

Brome County News
15 June 2005, by Maurice Crossfield

Conservation groups aim to keep the Townships clean and green

Nature attracts thousands of people to the Townships every year. And an increasing number of groups are putting their efforts into making sure some of that pristine nature remains intact.

In 1987, the Ruitier Valley Land Trust, Quebec's first such organization, was formed. Its prime concern at the time was wilderness protection and education. In October 2000, the Ruitier Valley Land Trust began envisioning a wider conservation project examining the Sutton Mountains and its place in the larger Green Mountain chain of the Appalachians. From that developed the vision of a protected area spanning from Mount Orford in the north, through the Sutton Mountains southward to Mount Mansfield and Camel's Hump in Vermont. The Appalachian Corridor (ACA) was born.

It's an ambitious project, covering some 100,000 acres where large, non-fragmented forests can still be found. The ACA's work is to develop a kind of patchwork of protected properties throughout the mountains, geographical stepping stones, allowing animals to travel north or south through the Appalachian corridor.

If global warming becomes a serious problem, it will give animals room to roam and adapt.

In the Townships, which is almost entirely privately-owned, the protection of large, untouched forests are vital to the continued survival of various species of plants and animals, such as the black bear and the bobcat, wild garlic and ginseng, not to mention several varieties of birds, reptiles and amphibians. Lose the forest and you lose the wildlife, many species which are listed as endangered to threatened.

Cougar

One such rarity is the cougar. Cougars (*Felis concolor*) are native to much of North America with the Eastern Cougar roaming the wilds of Quebec and New England. Due mainly to hunting, the species was thought to have disappeared in the latter half of the 19th century.

But since 1955, wildlife officials have received calls of sightings across Quebec. Tracks, eyewitness accounts and even videotapes are fine, but scientists were seeking hard proof, such as a body, or at least a strand of identifiable DNA.

For the next 50 years, the Cougar remained a mystery, leaving behind little more than the occasional track. In February, after five years of seeking out the elusive big cat in the Sutton Mountains, scientists were able to confirm the presence of cougars after testing strands of hair found at an observation station. Further testing is underway to determine if it is in fact the Eastern Cougar or a different variety that migrated into the region.

Since its modest beginnings under the wing of the Ruitier Valley Land Trust, the ACA has become a separate organization complete with charitable status, working with area organizations to implement the transborder strategy. Among its partners are Nature Conservancy Québec, the Ruitier Valley Land Trust, the Parc de l'environnement naturel de Sutton, the Mount Pinnacle Land Trust, Alderbrooke Marsh Land Trust, Les Sentiers de

l'Estrie, the Memphremagog Wetlands Foundation and the Mount Echo Conservation Association. The ACA also meets annually with Vermont conservation groups to exchange ideas and information.

The ACA's main objective is the protection of natural areas, either through their purchase or donation, or through the use of conservation servitudes. These servitudes on all or part of an owner's land ensure the future protection of the natural area, even if the land is sold to someone else.

The strategy has paid off. In the years leading up to the creation of the ACA, local groups had succeeded in protecting about 1,000 acres of wilderness. By 2004, that figure is close to 5,000 acres, making it one of the five largest protected areas in southwestern Quebec. This in a region which is 90 per cent privately owned.