

Returning a quarry to nature

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Getting to the old quarry at Clear Creek Forest is half the challenge. The sand and gravel pit is tucked just off the road along the northernmost part of the nature reserve, off a rarely used gravel road in the rural expanse between Morpeth and Rodney.

It's surrounded by trees and dense vegetation. Even the road into it appears to be a dead end.

The quarry, once bustling with machinery and workers, is seldom visited these days. But on a quiet morning on Wednesday two busses arrived with a dozen workers, over 1,900 plugs, and around 20 potted plants - the latest effort to revitalize the nature reserve.

"It went really good," said Larry Cornelis, a long-time environmentalist and one of the people at the quarry that morning.

"The planting was a little tougher than expected ... if it'd been damp it would have been easy to just put a hole in the ground and plug the hole in. So it took about an hour longer than expected."

The land is owned by Ontario Works, in conjunction with the Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority. The LTVCA hosted a comment period in early spring at which point Cornelis contacted them about the new Aamjiwnaang Greenhouse south of Sarnia.

Cornelis is a well known member of Return the Landscape, an environmental group in the Lambton area. He'd worked with the people from Aamjiwnaang First Nations to establish the greenhouse two years ago, a project to foster plants indigenous to southern Ontario.

It was the perfect answer for the LTVCA.

"There was a meeting in Aamjiwnaang with Ontario Parks and the Lower Thames," Cornelis said. "Lightbulbs went off. They were like 'What? A greenhouse? With native plants?'" The Aamjiwnaang Greenhouse were happy to help. They supplied the plants for the restoration and three workers - including technician Kyle Williams - drove down with Cornelis to meet up with members of the Antler River Guardians from the 4 Directions. The Antler River Guardians is a summer-based, First Nations youth group focused on land stewardship and conservation. The program started three years ago, an opportunity for First Nations summer students in southwest

Ontario.

They traveled to the quarry from Chippewa of the Thames First Nation south of London, a nearly hour-long drive for the small team. For them it was a chance to get their hands dirty in the morning and then learn about the Clear Creek Forest nature reserve later in the day.

"[We] usually have four," said Jo, a leader with the ARG. "This year we had seven ... the whole purpose of Antler River Guardians is to try to encourage more youth to get involved in the environmental careers. So it's kind of showing them everything to do with the environment."

The summer program started July 4 and runs until the end of August.

Other events for the month include searching for zebra mussels off the shore near Walpole Island, hunting, trapping, and fishing with the MNR, and canoeing.

"It's been enjoyable, educating," said Lucas Dale Hendrick, who added he was excited about hiking through the Clear Creek Forest after the dig.

"I'll still be learning ... asking about plants on the walk."

By noon the group had every one of the nearly 2,000 plants in the ground, dotting the small ponds in the quarry clearing. They'll provide part of the foundation for the ecosystem taking root there, an ecosystem derived entirely from species native to Southwest Ontario. lpin@postmedia.com