

**Conservation**

# Two ways to blend farming and nature

Conservationist says today's farmland is the result of 1,000 years of woodland ecology

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Ontario Farmer



Dave Ainslie

Two farmers from the Comber area talked about their approach to conservation at the recent Essex Soil & Crop Improvement Association twilight tour.

Dave Ainslie sees merit in leaving Nature to her own devices while Dave Buchanan says he and his family have managed to combine recreational pursuits with their conservation-minded approach to agriculture.

Ainslie says little remains of Canada's natural heritage in Essex County but hopes to help preserve what's left. He's working through the Canada South Land Trust to accomplish that goal.

The trust is a charitable organization that allows landowners to place environmental easements on their properties to preserve wetlands, forests, grassland and other natural environments for the future. Donations of ecologically-sensitive lands to serve as nature preserves are also accepted.

**"For the little bit of land we've lost, it is well worth it."**  
— Dave Buchanan

"I think this is about the desire of doing something that's bigger than self," Ainslie says.

Ainslie maintains a 25-acre woodlot in the former township of Mersea that hasn't been disturbed in a significant manner - except for the government-ordered removal ash trees a few years back - since the 1930s.

He says that while the trees in the woodlot are important to the ecosystem, they are just a small part of what's there. He's learned to identify many other plants and creatures that inhabit the woods, wild leek, trillium, Solomon seal, bellwort, spice bush, may apple, fringed loosestrife, Michigan lily, Virginia creeper and dwarf ginseng - just to name a few.

"It's the beauty of the diver-

sity of the woodlot that's taken me in."

A large part of that diversity is in the woodland soil.

Spreading his arms, Ainslie says there are millions upon millions of microscopic creatures living in woodland soils. Bringing them a hand's-breath apart, he says agricultural soils - though still diverse - possess far less.

"The land we farm today is based on a 1,000-years-plus of woodland ecology."

Ainslie says Ontario farmers like Dave and his family are doing an "excellent job" as soil conservationists - given the resources they're provided with over the decades.

THE BUCHANAN family is taking a different approach to the natural features of their farm than Ainslie.

While they value their eight-acre woodlot and the pond they built beside it, these provide recreation for the family as well as meeting environmental objectives.

Buchanan brought in an excavator and bulldozer to strip away the topsoil and create the pond at a cost of about \$7,500. It's about 175 feet long and 90 wide; 15 feet deep at one end and shallow at the other. Grass is established along the slopes.

There is no drainage tile leading the excavation but Buchanan has no problem maintaining the water level. It fluctuates by a foot or so.

He uses an algacide spring and fall to keep the water clear and adds blue dye to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the water.

"My dad said maybe a pond there would be a good thing," Dave says.

"For the little bit of land we've lost, it is well worth it."

On the environmental side, the pond is home to bass, perch, blue gill, various frog species, nesting wood ducks



This 1890-circa photograph shows the size some of the oak, sycamore and maple timber from Essex County's former old-growth forest near Tilbury. The two gentlemen in fur coats are Dave Ainslie's granduncle and grandfather.

and other creatures.

There are cattails and lilies at the shallow end.

The pond and bush is a favoured haunt for Buchanan's sons and their friends for the past three years. They swim and use barbless hooks to catch fish.

The family also enjoys pond-side fires along with ice-skating and hockey in the winter.

Dave and his wife Tammy are the 2010 Conservation Farm of the Year winners. The award is sponsored by the Essex soil & crop association and Essex Region Conservation Authority.

Ainslie is a founding director of the Canada South Land Trust, an organization that works with other conservation groups to acquire and manage significant natural areas.