

Trees becoming endangered species

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

When she arrived in Southern Ontario as an immigrant from Serbia, Danijela Puric-Mladenovic expected to see more forests.

As a graduate student in forestry, she has closely studied York Region's dwindling forests for five years while piecing together a historical record of trees that once grew here in abundance we can barely imagine.

When the first surveyors came through and noted the type of trees growing on each settlement lot, Ms Puric-Mladenovic now believes 85 to 95 per cent of the region was covered by a green canopy.

"Yonge Street was a tiny, tiny line in a sea of forest," she said.

Today, York has a tree cover of only 18 per cent, most of it very different than what existed here when loggers and farmers started carving up the wilderness.

But we still have "settlers' minds" when it comes to forests, Ms Puric-Mladenovic said.

"They needed food for their kids, but do we need to clear forests now for food? No."

It takes a month to build a house or pave a road but centuries to grow a mature forest, said Ms Puric-Mladenovic.

She surveyed 200 patches of forest from 1998 to 2000 and argues the region, which sponsored her work, must plan forest priorities now for the next 200 years.

York's remaining forests are on lands people have not wanted to use for development or agriculture and most of that land is on, or north of, the Oak Ridges Moraine.

In the north, the forest covers 29 per cent and is more mixed, continuous and connected.

On the moraine, much of the 25-per-cent tree cover is in tracts of pines, planted in the 1920s on abandoned land after near-complete logging of the moraine had produced blowing sands that made farming impossible.

Since that time, however, the region has not seen any large movement to enhance forest cover, although there are plantings each year by volunteers and conservation authorities.

In the south, only 9 per cent of the forest remains, most of it in young, isolated woodlots invaded by Manitoba maple and other non-native species.

One of the biggest and best preserved of these woodlots is the Baker Sugar Bush at Bathurst Street and Hwy. 7, most of which was saved in 1999 in a joint effort by the City of Vaughan, the local conservation authority and the region.

Its 74 acres have been managed for 180 years, so it more or less has the area's natural forest cover. But Ms Puric-Mladenovic said the sugar bush has not really been protected.

It has been left disconnected from other woodlots, its drainage changed and a highway built along one side, Ms Puric-Mladenovic said one morning as she stood beside five trailers selling homes in Thornhill Woods: the Premier Woodland Community, which is growing beside the bush.

LOST FOREST

She said trees that grew in a closed forest canopy had been left exposed, vulnerable to sun and wind. She imagined the thousands of new residents walking through the forest, as she would do and letting pets roam.

Many woodlots in the region face the same conditions. Eventually, the sugar bush will become an urban park, Ms Puric-Mladenovic predicted.

"It's lost as a forest."

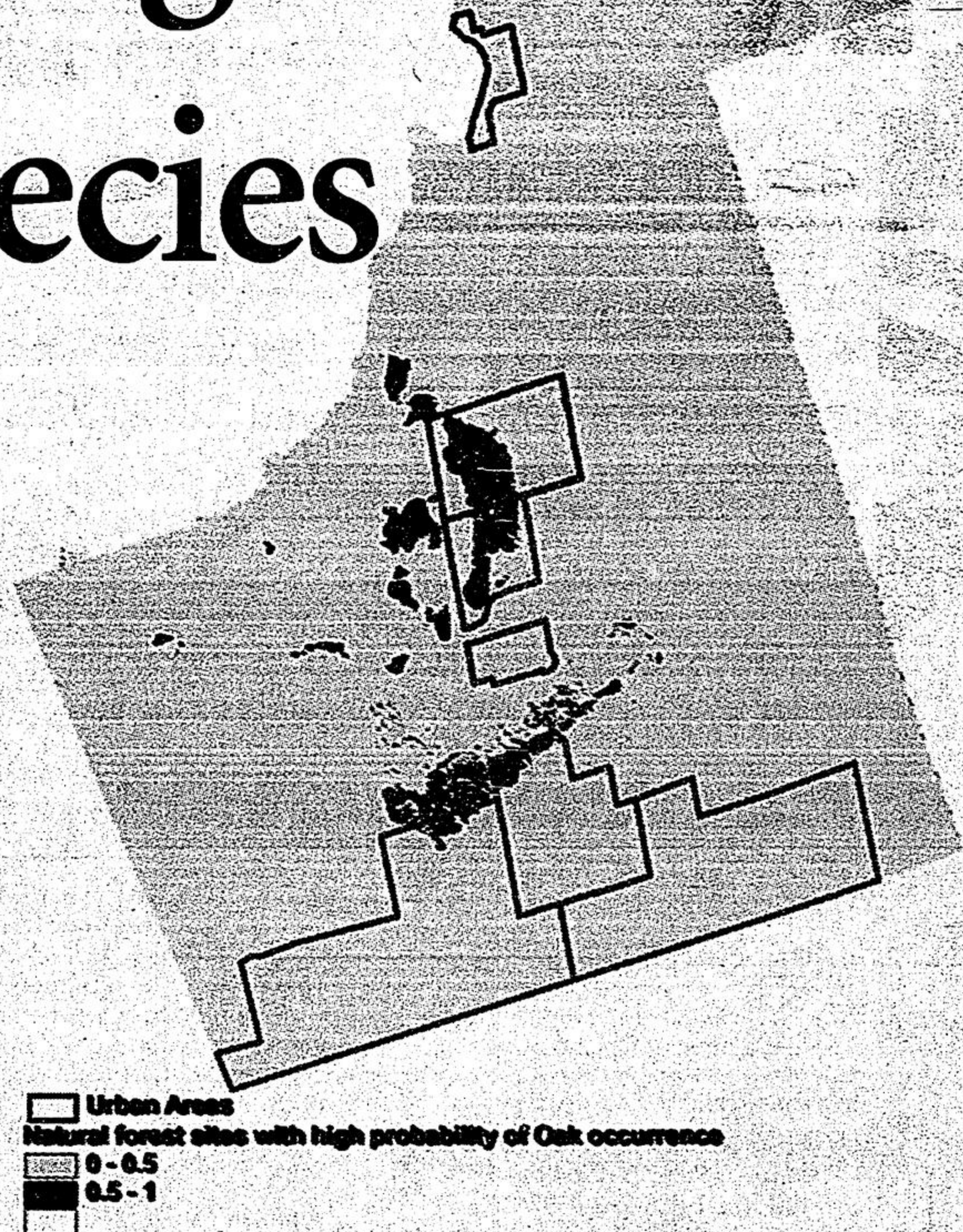
The University of Toronto Ph.D. candidate, who will speak at a conference on urban forest planning in Markham this fall, argues there is still time to enhance the forests we have, particularly if we allow scrub areas — often disused farmland that has sprouted poplars and other early-stage forest vegetation — to mature further.

But the region, currently redrawing its map of protected forest areas for its Official Plan, is under pressure from farmers who want to use "scrub forest" lands for agriculture.

The region approved one farmer's reclamation request last fall, after trees had been cut. Last month, it turned down two others, one of whom wanted to reclaim 10 acres in a provincially significant forest and wetland.

All three areas are part of the

Danijela Puric-Mladenovic (below) stands on the dividing line between the Baker Sugar Bush and Thornhill Woods, a subdivision developed beside the bush. Graphic at right, produced by Ms Puric-Mladenovic from records of 200 years ago, shows where oak trees dominated certain areas of York Region.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

region's greenlands system of natural areas. Newmarket Regional Councillor Diane Humeniuk, however, said she will meet mayors of East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King and Whitchurch-Stouffville to discuss a policy to allow reclamation.

"I believe there is a difference between the vegetation that grows back on such farmlands that may be in the form of scrub or bush, versus

indigenous forest trees, which, of course, we must protect," she stated in a written response. A reclamation policy must prevent non-agricultural development and that "significant forests or treed areas would not be removed," she added.

Developers bought thousands of acres of farmland in the region, driving up the price. Farmers can't afford to buy land, so they have to

farm their own marginal lands, said Gary Sedore, a Georgina farmer whose family has been in the town since the 1830s.

Mr. Sedore used to cut hay on the back of his wife's property near Willow Beach, land "low and a bit wet" that now has dogwood and poplar standing 20 feet tall.

Its proposed new Official Plan would reclassify large areas of Georgina, the town with more forest than any other in the region, as environmentally sensitive. Mr. Sedore said he thinks farmers will fight the plan.

"Somebody 20 miles away is saying, you can't go out into that field and touch those trees," said Mr. Sedore, who suggested the town start a conservancy fund to give its farmers fair value for land they won't be able to use. Otherwise, he argued, "they're trying to steal our land without paying for it."

The region needs a complete plan for its natural areas and to ask questions about where its "greening strategy" is headed, said Paul Harpley, president of the South Lake Simcoe Naturalists club and a member of a regional forest advisory panel. "We haven't seen that yet."

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