

Atreyu Lewis 0:01

Hi everybody welcome back to Establish brought to you by Shake Up The Establishment. We are youth run, nonpartisan community centered nonprofit that focuses on translating knowledge within various topics of climate justice to make this information more accessible to those living in what is currently Canada. I like to take a moment to acknowledge that we have the privilege of living, working, and thriving upon land that Indigenous peoples have lived and cared for, and continue to do so since time immemorial. We've acknowledged that our address resides on Treaty 3 land which is a territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabewaki, Attiwonderonk, Mississaugas, and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, we will be speaking with Daniel Taylor, the Greenbelt, Farmers Market network and Paul Mero from EcoSpark.

Lucia Fernandez 0:45

This episode is part of a larger project called the Voices of the Greenbelt, consisting of five podcast episodes, a mini documentary and virtual workshops. This project has been supported by the Greenbelt Foundation. The Greenbelt Foundation's grant and research activities are made possible by the generous support of the Government of Ontario. Such support does not indicate endorsement by the Government of Ontario of the contents of this material.

Atreyu Lewis 1:09

My name is Atreyu Lewis, I use They/He pronouns, and I am a Two-Spirit, trans masculine, non binary mix indigenous and racialized youth. I'm a public speaker, a project manager and grassroots leader with BIPOC organizations, as well as taking part in independent research on decolonizing methodologies, epistemologies, and promoting intersectionality and harm reduction. Well, thank you for joining us. Let's start off with just a bit of background and some of the values of the Greenbelt Farmers Market Network. I don't know a lot about it, but I have done a little bit of research with this project. I really love the kind of the goals of the network, how it really promotes inclusivity, education, nourishment, all those types of things. So could you first of all, just describe, like what the Green Belt Farmers Market network is?

Daniel Taylor 2:00

The Green Belt Farmers Market network is a group of about 100 farmers markets really loosely brought together around a single goal of just building sustaining and growing the local food impact that they have; the flow through about two \$3 million of local food sales. So it's like, we're not really a network until there's bad weather. But we used to run so we're founded in 2011. And I think we're both most well known for running the first market managers conference that brought together just folks that organized farmer's markets from across Southern Ontario and the Greenbelt region into one room for the first time. And that's happening every year up until the pandemic happened, and that we're just waiting for things to go back. So really simply, we're an organization that just helps support farmers markets when they need help. We're there to help advocate for them on their behalf. And we're here to just get everyone together under one roof and see what kind of synergy and organic stuff happens from that.

Atreyu Lewis 3:12

Thank you for sharing that. I really love how local it is and how it's like amplifying local businesses and like farm, farmlands and getting those sources local. McGill actually has a farmer's market. And I hope like it opens this spring and summer I think it will, because last summer was open in spring. It's a really interesting thing farmers markets, even though I don't know much about farming, I just I really love how it really just like promote growth, like professionally in the community, economically, I really love those aspects of it. And just how like there's a huge integrity to it. I think it's like, food sovereignty really and like trustworthiness and like the community as well. I really love that. It's so great to hear about it. So I guess I want to ask you then what are some of the general goals of the Greenbelt Farmers Market Network?

Daniel Taylor 4:01

Well on paper is to connect farmers with urban communities. But really, I think what we're trying to do right now in trying to push the boundaries of what a farmers market means. Our main goal is not rebranding but it's just kind of reorienting we all have a picture of what a farmers market does in our heads when we think of one right, it's easy to lampoon it, but let's be honest, it can be a very pastoral kind of space, that can be very white spaces and challenging for our communities to break into or, or feel comfortable in. And they really are tailored towards a certain social economic class. We know from data we've collected, and surveys that we've done, that the average customer of a farmer's market is a kind of middle aged mid 50's white woman. And there's a lot of reasons for that. But we see if farmers markets right are going to have a future, they need to both reconnect with the ancient roots of what those spaces are, which is really any - look at Europe, look at the Middle East, look at Asia - markets are just everywhere, right? Street vending is an integral part of those cultures. And we spent about 50 years wiping that clean from the North American city. So we're reintroducing, I think there's all this time. So our real goal is how do we push the boundaries of what farmers markets can be right now. But we need a more exciting vision for what they can grow into.

Atreyu Lewis 5:41

I totally agree with you, I really have always been looking for like, ways to connect community stuff, even in just like general public centers, and like waiting rooms, and also makes me think of this Loblaws that I used to go to when I was a kid, I still might have gone there when I go back to Toronto. But when I was younger, it was more like, there were more like displays of like fresh fruits and vegetables and bakeries, like there was an actual - it was more of a life to it, you know, you could tell that there was at least a lot of things in there that were fresh, and that were local. But now when I walk in there, it's very much more processed. Like they redesigned the whole thing. And it's very, like, you just see the packaged stuff. It's all just kind of cramped into the place. And it's really unfortunate, even though, yeah, supermarkets, they're not always like they're not usually like the local choice. But just like from someone who like had to get frozen dinners as a kid, or like just general food like that, or even birthday cakes, like something simple like that. I feel like it's not as I don't know, it's just not as like, fresh or like, it's not as good in a display anymore. Like you can really see how packaged and processed everything is. I also read that you're part of more specifically the Leslieville Farmers Market, which is something that it's interesting because I'm like in Toronto, pretty close to Leslieville. And they

always have this farmers market. It's that like, Queen and like Woodward or something. That it Yeah, it's always passed by there. And I've always wanted to see it. But I know that during the pandemic, there are a lot of communities who have used more outdoor spaces and natural spaces, because it was okay to do so following health guidelines. So I guess I was just wondering, is that something that the farmers market has been able to do or have they like, as it been more like taking breaks because of the pandemic?

Daniel Taylor 7:34

I think, you know, when the pandemic first struck Farmers Market Ontario, who's the provincial kind of association, along with ourselves and other groups, essentially kind of lobbied the government to make farmers markets deemed essential. So they operate outside, you know, it was much safer when everyone was scared, or just trying to figure out how to navigate food shopping again, and most importantly, is a lifeline for farmers, because their main kind of revenue sources are markets and restaurants, and then, you know, catering in bulk sales. So restaurants disappeared overnight. You know, they weren't buying local farms. So keeping markets open was really important. But, for example, in Toronto, a lot of different other kinds of municipalities around the Greenbelt, they said that you had to have a virtual option to be open. So kind of overnight, every market had to figure out like how to do online, deliver, package, and starting logistics, which like, I mean, come on, like markets are mostly run by volunteer groups. So a lot did closed down. But a fair few stayed open and mainly those that we supported, and others that really kind of jumped on with two feet kind of thrived during the market because they provided this really great, really essential outlet for communities to sell and get together in a safe way.

Atreyu Lewis 9:07

Yeah, must have been really difficult to navigate during the pandemic there was so many like back and forth between like opening like closing of like different [it's pretty miserable] it is yeah, I can also as a student to like the opening of the university like classes and then the closing of them. And just like the different precautions and just like general rules like of socializing like it's, I can't even imagine like for farmers market, it just must have been insane. But I am glad to hear that at least some of them did thrive and were able to work through it. Relating to that. I'm just I'm really glad that just the Farmers Market network exists to increase like access, visibility and awareness of like, seasonal food, local food. It's just so important to communities and to really like building that that like grassroots like community knowledge really. And also just like it's yeah, like you said equity to understanding each other's circumstances and like what we can afford and what we can afford. And like, why local shopping and local food is so important to kind of breaking down those barriers with getting resources and also just promoting sustainability. Really, it's, it seems it sounds like a really great network to be a part of. So I guess I just want to ask them maybe being a part of the network, is there something you can tell us about the farmers markets that maybe a lot of people don't know?

Daniel Taylor 10:28

Yeah, sure, I think I think most people will assume that markets are run by their cities. So I ran the Leslieville Farmers Market since I was a wee tot, so it was my first one, so I was like 24-25, 10 years ago, pretty much. And I've always run that part time. But you know, right now, I still do. But market managers we hire for it. But most markets are run by communities, by volunteers. And they make so little money its crazy. So farmers markets have like, we have a really strong economic impact by how much money flows through them. Its customers, right to farmers, I think what we don't really understand what farmers markets is that they're run by volunteers, that the business model sucks. So farmers are doing well, but the folks organize it, no one's getting paid. And if you have one near you, you're pretty lucky because what we're really working on as a proto industry or sector or what have you, is how the heck can you make a model to run a farmers market? Because every developer wants one like they are there's high demand for someone to organize these things. But we need to kind of flash in the future and find a way for that to work. So a lot of, yeah, that's something I'd say that people don't really realize about their farmers market is that they're broke.

Atreyu Lewis 12:01

Thank you for sharing that. No, like, honestly, the creating of business models for stuff like this, it is really difficult. So I guess just speaking of the market, I do know that the Greenbelt Foundation is like associated with it, and they've supported it before and they help kind of run the market network. How do you think the market network contributes to the Greenbelt's overall Sustainability?

Daniel Taylor 12:29

The Foundation, I will not put words in their mouth. But I think it's safe to say that they've always seen value in farmers as stewards of conservation, ecological restoration, like we know that highly diverse sustainably run local farms, they have more wildlife on them, they're better for soil, they're just generally better for the biome that they're around from hydrology to air or , I don't know, that kind of stuff. But there's science involved, for sure. We need to be creative for how we create economic opportunities for those farmers. And that's where we come in. So that partnership has always been kind of fun enough to be that on the ground, in the community actor, while they kind of stay at 10,000 feet, and have that radar perspective of the entire Greenbelt itself, and how local farmers and our work can best contribute towards those sustainability and conservation goals.

Atreyu Lewis 13:31

Definitely, since in doing my own research, the Greenbelt is extremely fundamental to food security and sovereignty, and really just a regional like investment in local food and agriculture. It's just it is a really big thing. I think it's something I remember; I drove by one of the signs on like the 407 or something. It's just kind of something that I've been [Welcome to the Greenbelt?] yeah welcome to the Greenbelt, yeah. And it's just something that I'm so glad to know about more.

Daniel Taylor 13:56

If you want the best visualization of the value of the Greenbelt. By the Humber River, it kind of juts down to Toronto the closest if you driving out of the city towards like, Lake Simco kind of thing. Like was like Wasaga beach, Sauble beach. If you drive towards there, you will see essentially big box warehouse stores. You know, they're mostly like large warehouse store stuff. And they just stop on a street and then street over is a farm. And it's a, it's the closest encroachment you have where there's no kind of gray field Greenfield between development and the Greenbelt itself, drive that little route. It's really nice, but it's, I think, beyond everything we need really always remain vigilant that a ton of people would rather that the Greenbelt just didn't exist. So it's good to kind of constantly show it off and make sure it's useful to people that live in Toronto and those municipalities? Because, you know, our votes are what keeps us alive.

Atreyu Lewis 15:06

Thank you for sharing. Yeah, definitely. Even though yes, like places like Toronto are super expensive to live in, I don't think the solution is to like, cut down so much of it just because it really does protect, like ecologically, hydrologically, it's just so significant to the environment. It also mitigates like flooding, and like just general, just general things that are like, that are so important to nature, and just helps us as humans really be in safe proximity to nature too. So I guess, with the farmers market, definitely the Greenbelt Foundation has contributed a lot to it. It's definitely very significant to your work. And I guess I just wanted to ask you, how is the Greenbelt foundation just contributed to the success of the Greenbelt, farmers market?

Daniel Taylor 15:55

The Foundation, they were an early adopter, they saw the value in what this could grow into. And like the opportunities there. So they provide that funding, I think when the environment was very, very resource scarce - it was a bit of a desert. And then when we came on in 2018, things were really shifting. So that's when we saw a great chance to grow and kind of use that trampoline that the Foundation had built for us to start to kind of engage funders, engage in consulting work, and building our own projects, and just leveraging the market itself.

Atreyu Lewis 16:35

Honestly, yeah, like really looking at it as something I've been thinking about a lot is how there are a lot of projects that people do, where it's very, like recreation to them, like farmers markets, I have heard that before that it has been among middle class or just like even just generally, like it's been seen as a recreation rather than more of like a vital, like community action. And I think the pandemic has really showed a lot of people how food scarcity is a thing. Even though it didn't affect maybe everyone before, it's certainly affecting everyone now. Like, like, there's so much scarcity and thinking for Inuit Indigenous peoples. It's huge thing like location and proximity. And it is a huge thing in terms of food security.

Daniel Taylor 17:21

Indigenous food pathways can be unrecognizable to Eurocentric agriculture, right? Food, forests, poly cultural, like development, you know? So I think, you know, one of the things we would love to see is, broaden the definition of farming and growing.

Atreyu Lewise 17:39

Yeah, like farming, that type of way of agriculture and getting food that was actually introduced not just by Europeans, but also when Indigenous peoples were placed onto reserves. That was the main assimilation policy is that you got to be farmers. It's like, really, we need to broaden the definitions of farming and just like, what is it to be a, like a food kind of preserver? And like, what does it mean to be to take part in food sovereignty. And I really love that you shared that. So I guess just to finish off, so definitely the Greenbelt plan, they've established really a land using framework to determine where urbanization shouldn't occur, to protect the current and future generations of it. And also to create a more stable economy, clean environment, social equity. I think that's something that also the Farmers Market Network really does a lot in their work, and this initiative to really include everyone in food security and food sovereignty. Thank you, Daniel Taylor, for sharing your insightful perspectives with us. Now on to our next guest, Paul Mero, from Eco Spark. So Paul, let me let me ask you tell us maybe about just generally about your work at EcoSpark.

Paul Mero 18:49

Essentially, what we do is we use citizen science to actually kind of reconnect people with nature. And so you know, many of us will go out and we'll walk a trail, and we'll look and see, it's like, the trees are all green, aren't they beautiful, but we don't actually look and see like, okay, is this a healthy ecosystem or a healthy environment or not? And so today, we have all kinds of invasive species in our forests that are changing the nature of the ecosystem. So what we do is we take groups of either community groups or school groups, and we teach them how to use citizen science to identify, you know, some of the different parts of nature and it's really great when you see you know, young people particularly going out and discovering their whole communities of nonhumans that live in our forests and in our streams. And it's like they see a whole new world. So, you know, I like to say we'd like to put the awe back into nature, and help people realize that, you know, we're not alone on this planet. There are many other communities and you know, there's a natural system that works. And when we understand that system, we can make better, better decisions around how we use our resources and, and how we plan our cities and live our lives. So if you were to ask me in one sentence, I would say our goal is to put the sense of awe back into nature for young people and old people alike throughout the Greater Toronto Region.

Atreyu Lewis 20:28

Absolutely, I love the word off, when it when we talk about nature, I think a lot of us really take it for granted. Or nature's really seen as kind of people really see it as an obstacle route or something to actually take care of. And that's really where stewardship comes from. I really wanted to ask you specifically, can you maybe give like an example of like Citizen Science like is that? What exactly does that mean?

Paul Mero 20:53

Sure. What I'll tell you about maybe is an event that's coming up at the end of April, the beginning of May. And it's called the City Nature Challenge. It's actually a global event. And EcoSpark organizes the event for the Greater Toronto Area. And essentially, we use an app, it's an app called I-naturalist, and people can download it onto their phone. And, and then you go out into nature, and you actually take pictures of plants, insects, fungi, you know, any kind of living thing, you can take a picture, and the app will help you identify what it is. And then you save it onto the I-naturalist website. And so as individuals go out and do that, we start to build up a database of all the different species that actually live, you know, in the greater Golden Horseshoe with us. So you can see, you know, how many different species of birds, how many different species of, you know, insects, of fungus and, and one of the things that EcoSpark is doing is we're mapping this out now. So, you know, when you're looking in your, you know, you're looking, what are the signs of spring? Well, the City Nature Challenge helps people realize, like, oh, there are certain birds that we are going to see, at the very beginning this spring, you know, we're going to see the Robins, we're going to see the Red Wing blackbirds, you know, there are certain insects that come at certain times, and they breed at certain times. So citizen science is helping people go out and discover, you know, what tools are available to them to identify the world around them and to contribute that to, to a research database that scientists can then use. And, you know, last year where there were over 1,000, sorry, not 1,000, there were over a million observations from around the planet, of different signs of nature. And so now researchers who are looking at things like bird migrations or you know, any number of different research questions, can go to the I-naturalist database, and they can download that information. And they can use that as they're assessing, you know, what's happening with bird populations, what's happening with insect populations. And unfortunately, those are on the decline. And this helps them quantify that and to, to identify what are some of the different challenges and problems that say migrating birds are facing because of climate change. So it's giving citizens the tools to understand the world around them.

Atreyu Lewis 24:01

That's really interesting. I think for me, I can relate to that a little bit as someone who's trying to do more foraging and like, go more local in terms of shops, it's like, I'm always wondering, like, what how can I identify trees better or birds better? Just when I'm trying to like, like collect for tea or for sap or something like that. It's something I've been interested in, in like stewardship efforts, really. I wanted to ask you so EcoSpark has recently launched this, the Green Belt Youth Ambassador Program. It's a free program that's going to provide like high school students around the GTA with like this opportunity to experience nature better and they celebrate each year better. Can you maybe tell us a bit about that?

Paul Mero 24:44

Sure, so the program is actually for anyone you know, ages I think it's 15 to 30. So it's high school, university and people that are recent grads from university. Essentially, we so when we first started the program, about three years ago, we had been planning to do a bunch of us tours and, you know, bring youth together in conferences and stuff. And then COVID kind of hit

us. So like every one, it kind of took the wind out of our sails for a little while. But throughout this process, we've also had an education component, which was explaining to folks, you know, what is the Greenbelt? And why is it important? And as the provincial government is looking at updates, and they're looking at, you know, expanding highways, and building new highways, understanding, you know, what are the impacts of those things. And so, what we've done is we've brought in experts from a whole variety of different backgrounds who have done webinars with the Youth Ambassadors, we've introduced them to the Ontario Environmental Registry. So they can see like, oh, okay, what updates are happening and the provincial government is asking for input, can we develop a youth ambassador or youth response to that input and in submit something to the Ontario Environmental Registry. So we've done a number of those as the province is looking at things like density of housing, so when they're planning new housing, and right now, they're having all of the municipalities update their long term plans based on their new density targets and growth plans. And so what we what we have is the Youth Ambassadors are actually developing a sort of standard response, so that they can then take part in, in those processes, because one of the, I think one of the biggest challenges, is the youth voice is really not, it's not being heard by different levels of government, whether that's the municipal, provincial, or the federal levels of government. And it's hard to get a youth perspective, because, you know, if you're in high school or university, you're usually pretty busy. And the processes that are set up are not really geared toward helping somebody learn and understand that it's, you know, there's a lot of inside baseball. So what we're doing is introducing young people to people who understand the game, and who can help them sort through and understand like, what are the impacts of, you know, building new highways and new neighborhoods and subdivisions out in the middle of nowhere? And, you know, is that going to make it, is that going to make their lives more affordable, more fulfilling? Or is it going to be, we're building another neighborhood where people are going to be isolated, far away from shopping, from schools, from all the things that they want to, that they need for their day to day lives? So you know, there's a big component of our program, which is just education about how our, how our current system, political systems work, and the ways that young people can engage and become leaders, the leaders of tomorrow. You know, I would say part of it is in response to looking at, you know, many of the people who are currently involved in the, in the battles to protect the Greenbelt. And many, many of the people in the in, that are engaged are like myself, older people of a previous generation. And, and we're working hard, just try and make sure that the next generation of leaders is coming up behind us. So that's a big part of our program is environmental - teaching the next generation to become environmental leaders.

Atreyu Lewis 29:18

That's really great. I'm so glad that the Greenbelt has taken this initiative with EcoSpark. Definitely, from my experience, it has been very hard from what I've seen to like, hear other youth perspectives, even like in university. I'm grateful that I'm able to, like, be more aware of climate science and climate change and environmentalism through like, different grassroots. I feel like there's been a surge of this past few years, youth are really starting to understand a lot more about like environments, like policies like really understanding like, more of the government's like work towards environment and different plans for environmental

conservation. So, this like program seems really very interesting to me. Now, since this is a partnership, like, with the Greenbelt, I wanted to maybe ask you like, could you possibly speak to some of like their goals like the Greenbelt goals, just as its own conservation plan?

Paul Meno 30:37

Um, one of the things about the Greenbelt is, it's, you know, it's some of the best farmland that we have in Canada, some of our top rated farmland falls within the Greenbelt. And, you know, we currently live in this globalized world where, you know, we go to the grocery store, and we see, I can get any kind of food from anywhere, just about any time. And the challenge is, there's a big, there's a big climate, climate change impact from being able to buy food from anywhere, anytime, you know, there's a lot of shipping involved in moving those, you know, fruits and vegetables from one part of the world to the other. And we have this amazing farmland, right in our own backyard. And so protecting that farmland and making sure it's there for tomorrow, and for the future, when might not have the same distribution system for our food. You know, there are climate changes, causing all kinds of disruptions all around the world. And so there are major droughts happening in areas that have been, you know, part of the food basket for for the, for the world. And so, we need to think in terms of what is that going to look like in the future? And are we protecting the farmland we will need that is close to home? So that's one of the things. The other would be, you know, looking at protecting our air and our water quality. The Greenbelt is, you know, it's, it's a level of environmental infrastructure that, you know, protects the cities around it. So when we look at things like flooding, you know, we're having, we're seeing more storms that are more intense than they have been in the past. And, and one of the challenges that we have in the Greater Toronto areas, we have paved over so much, so much land that we now have so many hard surfaces that more water is running off and getting into our sewer systems. And when we have major weather events, we're seeing that backup and we're having more flooding, so making sure that they have farmland and forests and, and meadows, and that we're protecting the areas along our rivers and streams is really important for us in in adapting to climate change, and protecting ourselves from the impacts of climate change. So there's that and then there's just a real, real mental health aspect as well. You know, living in a big city, we're bombarded with noise and we're we've got all kinds of pollution. And you know, we've got 10s of 1000s or 100 1000s of vehicles, you know, putting all sorts of pollutants into the air every day. And so the Greenbelt and the forests on the Greenbelt help filter that air but there's also this really wonderful aspect which is you know, we've got all kinds of great hiking trails and Conservation Authorities and you know, different places, river valleys throughout the Greater Toronto Area, the greater Golden Horseshoe where people can get out and they can learn to relax and to slow down their life and to become one with nature again, and just to have that place to pause and to, to learn to love the things around us and to take our families out and you know, whether it's going apple picking or it's, you know, going on a wine tour or, you know, any variety of things are some real, some real gems that help us in our, you know, maintaining our own mental health. So, the Greenbelt serves a whole lot of different purposes. It provides great farmland, you know, all sorts of ecosystem services and mental health services as well.

Atreyu Lewis Speaker 35:54

Definitely, the whole the Horseshoe has really improved like physical mental health for Ontarians who really need that like recreation and something to do to like understand nature better. And it's also for there's also tourism in those areas. Like you said, the areas definitely, it protects a lot of farmland, wetlands, watersheds. And also Greenbelt land really provides like fertile soil and resources, and can even contribute to like moderate climates for like agricultural production, and general like economy. So maybe, could you possibly speak to how the Greenbelt is an economic driver in Ontario?

Paul Mero 36:32

So as you've mentioned, there's tourism. And there are lots of great things to see and do around the well on and around the Greenbelt. So there are recreational opportunities, whether that's going hiking at a local conservation authority, or you know, going canoeing or any variety of those things. There's the employment that is provided in the in the food that is provided from our agricultural lands, which is a huge part of Ontario's economy. We also have some really great fruit growing areas that are a part of the Greenbelt and part of the you know, I mean, the Greenbelt is part of a bigger protected zone. So there's the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Greenbelt and the Niagara Escarpment protection plan. And as those things come together, we have, you know, lots and lots of places where you can go and whether it's going to a winery for tour, going and picking your own fruit. So, there's, there's a bunch of different economic opportunities there. And, and the Greenbelt is a big driver of Ontario's economy and keeping us on a on a healthy path forward. When we think in sort of in another term, and we think about the cost of living in the Greater Toronto Area, housing is very expensive. And, and the thing that really drives the cost of housing is the density targets. If you're building, you know, say 100 feet of sewer line, and you're going to serve only four big houses out in the country, the cost for each house to be connected to that sewer is going to be very high. Whereas if you live, you know, in a city where there's higher population density, instead of serving four families with that sewer system, you might serve 20 or 30 families with that service. And so that actually helps bring down the cost of living. And if you have higher population densities, you also have more stores and services, whether that's, you know, dentists or hairdressers, or, you know, the services we need on a day to day basis, that are within walking distance of our homes. So, it means that, you know, we're actually building a more cost effective future, and making a future that's actually a healthier future. Because when we actually can walk and interact and get the services we need without getting into a car, it means there's more money in our own pockets, and we're living a healthier lifestyle. So we're not, you know, we spend too much time in cars and not enough time using active transportation and building suburbs or, you know, urban sprawl does not. It's not conducive to active transportation, which we all need to get out and walk and interact with each other a little bit more. And the best way to do that is to leave our cars at the car lot or, you know, just not take on the street.

Atreyu Lewis 10:18

Absolutely. I've really noticed that as well. As someone who doesn't have a license, I'm definitely more of a walker and like just using transit, and also proximity to different areas. Like you said, Toronto is extremely expensive now, for living here, for students, for youth. And now

in this, like the pandemic, the pandemic has really impacted our ability to go to these spaces and engage with sort of like nature spaces and like protection. And really understand, like, be a part of programs that help with environmental education. But there has been some leeway now that the encouragement of natural spaces like doing things outdoors, like markets outdoors, and if we do have educational programs, doing them in like parks, where we can, since the indoor it's like, protect and like avoid transmission COVID-19. Since the pandemic has really kind of broken out in like, early 2020, have natural spaces provided by the Greenbelts plans, have they helped you in any way use them?

Paul Mero 11:33

Oh, yeah, no, I've I definitely get out and hike on the Greenbelt hikes. And the Greenbelt Foundation on their website has a great space where they, you know, highlight some of the different hiking areas you can go to on the Greenbelt, their cycling tours, there are farmers markets and things. So I've definitely taking advantage of all of those things. And with the Greenbelt River Valley, so, you know, the Humber, I live not too far from the Humber River. And, you know, I walk the river pretty regularly. And, and there are, I would say, probably 10s of 1000s of people who walk the Humbers, the Don Valley, um, you know, the Rouge, walk these rivers on a regular basis as a way to get out. And, you know, during the pandemic, it allowed us to actually, you know, do some social gathering, but while socially distancing, and in a fairly safe way, where we're, you know, we're not inside worried about sharing COVID and and we're actually able to interact with others, and in a nice way, so whether it's, you know, hiking or skiing or, you know, just out for a local stroll, there's lots and lots of benefits that I personally have taken advantage of, during that pandemic. Can I make a comment about something you were you were saying that you don't have a license, you know, when, when, when I think about the youth perspective than I think, in particular to the provincial government pushing to build a new 413 highway and to build the Bradford bypass and, and thinking about the youth perspective, you know, I have a friend who's got a daughter who's, you know, in second year university, or third year university, and he's been pushing her to get her license. And, and her response is, you know, why would I need a license, I'm not going to have to drive like, you know? I'm going to basically call the car and it's going to come and pick me up and take me where I want to go. She actually said to her dad, like, you know, do you know how to ride a horse? He was like, no? And it's like, well, you know, if you were born at that transition between the horse and carriage and the car, you know, would you be saying, well, I have to learn how to ride a horse, or would you be saying, horses are going to be obsolete as a form of transportation, so I don't need to do that. And I think that's one of the challenges for our government is, you know, they're building the infrastructure that is for yesterday, and not the infrastructure we need for tomorrow, which is, you know, building the intercity transit and, and making it so you know, you can go from say, Burlington to Oakville to Mississauga and Brampton to Vaughn. You know, you can go all across the Greater Golden Horseshoe using regional transportation system, instead of building more highways where everybody is trying to do it one at a time, you know? So that's, that, to me is one of our big concerns. How do we get that use voice and get the youth saying, what is the world going to look like tomorrow? What is the world that I want to live in? Not be no Oh, I want to see you build more yesterday's world.

Atreyu Lewis 15:31

Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, I've really never considered getting a licensed like, quickly. I know a lot of people get it, like when they're, you know, 16, 17, they really want it young. But for me, I feel like definitely walking and just taking general transit is more of my, like, I'm pretty comfortable with that. And I agree, I think there's a lot of ways to get around to different areas using transit. For me, like I'm at McGill, so when I use transit in Montreal, I really just kind of like going maybe just to the gym or something. But usually, I walk around this is really a lot of good local stores. There's a lot of good parks, that is easily like walkable and like walking distance. Even Toronto, when I'm visiting Toronto, I find I find it's the same, I find it's like the 501, 504, it's like pretty easy to just go where I need to go that way. And so yeah, like you mentioned, definitely like urbanization is a huge issue within Ontario, and the Greenbelt is really working to combat against that and figure out how we can increase climate resiliency. So I guess I wanted to ask you, what role does the Greenbelt really have in climate resiliency and the need to adapt to our changing environment, maybe in your perspective?

Paul Mero 16:48

Sure. Um, so the Greenbelts, as I mentioned, you know, it actually helps absorb a lot of water, and captures that where we need it in our farm, which is really great. Our river valleys provide local covered areas, they help control the temperatures of the stream with the forest in the trees along the side, which provides, you know, temperature, the water in the streams can get too warm for fish to breed and to live in the streams. And, so by protecting the river valleys, we're actually protecting the life of all the species that live there. And we're filtering water in a way that, you know, means that there's less impact on the water quality in the lake, which is where we get our water source from. So there's, you know, the, the Greenbelt provides all kinds of ecosystem services for us. It reduces the temperature so if you're looking at, you know, a city like Toronto or whatever cities have what they call heat sinks. And so the temperature in a city is typically a few degrees higher than it is in the surrounding area. And, and it also holds the heat longer, so at nighttime, when you know, surrounding areas often will get cooler in the evening, the city is still warmer and that's one of the challenges that we face because while we do see daytime temperatures going up what we see even more is the nighttime temperatures aren't coming down. And that's a real challenge, whether that's you know, people trying to sleep it increases the amount of air conditioning that we need. So, you know, all of those things, if we can protect our forests, and our green spaces around the cities, will actually help us have cooler air coming into the city and, and help some of that heat dissipate faster, which will make our cities more livable as well.

Atreyu Lewis 19:15

What I found interesting reading statistics about the Greenbelt, it protects really 78 Species At Risk. It's produces \$20 to \$24 million in flood protection, and \$3.2 billion of like ecosystem services. There's a lot of like, smart investment that I feel has been created with the Greenbelt's establishment. And it really seems like a great asset for Ontario's future and its environment. Could you maybe speak a bit more on like, how the Greenbelt establishment is an asset and as foreign investment?

Paul Mero 19:49

I guess in some ways, the Greenbelt you know, a big part of the Greenbelt and developing the Greenbelt was understanding the Greater Toronto Area. We're looking at significant population growth over the next you know, 40 to 50 years. And recognizing that if we just continue with business as usual, we're going to actually pave over, you know, as I like to say, we're going to pave over paradise, and, and we're going to end up with just a hot soupy mess that is going to have all kinds of problems. So, with the, with the Greenbelt, we're saying, you know, let's build our cities more sustainably. So, let's look at better ways of doing this. So that we have mixed use, so you can live walk and, and work all in the same area, you can shop in the same area. So, you know, with establishing the Greenbelt, we sort of said, we're going to put some, some restrictions on the way we plan. But those restrictions are going to make a better, a better, more livable region in the long run. And, and they're going to help us, you know, have access to all the different pieces of things that we need. And, you know, without the Greenbelt, we probably would see more sprawl with, you know, neighborhoods popping up in the middle of nowhere, we would see more farmland that's just simply being converted into subdivisions, where nobody grows their own food. Everybody has, you know, three or four cars, and you know, and it's just not a sustainable way to live. So, putting some boundaries on it makes us think differently. And it helps us to actually plan for a future that includes many of the ecosystem services that we all need to live, even if we're not aware of them on a day to day basis.

Atreyu Lewis 21:55

Definitely, I feel like, also with the Greenbelt, expanding it, there's been a lot of calls to action to try and expand it, instead of other infrastructure projects or something like that, so that these different regions like ecosystems can be, can really have that sustainability and they can live longer. In December 2021, there was the Greenbelt West coalition. It was made up of 25 environmental groups, they stated that they wanted to really focus on encouraging the provincial government to expand the Greenbelt. And from what you said, also about like farmland and economic factors, with urban development and sprawl being a key threat to the Greenbelt, maybe can you speak to the importance of like protecting the region's maybe on a personal level in your work?

Paul Mero 22:41

Sure. One of my biggest concerns and fears, the things that keep me up at night are, you know, are we going to leave a sustainable planet for young people today? And, and looking at, you know, the Greenbelt that we have now and looking at the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment plan, and you see, there's a bunch of pieces, and they kind of work together. But there's also lots and lots more land outside of the current Greenbelt that really should be protected. And, and so far, we haven't done that, you know, the Canadian government is, is signed a pledge to protect a certain amount of Canada's territory, through parks and park lands and stuff, and Ontario has a share of that they need they need to take on and, and we're not there yet. So you know, if we can look at how we bring the Greenbelt together and look at growing the Greenbelt, in areas where we have very significant wetlands where we have, you

know, very, you know, prime agricultural land all of those things, the sooner that we protect it and make sure that it's protected, the sooner we can think more about how do we develop sustainably in and around those boundaries, so that we have a combination of you know, we've got a protected land, but the people also have the access to go into use the land for recreation, and for less impactful activities than you know, building a subdivision and paving over it and putting in all kinds of infrastructure. That means that that land is only for use for a small number of people instead of everyone else, which we know as we're growing the population within the Greater Toronto Area that we are going to need more recreational land and access to more public land that is going to help people with mental health and with all those other things, and we need to make sure that we're not paving over areas that are going to then cause more flooding downstream. So, and, and if we don't change the way that we're developing, if we don't expand the Greenbelt, we're going to end up with more and more of these types of problems happening on a more often basis. And, and they you know, they have very, very significant impacts economically for the people that live within the Greater Golden Horseshoe. You know, oh, there are lots of trucks that if they can't get through, they can't deliver the groceries to the grocery store. You know, there are people who are trying to get home because, you know, they have to pick up their kids from daycare, but they can't get through because everything is flooded underneath. So, there are all kinds of those types of impacts that if we don't actually protect the Greenbelt and in these ecosystems, these areas of healthy ecosystems, we're going to have a lot more downstream impacts as well. And so, there's that cost of mitigating climate and there's, you know, oh, we can spend money to try and capture carbon and stored underground or we can actually protect the natural areas that have been absorbing carbon and protecting our environment for a long time, why we transition to, you know, cleaner fuels that just don't have the carbon emissions.

Atreyu Lewis 26:26

Thank you so much for sharing that Paul, I really agree. I think, definitely, like for you and for citizens, I'm really in a transition point myself from being like a youth to a citizen, being in second year university. That's really kind of what I'm really adulting if you rather put it and just kind of understanding how to navigate cities, like how to sustainably look after food and like, engage with nature, so I really appreciate you sharing that. Is there anything else you'd like to add or comment on before we end off here?

Paul Mero 26:57

No, I, you know, I want to say thank you. Thank you to the Greenbelt foundation. Thanks to Shake Up The Establishment, we need to a lot of shaking [laughter].

Atreyu Lewis 27:09

That's the idea!

In this episode, we've outlined the Greenbelts establishment, its significance and the plethora of resources it provides to Ontarian communities. Thank you, Daniel Taylor and Paul Mero, for taking the time to share your insightful perspectives with us. And thank you, our audience for joining us in this Establish episode. If you like what you hear, check out our work at Shake Up The Establishment. You can find us on our Instagram or website to continue learning about

important topics like environmental stewardship, social justice issues and political accountability. That's S-h-a-k-e U-p T-h-e E-s-t-a-b dot o-r-g, and find us under the same name on Instagram. To learn more about the Greenbelt, visit the Greenbelt foundation online.