

## **A Pledge to Rewild the City**

Two years ago, when the world was quiet, and we huddled in our homes to protect ourselves from the pandemic, Nature seemed to reappear in the gaps created by our absence. Great Grey Owls perched in the Elm tree outside my window, ducks ventured up from the river and coyotes slipped down inner city streets and loped away into the night.

It was as if the city had been rewilded by the sudden silence, by absent humans.

But the truth is that the wildness has always been here. We may not notice the biodiversity around us, except perhaps as a squirrel or a sparrow, but it is present, even if it is slowly disappearing. And our actions will determine how much of it remains.

Winnipeg is well behind other Canadian cities in efforts to protect and preserve urban biodiversity, by protecting the habitats that thousands of animal and insect species need to thrive. In fact, for decades, we've been eating up and destroying, rather than preserving, the forests, fields and grasslands that home our fellow creatures.

And it's not just other species that suffer. Because a city smothered in asphalt, concrete and Kentucky blue grass lawns is not a city that will weather the vagaries of climate change with any great success. Without concerted action now, the extreme flooding and heat that might have been offset by the city's natural life support systems such as trees, will worsen.

Thankfully, there is still time to address the problem by following the example of 47 other cities that have signed the Montreal Pledge – a pledge aimed at preserving natural habitats and expanding green space in urban centers.

But that won't happen if city council continues to table motions like the one presented by Jeff Browaty, to lift the city ban on cosmetic herbicides and pesticides. These are not the chemicals being deployed to vanquish mosquitoes or protect food crops. Their use in the city is purely cosmetic, feeding the manufactured human appetite for acres of green lawn, without a dandelion in sight.

So, why should our city uphold the ban on cosmetic pesticides? Well, the fact that almost 60% of Manitobans support the ban is one reason. The fact that most of the big name "lawn care" products pose serious risks to human and animal health provides an even stronger motivation.

Just last year, for example, Manitoba's honeybee population crashed by almost 50%. Adding cosmetic pesticides back into the mix of environmental stressors which led to that collapse is definitely not a good idea. Especially when the evidence suggests that many of those "cosmetic" pesticides are either damaging or lethal to pollinators.

So, why is the City even considering this? Who decided that killing dandelions, those bright yellow harbingers of spring, was more important than protecting kids with asthma and the

pollinators that guarantee our food supply? How did weed-free lawns become the measure of a city's success?

And why is council asking its experts to reinvent the wheel, by investigating the pros and cons of cosmetic pesticide use when the facts are known, and other Canadian cities continue to ban their use? This, at a time when those same experts are in the midst of writing a new Greenspace Master Plan and Winnipeg's first biodiversity policy.

When you stop to think about it, there's an absurd, almost bizarre set of assumptions that underpin our obsession with pest free lawns, especially in a climate change context. Which in Winnipeg means more summer droughts and thousands of gallons of city water wasted to keep those pristine lawns green. Not to mention the gallons of pesticides that will be used if the ban is lifted.

All of this, when we could be planting drought-resistant, pollinator-friendly native plants and grasses to adorn our parks and yards.

So, maybe it's time to question our assumptions and reimagine what the urban landscape might look like if our goal was to protect biodiversity. Perhaps it's time to view Nature, not as something that exists outside the city, but as an essential life support system within the city itself.

If that's the kind of Winnipeg you want then call your councillor and urge them to sign the Montreal Pledge and uphold the cosmetic pesticide ban. Then stay tuned for the city's upcoming Greenspace Master Plan and biodiversity policy. And when the opportunity arises for input, step up and make your voice heard.

It just might lead to a healthier, more climate resilient city.

Erna Buffie is a writer and science documentary filmmaker. For more information on the 15 point Montreal Biodiversity Pledge see: [https://portail-m4s.s3.montreal.ca/pdf/vdm\\_montreal-pledge\\_2022.pdf](https://portail-m4s.s3.montreal.ca/pdf/vdm_montreal-pledge_2022.pdf)

