

Land use policy needs heart, says coalition

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It's time to put the heart back into managing the natural spaces of central North America, say conservation groups.

The Heart of the Continent Partnership, a coalition of Canadian and U.S. groups focused on resource management, met at Lakehead University Thursday night for a discussion and to hear from one of the university's professors.

Peggy Smith, associate professor in forest policy and aboriginal forestry, was invited to speak on the challenges the coalition will face in their quest to have different groups negotiate over how best to manage over 2.2 million hectares of land in the Ontario and Minnesota border area, one of the largest publicly-accessed green-spaces on the continent.

"The challenges I see have a lot to

do with human relationships and politics," she said in an interview before her lecture. "We are operating under the conservation versus development paradigm, which is setting aside protected land over here, but let development happen unfettered over there.

"Local people are often excluded from those parks (cannot build a home), even though they lived there and that has a big effect on local economies."

Property and development conflict is common between groups — even those with common ground, Smith said. To successfully manage multi-use land, like the border and park areas, developers need to reconnect with the local people, get away from the development versus conservation mentality,

and try to work towards sustainable management where all groups can benefit and have a say.

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LU associate professor of forest policy and aboriginal studies

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Conflict solved when common ground found

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Collective management has been the core belief of the Heart of the Continent said Doug Franchot, chair of the coalition's steering committee and board member of Voyageurs National Park. He said they want to have people with seemingly different plans for the area speak to each other to find common interest. Often, they find it.

"I like to say it's very hard to yell at someone once you've had dinner with them," he quipped. "It's too easy to fall into the us against them mentality when dealing with such a large area, but the land is multi-use. We know there are many ways people can benefit from managing the area for different purposes and we are here to help them facilitate discussion."

The coalition isn't about having one vision for the area, it's about harmony between the different groups; from the conservationists, to developers, forestry, fishing and tourism. The coalition does want companies to maintain their business interests, but at the same time allow others to preserve the natural landscape for future generations.

Small, individual successes have been made in the area, according to Smith. But to have long-last effects, she said more attention has to be made to the timelines and how the aboriginal peoples, who have what she called "a unique and historical relationship" with the lands.

"We need to see the First Nations as more than just another stakeholder and we must re-think the long-term (25-year) forestry contracts the government gives to companies, as giving exclusive rights only creates friction," she said. "We as a society have to find a more sustainable, inclusive method of managing resources for all to benefit."

The Ontario-Minnesota border area includes Quetico Provincial Park, Voyageurs National Park, the Superior National Forest and numerous state forest parks and provincial parks. Franchot said they hope to soon include Isle Royale and the new Lake Superior National Marine Conservation area.