



Forest friends and foes

Eco Echo workshop inspires residents of the MRC

By Anna Robertson

On a warm and windy Nov. 5 morning, 24 residents of the Gatineau Hills gathered at Eco Echo to learn how to become stewards of their own forests.

Facilitator Carl Savignac led the group across Eco Echo's land towards the Hundred Acre Wood to begin the forestry stewardship workshop.

The MRC des Collines recently announced \$63,000 in funding for Eco Echo, a Wakefield based organization whose mandate is to educate the public about sustainability and forest stewardship. The money will fund 12 forestry workshops that are open to the public throughout the MRC, but are targeted towards landowners who are interested in knowing more about their forests.

Three workshops have already taken place. The first addressed the topic of forest appreciation and the second, tree planting. This third workshop focused on ecological assessments and tools for forest management.

Savignac guided participants slowly along a forest trail stopping frequently to discuss topics of ecological interest as they presented themselves. Participants hung on his every word as he shared his extensive

knowledge about topics ranging from tree species, monoculture, wetlands, and wildlife.

"We are surrounded by forests but we don't always know the forest very well," Savignac explained.

Several participants commented that it felt like the slower the group went, the more there was to learn. Questions from participants prompted in depth discussions about what was encountered along the trail. "We didn't move much!" said Savignac. "My idea was to walk more, but there was so much to say," he added.



Carl Savignac founder and director of Dendroica Environnement et Faune leads Eco Echo workshop on Nov. 5. Photo: Anna Robertson

One "friend" of the forest, according to Savignac, is the world of microorganisms that help dead organic matter decompose. Savignac said that there is more biodiversity in a dead tree than in a living one, and

that microorganisms including fungi, are critical to the health of the forest as a whole.

Savignac stressed that humans have a tendency to want to "clean up" the forest. If we see a dead tree or a dead branch, we feel we should remove it. We should resist that impulse, he explained, as the decomposition of dead trees returns nutrients to the forest soil. For birds and animals, dead trees and branches provide essential habitat.

Anne Bancroft, who owns two acres of forest near Wakefield in Edelweiss said, "I was wondering what to do with [my land] and now I think I'm just going to leave it and do nothing!"

When it comes to forest "foes," Savignac discussed deer. He explained that forested areas in the Hills have in most cases been logged more than once over the past few centuries. Many areas represent a monoculture – a stand of hemlock for example – and that biodiversity would be improved with more levels of vegetation in the forest. One barrier to this is the abundant presence of deer who eat shrubs and small trees year-round, preventing them from flourishing.

Workshop attendees were also surprised to learn that slugs and worms are taking their toll on forests by depleting nutrients from the soil. Neither slugs nor worms are indigenous to the Hills, Savignac explained. He said that worms are perfect for gardens but, "in the forest



Workshop participants walking from Eco Echo headquarters at 29 Ch. Trowsse in Wakefield, to the Hundred Acre Wood, for forestry stewardship workshop on Nov. 5. Photo: Anna Robertson

here [they] are not good at all." He also explained that slugs, which are indigenous to Europe and Asia, taste bitter and have few natural predators.

After a coffee break, facilitator Pascal Audet, president of Ma Forêt, escorted the group on another fact-filled forest excursion.

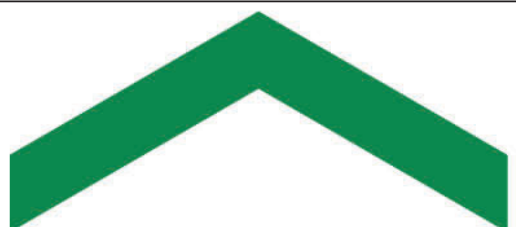
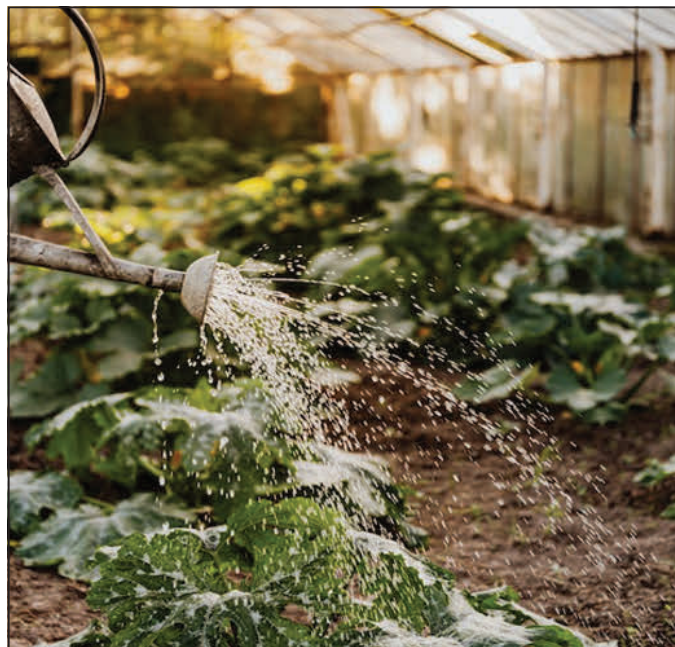
Both speakers at the workshop informed participants that they were available for private consultation. "Eco Echo is not just about here. It's very much about partnerships and sharing of resources," explained Eco Echo board member Christine Tremblay.

Participants came from throughout the MRC. Alisa Gibby Flores, who recently moved from Oregon, said she has just purchased a 10-acre

wood-lot in La Pêche. She is hoping to build a small house on her land which will blend into the ecosystem. "I am here to learn, partly because I'm not familiar with all the eastern tree species," she explained. She added that if there were workshops like this every week, "that would be heaven for me!"

"To walk through a forest slowly with somebody who is knowledgeable and passionate... just gives us a whole different outlook on what a forest really is and what it is nurturing," commented Tremblay. "Woah! Slow down," she suggested. "Take a look at what is around you. Listen to those birds... and enjoy the pure beauty of it all."

For more information about Eco Echo and upcoming workshops go to ecoecho.ca.



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