source within government.” (p. 3) What is it?

g. The discussion paper speaks of and promotes “working forest” easements. These should not be supported, unless a different kind of ecologically conscious forestry is going to be practiced, variously called “low impact” or restoration forestry. Some members of the Nova Scotia Woodlot Owners and Operators Association have been at the forefront of such work.

Thanks for listening to this presentation.

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