


In Zoo Woods, a silent spring

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Walk north on St. George St. past Sidney Smith, and, on your left, just before the Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories, you'll see "Zoo Woods," a naturalistic landscape looking a little disheveled and dirty, with a pond full of garbage and scum.

Zoo Woods, opened in 1995, was set up as a Beech-Maple ecosystem, to encourage insect and animal diversity, and provide UofT's downtown campus with an alternative landscaping arrangement.

A pond was also added, part of an initiative on storm water management. In order to prevent the overflow of sewers, the aim was to slow down and spread out storm water by diverting it from the Ramsay Wright's downspouts directly into the pond. From the pond, there was to be a little overflow channel to a French drain that would then disperse storm water into the ground.

What went wrong? According to Prof. Anne Zimmerman, of the Department of Zoology, there were a number of factors ranging from differing priorities, the restructuring of the committees involved, and most recently, the restructuring of the zoology department itself. The result, she tells me, is the loss of institutional memory as people move onto new positions. Zoo Woods has fallen between the cracks and become the zoology department's lost cause.

As for the pond being stagnate, Zimmerman relates that after installation, they realized that the Ramsay Wright downspouts drained into the sewer from inside the building, making it impossible to re-route the rain water into the pond. As for attempts to increase animal and insect diversity, Zimmerman admitted to being naive on that goal:

"We have had no success, several times we tried to bring in both toad and frog eggs to try and re-establish an amphibian population. That's not been successful-we don't see any birds here that would be unique to zoo woods, we see birds that are common on the campus . . . It's just a little bit too small and more importantly too far away from source populations with no real way for them to find their way here."

Steve Smith, a staff member of the Department of Zoology, explains that over the years, volunteer activity from Zoology for the maintenance of Zoo Woods has declined. He also points out that concerns from university members regarding security in the Zoo Woods area has resulted in an "undesirable" semi-annual cut back of growth along the paths and sidewalks to provide security sight lines.

For third-year zoology student Janet Shim, Zoo Woods is a work in progress. Shim has spearheaded a number of clean-up initiatives through the Zoology Course Union, an undergraduate zoology and biology organization. "This is the first year that we have done it, but hopefully we will be able to get a committee up and running that will maintain the woods throughout the year-there are a couple of tasks that need to be done, like in the fall we put down some leaf litter over the trees . . . make sure everything is how its supposed to be and keep an eye out for invasive species."

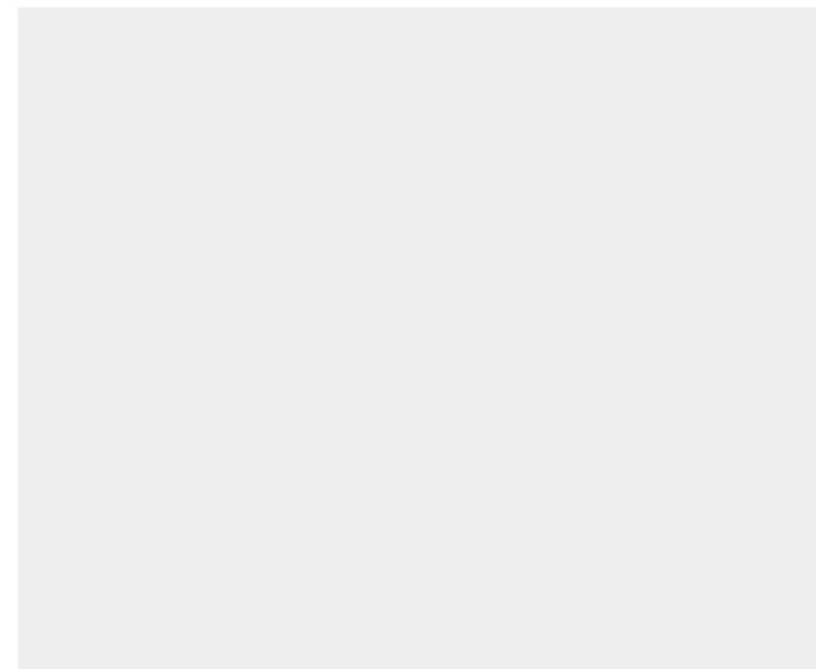
She is, nonetheless, concerned at how the reorganization of the Department of Zoology will impact the space, given that the groups most involved with the Zoo Woods will likely be relocated to the Earth Sciences Centre. "It's going to be a little bit further away," she says.

Zimmerman worries that many in the upper administration see the Zoo Woods as a rat-infested space. She counters that the site only attracts rats because of the large french-fry grease container stored outside Sidney Smith, and directly adjacent to Zoo Woods.

"It's a non-secure site, it attracts rats, the rats go in for the grease, and the rats come up here to get a drink of water and that leads the upper administration to say this is a rat infested environment but it's not. It is caused by inappropriate practices with food waste at Sidney Smith."

Despite all that, Zimmerman keeps positive: "The fact that it's still here is a success. There are some members of the upper administration that think this looks like an abandoned junk yard and would like nothing better than to see it returned to lawn, so the fact that it has managed to resist those advances to me is a partial success."

At the end of our interview, she invites me to visit the site in a few weeks. "There will be spring ephemerals that are popping up in a few weeks, and we do have some spring wild flowers that would be more characteristic of the beech maple forest so I think that's positive."



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