

Natural Resources

Why every town and every hospital needs a forest | Brian Baetz and Myles Sergeant

By **Brian Baetz and Myles Sergeant**



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(August 23, 2022, 10:20 AM EDT) -- We're in a big pickle.

We're in the middle of a climate emergency. It's not a four-alarm fire kind of emergency, instead it's a long, slow emergency that keeps creeping up towards a very impactful climax. Some people still deny climate change, or that humans have ramped up the kinetics of the multidimensional puzzle we call modern life in western societies. But the vast majority of us feel it coming, and this has spawned the term "climate anxiety."

Just watch the Weather Channel on a regular basis and resist the urge to turn your head. The heat dome over Vancouver, the town of Lytton, B.C., burning to the ground, rampant flooding in Kentucky, heat and drought throughout Europe, the tarmac on Heathrow's runways melting — the list goes on and on. It's like we're in an epic struggle against Mother Nature, and we were leading in the early going, but the last few innings have been kind of rough. And as the old saying goes, "Mother Nature bats last, and she bats 1.000." So we all know how this is going to end, most certainly for our kids and grandkids. But with the way things are going, maybe even for us.

But here's one solution.

As appealing as hand wringing and teeth gnashing and self-sedation may be, we all need to step up and take some positive action. There are a number of ways out of this climate emergency we find ourselves in, and many or all of these initiatives could and should be implemented concurrently. But the focus of this article is the multifaceted appeal of

forested green space. Open spaces planted with trees have literally scores of benefits. Trees soak up carbon dioxide and a wide range of pollutants and emit a flux of life-sustaining oxygen and other healing compounds. They provide habitat for a range of wildlife, and they lower surface temperatures in summer heat waves. Medieval kings had their royal forests, and we are blessed with many treed areas provided by conservation authorities and local municipalities. But to effectively turn the tide against the climate emergency, we need to dramatically increase the acreage of treed spaces in our communities.

As part of the Trees for Health Initiative (www.treesforhamilton.ca and www.treesforlife.ca), we contend that every city and town across our great country needs a forest affiliated with their health-care facilities. This can be physically connected to a hospital or clinic, where greening up the related spaces around the facility will provide many benefits to on-site health care workers, patients and visitors. These spaces will be limited to the physical boundaries of the given health-care facility. However, somewhere down the street or along a river or on the edge of town will exist more space that could be conserved and planted out with trees to create a health forest that is conceptually aligned with the community's health-care facility.

The pandemic has shown us how important access to green space is for our physical and mental health, and this health forest will soon be viewed as an "upstream" health-care facility. As British Columbia's PaRx program has shown, where doctors write prescriptions for accessing nature, people

using “upstream” preventive health-care spaces may have a substantially reduced need for “downstream” health-care facilities. All of these benefits are arrived at with minimal investment comparatively, and we can address climate resiliency and our public health needs in one stroke. Adding in the potential for integrating land-based wisdom from our Indigenous mentors is another huge bonus for a health forest in every community.

And here’s how you can help.

As educated professionals and leaders within your communities, you can help bring the above vision into reality. Call the CEO of your local health network and suggest to them that a health forest is a necessary and vital component of providing health care to your community. Contact your alma mater and ask their development folks if they are working with local health-care leaders to catalyze a health forest in the community that the campus is a vibrant part of. And next time your firm is thinking about its own philanthropic endeavours, consider supporting Trees for Health — Ontario (via the registered charities Trees for Hamilton or Trees for Life).

The climate emergency bells are ringing, and it’s our collective responsibility to do all that we can to turn the tide and mitigate the inevitable climate impacts in a sustainable and integrated manner.

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