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Assessing the risk of doing nothing

By Nate Smelle

As exciting as the world of municipal finance is, it was not the treasurer's report that had me eager to sit in on last week's council meeting in Dungannon. What grabbed my attention while reading over the agenda the night before was a so-called ?emergency motion? put forward by the Ontario Forest Industries Association (OFIA). This motion asked for council to support the OFIA in its campaign to have the Government of Canada extend the forest industries exemption from the Endangered Species Act for an additional five years; and for a two-year exemption from the new Species At Risk guide by the Government of Ontario.

Having spent many late nights studying the Species at Risk Act (SARA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a volunteer researcher with the David Suzuki Foundation, this item on the agenda immediately caught my eye. Scouring through the information pertaining to each of the species identified within the legislation, my task was to sniff out loopholes and obstacles preventing many threatened species from being protected. After reading the act and the reports on many of the species on the verge of attaining protection, it became clear to me how this legislation allowed the needs of industry to trump the survival of a species.

The SARA states clearly that ?no person shall damage or destroy the habitat of a species that is listed on the Species at Risk in Ontario List as an endangered or threatened species; or a species that is listed on the Species at Risk in Ontario List as an extirpated species,? which seems to imply that any species on the list has protection. This however is not the case. What is seen by many as a major flaw of the act is that it contains a clause which allows for the destruction of critical habitat of species at risk if ?the minister is of the opinion that the activity will result in a significant social or economic benefit to Ontario.? In addition, when a species is listed under the SARA it requires the development of a ?recovery strategy? that identifies its' critical habitat. Because the majority of these ?recovery strategies? do not define the critical habitat of the species they are meant to protect, in most cases protection is stalled.

Even with a mouthful of baby teeth, this legislation still serves as an essential means of ensuring species such as the Blanding's turtle, the eastern Massasauga rattlesnake, the woodland caribou and several others have a future. Refusing to enact these measures sets a dangerous precedent when it comes to environmental protection, because as minimal as they are, they are the only legislative tools we have in Canada to protect biodiversity and species on the brink of extinction.

As we know, this fight between industry and environmentalists is nothing new or unique to Canada. The Endangered Species Act in the U.S. has faced opposition from the far-right for decades, and is currently under attack by the Environmental Protection Agency under Scott Pruitt. Using arguments similar to those being deployed by the Trump administration, the OFIA is claiming that if the government continues to implement environmental protection policy through the ESA and SARA, ?mills will close, jobs will be lost, and forestry dependent communities will be decimated.?

The truth of the matter is that this is not the case. Implementing environmental protection does not mean that the forestry industry needs to grind to a halt. Yes, as production slows to accommodate the environmental pillar of sustainable development, profits might shrink in the short-term and the executives may not get their bonuses for a while, but communities will not implode and people do not have to lose their jobs. Sustainable forestry that respects biodiversity and species at risk is not a pipe dream. It is a viable alternative to conventional forestry practices that perpetually nurtures long-term profitability and ecological integrity, rather than exploiting limited resources on a short-term basis. Sustainable forestry requires industry to give more time, care and ultimately respect for the right of a species to exist for its own intrinsic value.

I commend members of council in Bancroft for taking time to educate themselves on this motion and what it truly represents. It will be very interesting to listen to what the experts on both sides of this issue have to say.