

Compromise reached on 'enchanted forest'

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Nature and art: never the twain shall meet?

As a few dozen faithful supporters gathered Thursday morning in a peaceful show of support, George Sawchuk met with an environment ministry official to chisel out the fate of his sculptures.

By meeting's end, Sawchuk and Mike Whately, regional wildlife manager, had managed to reach a tenuous compromise that will save the sculptures but prevent further expansion of the gallery.

"I think it was a fruitful discussion," said Sawchuk, with resignation. "The thing I really didn't like was the tone of the letter that the government sent me in the first place."

Over the past decade Sawchuk has been sculpting and building trails in a wooded lot behind his Ship's Point house. To the thousands who visit each year, it's known as the "enchanted forest"; a place for reflection, contemplation and a way to bridge the gap between nature and art.

But according to the ministry of environment, Sawchuk has been trespassing on crown land, and by encouraging people to walk through the forest, degrading an area set aside for wildlife habitat.

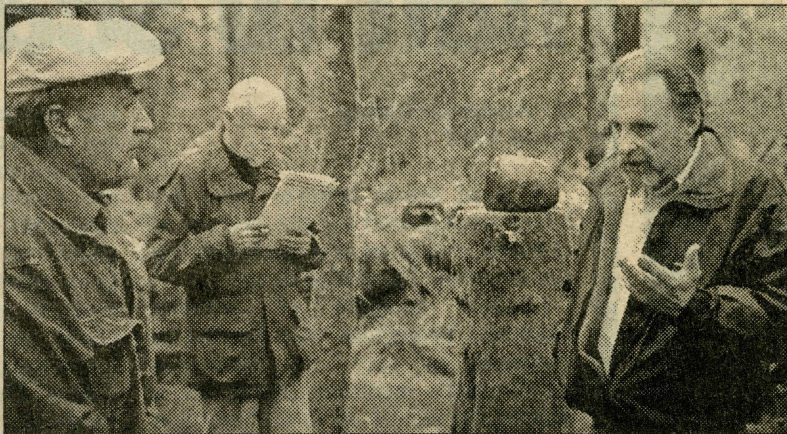
So far, 900 signatures on a petition beg to differ with the government.

One of the signatories, Bus Griffiths, a fellow artist and woodsman, met Sawchuk 40 years ago. They logged together up and down the west coast, and he knows well the fodder that feeds his friend's rich imagination. He never thought he would see the day when he would be defending Sawchuk's nationally acclaimed, thought-provoking art from the long arm of the government.

"I've been through the forest dozens of time and I've never seen anything that would hurt wildlife. I've seen birds' nests right next to some of George's sculptures. If anything is a problem, it's that fence they've built," said Griffiths.

He's referring to a fence recently erected along Sawchuk's property line. It's the government's way of telling the artist that enough is enough.

Joe Newman, longtime neighbor of Sawchuk's, is equally befuddled by the government's handling of the issue and says any



Nationally recognized sculptor George Sawchuk, left, discusses the boundaries of his outdoor "gallery" with Mike Whately, regional fish and wildlife manager for the Ministry of Environment.

claims that the sculptures hurt wildlife are ridiculous.

"I don't know why they've chosen to pick on this man. Children love to go there. They have picnics in the forest," said Newman. "He is the kindest man."

While the crowd grew and signatures mounted on the petition, a somewhat besieged looking Whately emerged after an hour-long meeting with Sawchuk and embarked on a tour of the contentious outdoor gallery.

"The focus of this area is on wildlife habitat management. We're not saying that people can't come in here, but if you build trails and make the area easier to access, that's not necessarily good for wildlife," said Whately. "First and foremost for us, it's wildlife."

Whately has asked Sawchuk to stop expanding his sculptures further onto crown land. He also wants Sawchuk to allow the small trails already etched through crown land to return to their natural state. That means no more raking leaves and housekeeping of the forest that makes walking easier for visitors. Sawchuk seems willing to comply.

But the irony of this dispute is not lost on Sawchuk. His art makes poignant statements about how mankind mistreats the environment and any suggestion that his work damages nature doesn't bode well with Sawchuk.

"If you can't get to it, what's the point of preserving it. People come here to get closer to nature," said Sawchuk. "If there's trails people won't go tramping through the bush just anywhere."

The artist has managed to negotiate two openings in the fence that will improve access to his sculptures and provide thruways for wildlife. At the same time he has agreed to sign a contract promising not to expand his gallery beyond the perimeter.