

Building Bridges

OTTER PONDS DEMONSTRATION FOREST

2012 Annual Report



(Photo courtesy of Dan Hutt)

Introduction

Often -- but not always -- change seems to come slowly in the forest. Appearances, however, are deceiving. From deep in the soil to the edge of the sky, the processes of life, death, decay and rebirth are constantly at work.

So it was at Otter Ponds Demonstration Forest in 2012. There was visible progress made, to be sure, but also significant activity behind the scenes. This report provides a brief review.

As with any large project, accounting and other paperwork also required a significant investment of time and effort. Outgoing Treasurer Gary Mullaly will present a financial report at the annual general meeting of OPDF on March 23, 2013, which will then be incorporated as an appendix to this report.

Background

The Otter Ponds Demonstration Forest is a unique partnership that includes four non-governmental organizations, a forestry company and the province. The partners collaboratively manage a 500-hectare (1,200-acre) Crown parcel near Mooseland, Nova Scotia, within the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Otter Ponds brings together the Nova Scotia Woodlot Owners and Operators Association, Eastern Shore Forest Watch, Ecology Action Centre, and the Mooseland and Area Community Association, along with Northern Pulp Ltd. and the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources. The partnership agreement was signed June 22, 2010.

Otter Ponds produces timber for market using the best forest management practices presently known, while protecting wildlife habitat and the Tangier River watershed, respecting the ecosystem services provided by the parcel, and enhancing the social and cultural value of the forest.

The project is meant to demonstrate the full potential for sustainably managed working woodlots in the Acadian Forest. Therefore, education and public outreach are essential parts of our mission. Otter Ponds is a place for all Nova Scotians to learn about sustainable forest management and forest ecology.

Infrastructure

In what might have been our most visible accomplishment, a small army of volunteers from all four of our partner organizations spent hundreds of hours building a bridge over Otter Ponds Stream in the late summer of 2012. The bridge is essential to the long-term development of OPDF, providing critical access to much of the forest for visitors and for the transportation of wood products.

The bridge is a symbol of the work we do at Otter Ponds. On many levels, we build bridges: Between a sustainably managed forest and the purchasers of wood products; between an outstanding example of ecosystem-based forestry and a public that is increasingly removed from natural-resource management; between the difficult current situation in Nova Scotia's forest and a better future for human and natural communities.

The picture on the cover tells the story: OPDF Director Matt Miller (in the centre wearing a green raincoat) leads a group of forestry students from Forest Heights Community School in Chester Basin across the newly completed bridge in October 2012. The large planks on top of the bridge are 4 inches thick, 16 inches wide, and 18 feet long. They were all milled from a single red spruce that was felled while cutting the right-of-way for the main road into the parcel.

More than that, the planks illustrate what we are trying to accomplish at Otter Ponds: The active management of a robust forest dominated by older and larger trees of long-lived, native Acadian Forest species. Such a forest has much higher value than lands managed for production of small-diameter softwood logs, both in an economic sense and in an ecological sense. Long-term stewardship of a healthy ecosystem that provides the full range of values (wildlife habitat, clean water, non-timber forest products, "greenhouse gas" removal and storage, and so on) is a primary goal of the demonstration forest.

Building a timber-crib bridge was a big undertaking for a small organization. It is 18 feet long and 16 feet wide. The concrete abutments on either side of the stream are 30 inches thick, 30 inches tall, and 18 feet long. The timber cribs (now hidden by the road bed) were filled with 100 cubic metres of field stone. The total cost of the bridge was approximately \$20,000, which was borne by the Crown Lands Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources.

Once the bridge was finished, OPDF built another 250 metres of gravel roadway, extending the access road begun in 2011 to an area that will serve as both a landing area for logs and the site of a visitor shelter, toilets and other amenities for the public. The cost of the roadwork was \$15,000, also paid by the Crown Lands Division. All of the main access roads are now in place at Otter Ponds, though additional roads for timber extraction must still be constructed.

Even before the bridge was built, volunteers had laid out and cut the first section of the walking trail system at OPDF. The 800-metre segment begins at the bridge and follows Otter Ponds Stream before rising onto a hardwood ridge and passing an old gold-mining site. The trail was an essential first step for creating education programmes for students, woodlot owners and others.

Otter Ponds also contracted with Eastern Fence Erectors of Dartmouth to install a double-swing steel gate with lock box for \$3,235 plus HST. The gate will be erected in the spring of 2013, on the access road at the boundary of the project lands. The intent is not to prevent public access, but rather to limit vehicles during active harvest operations, muddy road conditions, or (if necessary) to protect against vandalism.

Silviculture

In accordance with our July 2011 forest management plan, OPDF planned and carried out its first harvest in the fall and winter of 2012-13. The operation began Aug. 30, when Picea Forestry Consulting & Woodlot Services of West Northfield started to lay out selection harvests and mark trees in both softwood and hardwood stands. The directors ultimately decided to postpone the hardwood harvest (which was planned for German Lake Hill, the first drumlin east of the Tangier River), but moved forward with a pre-treatment assessment of a softwood area beyond the new bridge across Otter Ponds Stream.

One goal was to clear rights of way for three timber extraction roads that would allow access to a large part of the parcel. Another was to build our capacity to plan and conduct harvests that demonstrate the highest standards of uneven-aged forest management.

Picea prepared and revised a tender for the harvest, which was sent to 22 contractors in the region on Oct. 10. Nine days later, OPDF staff and Picea conducted a one-day site visit for four contractors who had expressed interest in the work. Directors were disappointed with the turnout, but plan to do a survey of all of the contractors that received the tender to learn more about why they chose not to respond. Three bids were received by the Oct.26 tender deadline. The offers were reviewed by Picea, which recommended that Forestex Ltd. of Mooseland be awarded the work.

Forestex began cutting a short time later. Ultimately, about 400 tonnes of wood were harvested and sent to three Nova Scotia sawmills, including a small amount of large-diameter, high-value red spruce tonewood (used in making musical instruments) which was purchased by Windhorse Farms.

The work wrapped up in early 2013. Picea conducted a post-treatment assessment of the completed harvest on Feb. 6 and submitted a claim for silviculture payment to the Crown.

Long-term Planning

Forethought is an essential part of successful forest management. OPDF is in the midst of two projects that will set the stage for further work in 2013.

Landscape architects Stephen Cushing and Jonathan Lampier of Dartmouth are almost finished with a landscape plan that will guide the development of public amenities at Otter Ponds, including a shelter for visitors, a fire ring and toilets.

Picea Forestry is preparing road and silviculture plans for the project area. This latest work builds on a forest management plan that Picea wrote for Otter Ponds in 2011 and will help to guide future activities in the project area.

Education and Public Outreach

Otter Ponds is meant to demonstrate the potential of well-managed forests to provide economic and ecological benefits to human and natural communities. Education and public outreach are, therefore, primary goals of the project.

Director Kate Campbell, who heads the Education Committee, and dedicated volunteer Dan Hutt have led the effort on education and outreach. (In addition, they also contributed much labor to the bridge project.) Activities by the Education Committee in 2012 included:

- In February, Kate and Dan created a slide show of the proposed walking trail at OPDF, which they presented at the Eastern Shore Forest Watch annual meeting and other events.
- In March, the OPDF education committee met with potential partners at the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax to discuss ways to reach out to youth and provide meaningful programmes on forests, wildlife, riparian zones and other topics.
- Andy Kekacs, who provides staff support for OPDF through his work with the Nova Scotia Woodlot Owners and Operators Association, attended a daylong workshop conducted by the Canadian Wildlife Federation's Project Wild in early April, to learn more about effective outdoor environmental and conservation activities for young people.
- Also in April, the Education Committee organized a trail-building day for volunteers (noted in the infrastructure section above).
- In June, the committee held a professional development day for new OPDF board members and others who were interested, led by Patricia America and Sandy Hyde of Picea Forestry.

- Volunteer work on the new bridge occupied much of the late summer and early fall. After the work was finished, OPDF hosted its first two school groups in early October: More than 20 students from Forest Heights Community School in Chester Basin, and an even larger group of master's degree candidates from the School for Resource and Environmental Studies at Dalhousie University. It was a learning experience for all involved, but the programmes were also well received and largely effective in telling the story of sustainable forest management at OPDF.
- Finally, in December, Kate met with David Taylor of the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources at the education centre in Middle Musquodoboit to learn more about developing education programmes.

Summary

It was a busy year at Otter Ponds Demonstration Forest, with substantial progress made in developing infrastructure to access the project lands, building our capacity to plan and conduct ecologically sensitive and economically viable harvest, and enhancing our ability to teach others about the work we are doing.