

The Membership Link

By Ned Morgan



Photo: Greg Coman



Sometimes when I look over the Southern Ontario landscape, I think of my ancestors.

They emigrated from Ireland in the 1840s and I wonder at the landscape they would have encountered here, in particular the shadowy, unbroken expanse of virgin old-growth forest. The Canada Company sold parcels of the wild Huron Tract at a bargain to these poor settlers who were probably landless in their country of origin. The pioneers' first order of business was to cut down as much of the forest as possible, often reducing the logs to ashes and their surroundings to a smoking moonscape of stumps. Their lives were probably a little desperate, lonely and benighted; if I met one of them today, I'd likely find that we didn't have much in common. "Conservation" wasn't in their vocabulary; nature was there only to wrest a hard living from. They had no other choice.





Photo: Glenn Harris

Today we have a choice. We can participate in a mass environmental movement that is working to save our wild. We can join the Bruce Trail Conservancy and encourage others to do so. Inside its conservation corridor, the BTC's work focuses on successfully balancing access to the wonders of the Niagara Escarpment with the need to preserve the natural landscape and the delicate ecosystems it supports.

The BTC and other environmental stewardship organizations can be seen as part of our evolution as a species – a long, imperfect and continuing evolution. The North American environmental enlightenment has its roots in the writings of Emerson and the actions of John Muir, as well as millions of citizens who have supported legislation or spoken out to protect wild spaces over the last 150 years.

In his book *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken offers an enlightening examination of the rise of the environmental movement. He points out that it began at roughly the same time as the rise of

biology as a science in the 19th century. By the 1960s, the decade in which the BTC was founded, the movement began to coalesce in a broader public awareness. Hawken uses Mahlon Hoagland's *Laws of Molecular Biology* to explain the rise and behavior of environmental and social-justice movements. Just as "Life builds from the bottom up" – by cooperating cells joining into a complex body – so too do environmental movements. And just as "Life assembles itself into chains", conservation organizations like the BTC similarly link people and ideas.

All life is made up of linkages, and social movements mimic life forms. An organization such as the BTC is not a top-heavy, power-or-profit-driven organization like an army or a corporation. Instead, its linkages – among members, landowners, government, donors, and anyone who uses the trail – define and drive it. To become a member of the BTC is to help guarantee that these all-important linkages remain strong.

Membership strengthens and deepens our commitment to and appreciation

for the Niagara Escarpment and the Trail. Ultimately, people do not need to be members to hike the Trail – nor do they need to be members to make a donation of land or funds. Yet membership is crucial to the BTC for the wide-reaching and welcoming community of conservation it engenders. Even those members who don't go on organized hikes still feel a strong connection to the experience and legacy they are helping perpetuate.

Today we should feel lucky that an organization such as the BTC exists to link people with the natural environment – and with each other. We should feel lucky that unlike my pioneer ancestors, we're no longer locked in a lonely survival battle with nature. Often when I'm hiking in my home section of the Beaver Valley Club I take note of several giant, scarred old-growth beech and maple trees near the trail. I marvel at how these trees survived the onslaught of those obsessive pioneer loggers. Now they stand protected by the Bruce Trail Conservancy – by us. •