

A gift of land - The expression of our love for Sutton

by Elisabeth and Victor Allstone

As the first landowners in the Sutton area to make an ecological donation to Nature Conservancy, we have been asked on several occasions what motivated our 32 acre gift of forest. The answer to that question may be found in our deep affection for Sutton and its mountains as well as in our gratitude for the more than forty happy years spent in these unique surroundings. Indeed, our life here in the Mont Echo area has given us so much pleasure and satisfaction that we thought it only fitting to preserve some of this beautiful wilderness forever by making an ecological donation to a conservation organization.

There is no doubt that it was love at first sight when we drove through Sutton on a warm, sunny day in the summer of 1959. Majestic trees lined both sides of Main Street, their tops forming a shady canopy over our heads. Our destination that day was Vermont where we occasionally spent weekends. Seeing the forest-covered mountains around us we suddenly realized that the landscape here was similar to Vermont and just as breathtakingly beautiful.

At that time Sutton was still very much farming country with large herds of dairy cattle grazing in the undulating pastures that provided a lush foreground to the high mountaintops silhouetted against a clear, blue sky. No wonder that dreams of owning a little corner of this bucolic paradise were dancing in our heads. After all, Sutton would be so much closer to Montreal, our place of work and every-day living, making it much more accessible for regular weekend escapes.

A lot changed in the early sixties with the creation of Ski Sutton and the installation of lifts for downhill skiing which attracted day and weekend visitors in growing numbers, quite a few of them using the Montreal to Boston Dayliner train to get here.

This was also the time when the relatively small-scale farming operations, which had been the mainstay of Sutton's economy

(apart from a handful of manufacturing enterprises), were becoming increasingly unprofitable. The result was that as dairy production diminished, pastureland and farm buildings were often sold to outsiders, or "city people".

It was our good fortune in the spring of 1961 to buy a century-old farmhouse with about 10 acres, all of it in need of "tender loving care". As the saying goes: we have never looked back! By now it has been a labour of love for more than four decades, but the rewards have been immeasurable.

Weekends and vacations in Sutton were quickly becoming a way of life providing a happy and healthy balance between the stresses of city life and hard physical work. This involved coping with the most unexpected problems, learning new skills, and above all being patient and living in tune with the seasons. For example, trees had to be planted every spring, black flies notwithstanding! In those days the provincial government actively supported the establishment of coniferous tree farms in order to keep the meadows from becoming overgrown with brush. This practice unfortunately deprives us now of some sweeping vistas of the Sutton Mountains where deciduous trees are the naturally predominant species which at least provide a winter view.

As the years went by and things were finally taking shape around us on our property, we developed a keen interest in woodlot management as a result of taking extension courses at Macdonald College. We were finally able to differentiate between the various tree and plant species and thus became more knowledgeable in our woodlot activities. How proud we felt when we became a "Certified Tree Farm" in 1977, the award being bestowed through the Eastern Townships Forestry Association (AFCE) of which we are still members. By then we had added a sizeable acreage of mature forest to our original property.



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Planned forest management practices in the private forestry sector are drawn up by professional forest engineers who are responsible for their execution in a manner that respects the environment. Needless to say this type of expertise is highly appreciated by landowners like us. In fact, we would never have known about the rare quality of the woodlot donated by us to Nature Conservancy had it not been pointed out by our forest engineer that the stately maples, beeches, and ash trees there were between 100 and 140 years old. No wonder that we want this ecological treasure to remain untouched.

The almost unfragmented upper reaches of the Sutton Mountains where our property is located have recently attracted much deserved attention and active support by the Quebec's Ministry of the Environment (MENV) and conservation organizations alike. The protection of this rare biodiversity lies largely in the hands of the local and regional authorities concerned, as well as the corporate and private landowners in the area. Ecologically sound logging practices which respect our precious flora and fauna can become a reality.

For our part, we are grateful for the advice and guidance received from Nature Conservancy, the Appalachian Corridor project (ACA), as well as from several landtrusts active in our region, i.e. the Ruitier Valley Land Trust (RVLTL), The Mount

Pinnacle Land Trust, The Alderbrooke Marsh Land Trust, and *Parc d'environnement naturel de Sutton*, all of whom served as shining examples in our efforts to protect a small piece of these extraordinary mountains. In completing our transaction we were aided by the clear and concise procedures for donations of land having an ecological value established by Environment Canada and the *ministère de l'Environnement du Québec* (MENV).

Today, Sutton is essentially a year-round tourist centre, particularly appreciated by those who still feel connected with nature and want to get close to it as an escape from crowded city life. It is our sincere wish that this vital and economically essential industry will continue its spectacular growth in harmony with the protection and conservation of our threatened unique wilderness areas, since both activities would appear to be entirely compatible.

Sutton, with its friendly, nature-loving people and breathtaking landscape is indeed a worthy recipient of our gift.

This is the last of a series of three articles pertaining to the Appalachian Corridor initiative (ACA). If you want more information about the ACA project and the conservation options available to landowners, please consult our website at www.apcor.ca