Choosing a home



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WHEN I FIRST VISITED North Hastings more than 20 years ago as a tourist, I was immediately drawn in by the natural beauty this area has to offer.As I drove north from St. Catharines, headed for a two week adventure in thebackcountry of Algonquin Park, I must have pulled over to take photos at least 20 times. I remember losing count of the number of lakes on the side of the road between Peterborough and the park.

On this trek, I also saw deer, a broadwinged hawk, a barred owl, a red fox, a snapping turtle, a pair of loons on Paudash Lake, and the biggest bull moose I had ever seen at the time.Just getting my feet wet as a wildlife photographer, I had not expected to see so many species until I was at least 24 hours into the backcountry. Yet, every one of these animals made themselves readily available to be photographed without even having to leave the comfort of my pickuptruck.Now, that I have lived here in North Hastings for the better part of the past 15 years, I realize that the stretch of Hwy 62 between Bancroft and Algonquin Park should take approximately 45-50 minutes. On this first exploration of the area it took me more than four hours. Spottingthe northern lights for the first time in my life near Lake St. Peter on my way back to Niagara, I ended up adding another two hours to the drive home. Needless to say, but everything seemed to be calling me here.Although another six years passed before I decided to make North Hastings my home, it was that first trip through the Bancroft area as a tourist that planted the seed. If it wasn't for that week, who knows where I would have ended up putting down my roots.Driving on the same stretch of highway last week, more than two decades later, I thought about how instrumental that single trip has been and continues to be in the context of my life. Reminiscing on my adventure long ago as I made my way from Maynooth to Bancroft, I started thinking about the Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization's ?Connections Campaign?; and, the potential opportunities for sustainable, ecologically responsible long-term economic growth that this area's natural beauty provides us for free. Well, maybe free isn't the best word in this case.Preserving this self-replenishing resource does cost us the time and energy we muststpend as stewards of the land, water, and biodiversity.

The OHTO's campaign focuses on celebrating people's connections to the land, water, local communities, wide-open spaces - ?all this area has to offer.? For the many of us who have chosen to make North Hastings home instead of ?the city? it is our person-al connections to this lifegiving natural beauty that brought us and keeps us here. If that natural beauty evaporates in the wake of so-called ?progress?, so will the allure inviting people to live and visit here. As I rolled through the Town of Bancroft on my way home, my mind shifted again; moving from the OHTO's Connections Campaign to a recent press release fromZoocasa Real Estate Brokerage Inc. In this press release, Zoocasa announced thatBancroft had been ranked as the best place in Canada to buy real estate.What caused my mind to jump from appreciating the value of ecotourism and nature, to this sign of ?progress? was something I had never seen in Bancroft before

- people sleeping on the streets.

Having covered the homelessness/housing crisis since I first took on this role, there was never a question for me regarding how urgent the situation is here in NorthHastings. However, in all the time that has passed I have never come across some-one sleeping on the streets. Maybe it was because I was passing through town earlierthan usual on that day, but within the four minutes it took me to get from the officeto the corner of Hwy 62 and Bridge Street I counted three people still asleep on theconcrete.In larger urban centres this is a common observance, for some, acceptable collateral damage and a necessary byproduct of ?progress.? For me, however, it is a sign that we need to do better. As stewards of our communities our elected officials needto step up to this crisis, and make sure everyone who feels compelled to chooseNorth Hastings as their home can afford to at the very least have a roof over their head.