

SARA wasn't created just to annoy industrialists

By Nate Smelle

All one needs to do is take a short drive around the Bancroft area they will see quickly how important the forestry industry is to this community. Many of the buildings are clad in wood siding and every single one of them was constructed of wood framing of some sort. Stacked outside many of these structures are piles of firewood to keep us warm throughout the winter months. Lining the roadsides and decorating the land around each of these buildings are trees ? hemlock, pine, spruce, poplar, balsam fir, tamarack, white and yellow birch, and a couple varieties of maple and oak. It is undeniable that the forestry industry plays a huge role in our local economy. During last Wednesday's council meeting, Peter Nitschke of the Ontario Forestry Industry Association and Lou Freymond, owner/operator of Freymond Lumber Ltd. presented members of council with the reasons why they believe the forestry industry should be exempt from Ontario's recently updated Species-at-Risk guide, and what the motion identifies as ?flawed Endangered Species Act policy.?

Voicing their concerns for the economic well-being of the industry, their presentation focused heavily on how two species at risk ? the Blanding's turtle and the woodland caribou ? threaten to ?shut down mills? throughout the province. Reading through the recovery strategy for the woodland caribou, it specifically names the forestry industry, as well as mining, hydro corridors and roads, as the main culprits contributing to the caribou's disappearing habitat in Ontario. The strategy also highlights that since the late 1800s the woodland caribou have lost between 40 and 50 per cent of their habitat. While this species does not inhabit forests in the Bancroft area, the fact it shares its natural habitat with loggers in the far north is being used as justification for the exemption requested by the forestry industry throughout the entire province. Nitschke told council he considers the Blanding's turtle to be the woodland caribou of the Bancroft area. Aside from their likeness as sentient beings that breathe the same air, the only thing these species share in common is the fact they are both threatened by habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation.

Carefully designed by the biologists, ecologists and scientists who dedicate their lives to understanding these creatures and how they interact with their environment and each other, the ESA and the Species-At-Risk Act were not created just to annoy industrialists. They were established with the intention of rebuilding populations of species decimated by human activity, and to protect the interconnected web of biodiversity which sustains and enhances our ecological and human health. As effective as the Crown Forest Sustainability Act may be, it is essentially a tool developed to sustain the forest so that it can continuously be harvested as a resource. The protection it provides for species at risk and biodiversity is secondary. The ESA and SARA on the other hand, are tailored specifically to address the biological and ecological demands of species which have been scientifically proven to be in danger of going extinct if something is not done.

Having worked in the industry for many years, Councillor Barry McGibbon believes environmental protection should be left in the hands of the forest industry. The big problem I see with this is that although many foresters in the business act as good stewards of the resource that allows them to earn a living, not all do. SARA and the ESA are in place to keep those individuals more concerned with their bottom line than with biodiversity or species at risk in line. Exempting an entire industry from having to abide by such regulations is a dangerous precedent to set. If all forestry practitioners are deemed as responsible stewards of the land, then who's to say that the mining and oil and gas industries shouldn't be given the same above the law status?

It is not as if these environmental protection measures would bring the forestry industry to a grinding halt. In most cases ? especially in our neck of the woods ? the ESA and SARA only tend to influence forestry operations through timing restrictions. During the presentation to council, Freymond suggested that these timing restrictions aren't always the best thing for the environment, because when foresters are prevented from cutting trees and hauling wood from the forest during sensitive times of year for species at risk, they end up doing damage to other species and their habitat that are actively using the harvest area when they are permitted to enter the bush. If admittedly loggers are damaging habitat and disrupting species when they are allowed to harvest trees, then it is fair to say that by using the same machinery they would ultimately cause a similar level of harm during times of year sensitive to species at risk. This, in my opinion, is why the ESA and SARA are absolutely essential.

Sad as it is that these non-threatened species and their habitat wind up as collateral damage in the effort to protect species at risk, their existence is considered under the ESA and SARA as an acceptable cost of doing business. Unfortunately for these individuals, the forestry industry, and all of us for that matter, the state of the environment and the complexity of ecological crisis demands a dynamic recovery strategy that does not allow for business as usual.