

Healthy beech trees may soon disappear



Ernie Demuth gives a presentation to members of the Bancroft Area Forest Industry Association on the ravages of Beech bark disease, as BAFIA VP Virginia DeCarle assists. /TONY PEARSON Staff

By Tony Pearson

‘We may be the last generation to see any stands of healthy beech trees in our forests.’ This was the dire prediction of Ernie Demuth, past president of the Bancroft Area Forest Industry Association (BAFIA), in his presentation to its annual meeting last week.

Most people are familiar with Dutch Elm disease, which wiped out 80 per cent of Ontario’s elm trees in the seventies and eighties. And a majority of people have also heard of the recent threat posed by the emerald ash borer, which kills almost all the ash trees in an infected area; this threat is now spreading across southern Ontario.

But few have heard about beech bark disease, which is now attacking large swathes of forests in our area. The disease is a ‘double-whammy’; an insect opens holes in the bark, which in turn open the door to the necrotic fungus. This fungus eventually rots the tree, producing many small cankers and red fruiting bodies. The tree is so starved that it can easily snap off in a high wind. The disease not only kills the tree, but carries on to the next generation of saplings through the root system. So new beeches are ‘born’ ill, and fail to grow to normal height. Over time, these stunted beeches create a dense understory mat called a beech thicket. Such thickets can choke off other vegetation, and create ecological ‘dead zones’ within the forest.

Since beech trees can be a significant portion of hardwood forest areas (they can amount to between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of a stand of sugar maple), diseased beeches can severely reduce the amount of timber that can be harvested.

The disease has other effects. It seriously restricts the diet of black bears, for whom beech nuts are a key element in their diet. The disease spreads quickly. Although it has been present in Nova Scotia since the 1880’s, and for decades moved very slowly, it has spread almost like wildfire since first hitting Ontario a little over a decade ago. Demuth estimates that his company had lost 80 hectares of saleable timber in one summer.

Although some websites maintain that there are ways to combat the disease, Demuth was sceptical. In lots encompassing hundreds of hectares, he had discovered only a few disease-resistant trees. ‘By the time you see the first damage, it’s too late to save the tree,’ he stated.

Still, Demuth didn’t want to paint a complete doom-&-gloom picture. ‘In our large allocations of tolerant hardwood harvest forests where we do selection harvesting,’ Demuth reported, ‘I am finding about five to 10 per cent of the total area may be affected’. He added, ‘I can confidently say that our sugar maple regeneration far exceeds our beech regeneration’. We do not anticipate a wide-scale ecological disaster in Hastings and Haliburton.

On the other hand, one healthy species in the forest mix will certainly disappear. Reports Demuth ‘when foresters from Nova Scotia first come to our local forests and see our beech, they take pictures beside it, because they have yet to see a large healthy beech. Their beech is warty, small, spindly, and nothing compared to what we have.’

In other association business, BAFIA continued its plans for Forest Day, which will bring Bancroft elementary school students to Joy Bible Camp in May to learn about forestry and sustainable forest management. BAFIA is also continuing its overall efforts in public education on careful use of natural resources through its Local Wood Initiative. It is also a sponsor of the up-coming Saw-Tech exhibition in Bancroft this June.

BAFIA officers for the coming year are Larry McTaggart as president, Virginia DeCarle as vice-president, and Lou Freymond as secretary-treasurer, with Peter Cybulski and Cameron McRae as directors. McTaggart, with over three decades' experience, reiterated his strong belief in forestry as 'the truly Green industry' 'we harvest for the enduring health of the woods'. He also re-emphasised the role of BAFIA in promotion and public education.