

Shining a light on MRC's forests

MRC-WIDE ENVIRO/ART PROJECT EXAMINES HEALTH OF REGION'S FORESTS

BY MADELINE KERR
madeline@lowdownonline.com

The state of the MRC des Collines' forests is a mixed one, with some worrisome trends but also some good news too, according to a recent presentation by environmental campus Eco Echo in Wakefield.

"Every tree is our responsibility. What affects one tree, affects others, and this affects all of us. This collective responsibility is what motivated us."

– Christopher Minnes

A team of scientists, artists and environmentalists helped present the final results of Eco Echo's months-long project, Mapping the Community Forest, on April 20 at Centre Wakefield La Pêche.

At the event, social scientist Chantale Doucet, who helped conduct and compile research about regional forests, along with UQO/UQAM professor Christian Messier, presented some of her team's findings, which gave a mixed portrait of deforestation and regrowth throughout the MRC.

All six municipalities are extensively covered by forest – between 62 per cent (Cantley) and 80 per cent (Val-des-Monts), with the largest forested surface area in La Pêche (485 square kilometres). The main species of trees in all sectors is maple (47



From left to right: Laura Birks, Christopher Minnes, Christine Tremblay, cj fleury and Shelley Crabtree stand amidst the art installation titled "Symbiosis", a collaborative artwork designed by fleury, which features over 100 drawings by individuals in the MRC des Collines. The work will tour all six municipalities in the MRC in the coming months. Photo: Madeline Kerr

per cent), and most forests are on the younger side: Chelsea has the highest percentage of old forest, which is defined as 80 years and older (71 per cent), while 63 per cent of forest in L'Ange-Gardien is young growth, or between 20 and 79 years old.

Doucet's presentation showed that, historically, logging had an extensive impact on forests in the region, while recent growth in population has also led to greater deforestation. The presentation pointed out that old-growth forests have decreased significantly

in the last 300 years, and greater fragmentation of forest cover has led to decreased biodiversity and the loss of plant and animal habitats.

But there was some good news, too: As more people have historically moved into cities, low-quality farmland has begun to naturally reforest, leading to some modest gains in forest cover since 1990.

During a question period following Doucet's presentation, local environmentalist Ilse Turnsen asked if the project would

translate to policy changes in the MRC. Eco Echo co-founder and vice president Christopher Minnes, who helped initiate the Mapping project, explained that impacting policy is the eventual goal of their research, but for now the project "helps municipalities and individuals make informed decisions" about further study and protection of the region's woodlands.

"Every tree is our responsibility," Minnes told the audience. "What affects one tree, affects others, and this affects all of us."

"This collective responsibility is what motivated us," he added.

Mapping the Community Forest is an MRC-wide initiative, originally conceived by Minnes and Wakefield-based multimedia artist cj fleury – two individuals who aren't known to shy away from big ideas like this one.

The \$50,000 project's goal is to encourage the public to examine the state of local forests throughout the region's six municipalities, according to Eco Echo president Eric Courneau.

Beginning last fall, Mapping the Community Forest involved 12 creative workshops held at different locations throughout the MRC, all led by fleury, who helped participants contribute to a collaborative art installation.

The installation, titled "Symbiosis", consists of several hanging columns of rice paper, arranged to look like a grove of trees, all of which have been intricately decorated with more than a hundred drawings of woodland flora and fauna in black ink. A video is projected onto the drawings, which was created by local videographer Gillian Kirkland using drone footage of regional forests shot by Julien Maisonneuve, set to an original score by the local, Juno-winning band Esmerine.

On April 20, fleury showcased the finished artwork in the Wakefield library – the starting point for its MRC tour, where it stayed until April 27. In the coming months, the artwork will be displayed in venues across all municipalities in the MRC.

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