

Last summer, I decided to conduct an experiment. I wanted to see how far one would have to travel from the centre of Montreal to reach a genuinely untouched space with a thriving ecosystem. I started at Mount Royal, a space that's often depicted or understood as genuinely natural, as opposed to simply a park 'green' space. I walked with a group of friends for more than eight hours before I reached L'Anse-à-L'Orme. If it isn't already clear – the majority of Montreal has been developed. Sure, we live in one of Canada's biggest metropolises, but where can the residents of this city go to unwind, what about those who cannot afford to take an entire day off to drive to a genuine forest out of town? And what of the many species populations that live in the space, who will die out due to fragmentation of habitat? I find it upsetting how Montreal's commitment to saving 10% of green space seems to defy logical conceptions of untouched, genuinely protected space. Instead, it seems to largely include public park spaces, with only human interest in mind, spaces that in themselves are clearly heavily altered from their natural state. If this section of Pierrefonds-Ouest is developed, a commitment to protect 10% of green space becomes impossible. Environmental commitments begin to feel rather short-sighted, if only declared for appearances, easily rescinded once out of the public eye. I believe this is a problem that is at the core of this space now being at risk. The public is not adequately aware of the project and its consequences. This is an issue for everyone in Montreal, not just the residents of Pierrefonds, because it could lead to the destruction of the final protected ecosystem that is as untouched on-island. It is a big deal, and people should have been told of both sides of the issue in an unbiased, accessible way (via city-wide handouts or equally city-wide 101s, etc) before a decision this big could be taken. Even at that, within those that have the luxury to seek out such information, over 17 thousand are actively opposed enough to wish to sign a petition.

If we took the time to take our green spaces seriously, to protect them, people wouldn't have to travel outside of Montreal to immerse themselves in nature. It has been proven time and time again that being in nature is beneficial for our health. Protecting ecosystems also means protecting and promoting ecosystem services that, operating in a chain reaction, protect our long-term health and thus the very longevity of our society: our access to clean air, our protection from disease and our personal well-being, to name only a few benefits. The park could become a point of pride. Montreal has a lot to be proud of: a thriving city with a top notch entertainment industry and endless sights, sounds and leisures that pull people in from all over the world. Why can't Montreal also be proud of its green spaces, or of keeping up with its commitments? Mount Royal is often sold as the centre point of the city. Is it not ironic that we can promote nature-based beauty and leisure in one space as so important, while leaving another crucial space severely undervalued?

As many have pointed out in the past, there is plenty of unused space all over the city that could be used towards housing projects. Yes, perhaps using this space would be a lot more irritating bureaucratically, should these lots be owned by people or entities separate from the government, but we are talking about destroying a natural space. This cannot be undone. The trees will not grow back in ten or twenty years when this space is no longer considered a new project. The populations of flora and fauna wiped out will not reappear without significant effort. Montreal has the opportunity to move forward. To diversify its appeal, to stand up with its commitments, to take positive steps beyond being ruled by oftentimes corrupt financial interests. It has this opportunity to write a love letter to all those that live near to L'Anse-à-L'orme and to those far away that care about what it stands for. For me, the decision is clear. True sustainability takes into account the financial, social and environmental. Officially protecting this space and charging admission or hosting nature-based events or activities on site, while developing housing in other unused lots, could offer a long-standing alternative.

Thank you for taking the time to read my concerns. I look forward to the decision with hope.

Catherine Averbach