

Some Dimensions of a New Forest Land Ethic

By David Orton

“The overwhelming thrust of the ‘environmental’ movement is dedicated not to the interest of Nature, but to the security and sustainability of the advancement of the human enterprise.” John Livingston, **Rogue Primate**, p. 214

“The ideology of ownership of nature has no place in an ecosophy.” Arne Naess, **Ecology, community and lifestyle**, p. 175

“Deep ecology provides us with a nonhuman-centered philosophical relationship to the natural world. This is an interdependence of humans with other life forms, on a basis of equality, with all of Nature – humans are not set apart from Nature... Deep ecology says that through a fundamental revolution in consciousness, we can change existing human relationships of attempted dominance over the natural environment. This is deep ecology's profound and unique contribution to our time, but the most appropriate social, political, cultural and economic relationships for such a world are yet to be determined.” *Deep Ecology, Earth First! and Anarchism*, by David Orton, **Earth First! Journal**, (August/September 2001), p. 18

INTRODUCTION

As a member and general supporter of the Friends of Redtail Society, I thought I would try to think through some ideas about what a new forest land ethic would entail for our local situation near Scotsburn, Pictou County, Nova Scotia, and circulate them through the internet. It looks like the Friends will be successful in raising the \$250,000 needed to ‘purchase’ the land – 313 acres at immediate risk from clear cutting. We need what Diana Beresford-Kroeger’s 2010 book **The Global Forest** calls a forest bioplan: “The act of bioplanning knits back the battered element of nature into our thinking.” (p. 50) Note well the emphasis on “bio” or life as guiding the plan.

The [Friends of Redtail](#) web site states under “Our Vision”:

“By now it is widely evident that humanity as a whole is walking a path of earth destruction and eventual self-extinction. It is urgent and necessary for us to find ways to bring our activity back in-line with the earth’s natural processes. Friends of Redtail Society challenges the dominant assumption that nature is a ‘resource’ and that environmental destruction is necessary because our current economic structures depend upon it.

When we are successful in closing the purchase and sale agreement with Wagner Forest NS in December of 2009, this land will forever be protected and subject to the tenets of

our Society. As an organization, we wish to support the re-emergence of the idea that we can live in better harmony with earth's processes, that we can demonstrate a balance between the needs of human and non-human communities and that our lives can support, not degrade life on the planet."

I am overall impressed with the collective wisdom and enthusiasm of the group of people and their supporters who have come together as the board of directors of the Friends of Redtail Society, and how they have conducted themselves. As one can see from the statement posted by the Friends, deep ecology ideas are having influence, and there is an implicit criticism of the destructiveness of the capitalist economic system without actually naming the system. While some statements may be overblown, given grim ecological and social unknowns ("this land will forever be protected") – and one misses an important acknowledgement, which can be overlooked by 'purchasing' land, that, as Arne Naess, among others, has told us "The land does not belong to humans" – their preliminary position of what a land ethic or bioplan would entail has aroused the interest of many of us here in Nova Scotia. We are looking to the Friends of Redtail Society for a path forward out of the impasse of a forest wasteland, with its depleted wildlife created by industrial forestry in Nova Scotia *and how this will relate to the human community living in the immediate area*. There is growing interest in our province in whether some kind of new bioplan model of a citizen-based "community" forest co-existence, which puts the forest and wildlife in first place and the interests of humans as a necessary part of, but subordinate, to this overall priority, is being conceived in the Scotsburn area.

Others have seen that successfully launching a public appeal to raise funds at a grassroots level to purchase forest land, as carried out by the Friends of Redtail Society, is unique within this province. Most bequests of land for conservation purposes, as set aside from industrial forestry, are made from "on high", that is by wealthy individuals, often nearing the end of their life, or by an organization like the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, which acquires "privately owned land" through purchase or by donation. "Social recognition" for such land acquisitions is conveyed through media publicity. An equivalent federal conservation organization would be the Nature Conservancy of Canada, which also works with corporations and government bodies, and, from time to time, runs full-page advertisements in the **Globe and Mail**, listing financial donors grouped into various supposedly honorific contribution categories. Neither of these two organizations challenges the human-centered nature of industrial society or capitalism itself, but they do subscribe to setting aside some lands from a prudent "stewardship" position for long-term human self-interest. (Nature Canada is another federal organization, including 350 naturalist clubs, which works for conservation. Nature Canada says it is not "opposed to industry and development" and works in partnerships with groups like the Forest Products Association and Mining interests.)

Those who have contributed to the financial campaign of the Friends of Redtail Society – apart from a desire to protect forest land and wildlife from clear cutting, are also in support of ensuring the continuation of a surrounding land base for the educational work carried out by Redtail Nature Awareness and its founder Billy MacDonald, over the last twenty years. One might expect some of these supporters to have differing view and

questions on what a new Earth-centered forest land ethic or bioplan will entail. It becomes therefore the responsibility of the Friends of Redtail Society to think through what it wants for the soon to be protected land base, and to spell out in a general way the features of the bioplan. It will also be their responsibility to rally support for this vision among those who have financially contributed to the campaign.

One major problem that has to be faced is that any new land ethic has to come into existence within a social, cultural, political and economic situation, which not only gives institutional support to industrial forestry, but also considers wildlife as an exploitable “resource” for public consumption – with designated hunting, trapping and fishing ‘seasons’ throughout the province; and which upholds that mining sub-surface ‘rights’ are permanently alienated or given over to the crown, to be disposed of as the provincial government sees fit. Can such provincial policies be successfully opposed at the Scotsburn community level with local support and community-based eco-caretakers of the protected lands on site? (Billy MacDonald has worked as an unpaid eco-caretaker on the McBeth Road during his Redtail work, and this could be a working model to draw from for the bioplan.) Will it be necessary to try and get the provincial government to enshrine the bioplan in legislation? If so, how realistic is this prospect? While there will be considerable support and excitement among some sections of the general public once the bioplan is fully articulated, it will be necessary to publicly defend this land ethic against hostile critical voices. Such voices will inevitably try to undermine what the Friends are doing. Their work will be seen as a serious challenge to the forestry and industrial capitalist world – and those who directly benefit from this, as it presently exists not only here in Nova Scotia, but across Canada as well.

THE DE-FORESTATION SITUATION

Now is a good time to have such a land ethic discussion among the directors and supporters of the Friends of Redtail Society, before the ‘ownership’ of the desired forest lands is finally transferred to the Society at the end of 2010. My comments are meant as a contribution to such a discussion.

One way of starting such a discussion is to say what the actual forest and forestry situation is in Nova Scotia. There are of course many government tax breaks and hidden subsidies that underlie industrial forestry in the province, but our concern here is principally the ecological picture. The forest industry should be called by its real name – the de-forestation industry. The existing views governing industrial forestry extraction – pulp mill forestry – can serve as an example of what the Friends of Redtail Society obviously needs to oppose. Some aspects of this viewpoint are listed below, although much more could be said. (I would like to acknowledge here the influence on my thinking of the forest ideas of the Australian deep ecologist [Richard Sylvan](#) [1935-1996].)

- Trees are seen as a “resource” put on this Earth for human and corporate use. They can be cut any time – 24 hours a day if seen as necessary, any month of the year and by any method. Clear cutting is favoured for commercial advantage,

although also publicly defended as a biological necessity. So there is no forest cover left, except for some small token tree clumps, after a “harvesting” operation. The forest as a home for wildlife is not basically a consideration in commercial logging operations.

- Trees and forests can be “owned” by private corporate interests, by the federal and provincial governments or by individuals. According to federal government data, there are 30,000 individuals in Nova Scotia who have small woodlots, 35,000 individuals in New Brunswick, and 16,000 woodlots in Prince Edward Island. (‘Woodlot’ is a human-centered term denoting that wood production has priority.) Crown or public lands are seen as primarily committed “resources” for forestry under long-term leases to the forest industry or as potential “resources” for other industrial uses, as in mining. There is no legislative responsibility by humans for the living requirements of nonhuman species who need the forests as their home on crown or public lands. Provincial or federal governments do not accept that healthy forests of mixed hardwood and softwood species of varying ages must be a base line for the well-being of wildlife.
- Forestry interests and their supporters want maximum wood consumption and maximum commercially desirable species production in society, and minimum set asides for parks or wildlife conservation areas. “Wildlife” requirements have to be compatible with industrial forestry demands. Wildlife is basically viewed by the provincial and federal governments as a ‘cash crop’ for hunters, trappers and fishers, which are a decreasing minority of the population. The wildlife “manager” is essentially a broker among competing human-centered interests. Yet who speaks for the interests of wildlife? Wildlife not viewed as ‘crop’ has no value.
- It is accepted as perfectly normal “forestry” that chemical herbicides and insecticide poisons may be routinely used on the forests, along with biological sprays, which also have chemical components in their ‘biological’ formulations. It is routinely and falsely denied that there are any negative consequences to the use of forest biocides, whether to the ecosystem or to humans living in the vicinity of spray sites. The use of sprays is a direct interference in evolutionary processes to try and shape them for human-centered commercial ends.
- The prevailing forestry ideology of maximum wood production is part of an economic growth ideology which orients industrial capitalist society.
- We are told in the climate change literature that fossil fuels contribute three quarters of the problem regarding greenhouse gases, and that deforestation accounts for one quarter of the problem. But this knowledge has evaded the thinking of the forest industry in Nova Scotia, which persists with its defence of clearcut deforestation.

WHERE ARE WE?

“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 existing de-forestation situation in Nova Scotia can seem oppressive and overwhelming for a group of people like Friends of Redtail. They have 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 earth’s processes.” Yet I think if the Friends draw from the basic lessons of the work of Redtail Nature Awareness, which I believe to be their unique experience and source of moral strength, this will give them not only legitimacy, but will make it hard for opponents to undermine their work. 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. This seems to mean that the core set of beliefs from the work of Redtail should be adopted for the newly secured forest lands, with whatever modifications and additions that are seen to be necessary for the bioplan to have community support. So what are these core beliefs?

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. So for example, trail construction and 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 was generally enjoyed by its participants. So the forest experience must be enjoyable. Yet Billy always stressed that he is not providing entertainment but an opportunity to integrate with the forest, and perhaps learn some of its teachings and mysteries. The large number of Redtail camping recidivists shows that this overall “enjoyment but not entertainment” message was generally accepted, because many people came back for more.
4. Billy has acted as an eco-caretaker, actively keeping an eye on the MacBeth Road, which accessed Redtail, to stop deer jacking, night hunting, the dumping of animal

carcasses from farms or illegal hunting, garbage, night parties, etc. This also involved developing relations with members of the local community and, where necessary, lobbying to change dysfunctional behaviours. The local community rapidly came to 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. Billy has used his Redtail base to speak out in the media against environmental atrocities, and the Friends of Redtail Society should follow a similar path on land use issues which concern Nova Scotians. The Friends need to speak out, for example, against the industrialization of nearby Dalhousie Mountain, with its existing, and soon to be expanded 'wind farm'. (For a discussion of the Dalhousie Mountain situation, see "[Wind Farms' Some Deep Ecology Considerations](#)".)

SOME OTHER ISSUES

There are some other issues that need to be addressed when trying to implement a new forestry vision. Here are a few proposals, which can only be suggestive at this stage.

When squaring off against industrial interests, coalitions to save forest land – often called wilderness areas – in which mainstream environmental groups have been involved in Nova Scotia, have made the point that "traditional use" would be upheld if the contested area was finally saved. This brought on board the hunters, trappers, off-highway vehicle users and people with hunting cabins on the contested lands. However, I always thought this was a view of human-centered wilderness and, within Nova Scotia, one which I could not support. (I think in the North this is a different situation, where support from local people – aboriginal and non aboriginal – is often crucial for the protection of forest lands in new parks or wilderness areas. One has to take into account traditional use by locals.)

I hope there will be no trapping or use of off-highway vehicles in the newly protected lands. If there has to be hunting (I prefer there was not), then perhaps deer hunting could be allowed for a restricted two-week season in a designated area of the protected lands by bow hunters only.

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](#)". I think at the present time this should be considered mainly an important continuing discussion, without trying to practically implement these ideas on the preserved lands, which are relatively small in the overall scheme of things.

Once the Wagner lands are acquired, I can see the situation where other “landholders” in the MacBeth Road general area may want to put their own lands in some kind of ethical alignment with the land base which the Friends of Redtail Society is establishing. Such discussions need to be encouraged.

CONCLUSION

I am a supporter of the work of the Friends of Redtail Society in establishing a community-based forest with its new land ethic and bioplan. My comments are meant to be helpful and a contribution to a needed discussion.

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