

Atreyu Lewis 00:00

Hi everybody, welcome back to Establish brought to you by Shake up the Establishment. We are a youth run non-partisan 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.

Atreyu Lewis 00:16

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 three land which is a territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabewaki, Attiwanderonk, Mississaugas and Mississaugas of the credit First Nation.

Atreyu Lewis 00:36

This episode is part of a larger project called Voices a green belt, consisting of five podcast episodes, a mini documentary and visual workshops. This project has been supported by the Greenbelt Foundation, agreement 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 00:55

My name is Atreyu Lewis, I use they/he pronouns and I'm a two Spirit trans masculine non binary mix indigenous and racialized youth. I grew up in Toronto, and I am now currently situated in tiotia:hke also known as Montreal, Quebec. 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.

Atreyu Lewis 01:19

In this episode, we'll be speaking about nature based solutions within the greenbelt and how they improve resilience against climate change. Today's guest is Miranda Baksh, a racialized environmental educator who co-founded the peel community climate council.

Atreyu Lewis 01:31

So thank you so much for joining us. So glad to have you part of our project. It's really nice to have you on board. Definitely as someone who is an Environmental Defence, who's affiliated with Environmental Defence who has experience, lived experience with climate justice, it's so great to be able to speak to you and ask you some questions. So just to get started, I will ask you a bit about Greenbelt resilience. The Greenbelt can really help with a lot of

absorbing rainwater, it can help against greenhouse gas emissions. So you said that you were, you're based in Brampton, like that type of area.

Miranda Baksh 02:05

Yes.

Atreyu Lewis

So the Brampton area, it actually does kind of weave into the Greenbelt a little bit, and more of like, the outer boundaries of it. So I guess, in your opinion, what do you think has made Greenbelt areas, like the Greenbelt successful?

Miranda Baksh 02:19

I think that it definitely brings awareness first and foremost that there is something here that is to be protected. You know, as a resident, when we're driving, we see those signs that say you're entering the Greenbelt. And so right away, it brings up discussions within the car. And I know other people have chatted about it, and just that physical presence of calling of the Greenbelt is so important, instead of it just being called protected land. Because I think it really brings awareness that hey, there is this specific region that is protected right in our communities, and we live very close or potentially within it. So that's one bit and then I do believe it's been so successful, of course, because it prevents sprawl, whether those are followed or not, we can chat about later. But I think it's just really important that it is protected by law.

Atreyu Lewis 03:07

Absolutely. Definitely, I think the green belt like that really that awareness on like the effects of things such as greenhouse gas emissions. And how the weather affects, like different weather events, and flooding, and all those different things, and it really just plays into the whole role of climate resilience. The Greenbelt is, it's a really good way for like citizens to actually get involved with the protection of the environment, as well as like understanding how it works. So I guess in your opinion, what role does the Greenbelt play in climate resilience from your experience?

Miranda Baksh 03:41

Yeah, I think it plays a lot of roles, but we can probably divide it into two categories. So one being prevention, where we think about carbon sequestration, and restoration and all of the other things that go into the Greenbelt. And I guess, just for context, I've worked at the Toronto Region Conservation Authority and Credit Valley Conservation Authority here, so protects, those are two organizations that protect the land surrounding the credit River watershed, and these are areas that I grew up on all of the time and it was really neat from going from hiking as a resident into these parks, to then helping to manage the parks and teach folks how to navigate the trails and that type of thing. So I'm very well aware of all of the restoration projects that go on, whether it be from protecting invasive species, getting them out of the parks, protecting local species, making the trails accessible. All that work is so important in protecting this land space, and also making sure that it's working optimally to

really prevent a lot of issues like erosion, and as I mentioned, protecting it is so important in carbon sequestration. So that's where we could think about it from a mitigation perspective where it's preventing the carbon from just continuously going out in the atmosphere. It actually can be sequestered or trapped in these local parks along the Greenbelt. But on the flip side, if we think about rainfall, you know, just two weeks ago here in Brampton, there was major flooding because of all of the snow that suddenly melted so quickly, over 100 homes had to be evacuated. And that is, a huge portion of that is because so much of the runoff is just sitting right on top of the roads, and it can't get saturated within the soil. So that's another reason why the Greenbelt is so important in trapping that type of water, and we could assume that with more extreme weather events, whether it be rains or droughts, either way the Greenbelt can help the impacts on local communities. So yeah, we could think about it from a carbon sequestration standpoint, and then also from a biodiversity resilience standpoint, and then thirdly, nature based solutions, which is something I looked at in my master's work and I you know, I looked abroad in different countries thinking about nature based solutions, but the Greenbelt right here at home is an example of the how that can work really well.

Atreyu Lewis 06:08\

Definitely. As doing, when I was doing research for the Greenbelt for this project, learning things of like how the forest wetland soils combined to store like; over 102 million tons of carbon per year, in tree canopies within the Greenbelt remove about 60 kilograms of pollutants per hectare each year, and things that that, like, show how the Greenbelt can contribute to the mitigating of climate change, and the different effects that come with that, and definitely, like really interested, like to hear about work you've been doing and your masters like with nature based solutions. Could you maybe speak to how like this information in the Greenbelt? Just a Greenbelt in its whole? What is its role in the global climate change issue?

Miranda Baksh 06:50

Yeah. So when we think about globally, of course, carbon sequestration, I'm going to go back to that, because I can't stress that enough. As a conservationist. That's really where my heart is, and where I came from, and how I even entered this climate realm. So I think that is key in regulating our climate and holding that carbon in, but it isn't enough for us to just solely depend on, but it is extremely valuable. In fact, there was a blog put out by a colleague at Environmental Defence, and they found that the greenbelts watersheds provide more than \$1 billion dollars worth of ecological services, and it does that by filtering pollution and waste, regulating our water flow and preventing floods. So if we wanted to put a \$1 amount on that in the global scale, it's extremely important.

Atreyu Lewis 07:39

Definitely, I think, for the Greenbelt, it really contributes a lot to climate change. There's a lot of great things that come with, like expanding areas such as a Greenbelt, even though but also it is not immune to consequences. There's like, there can be heat, there can be flooding. And then there's also the debates around environmental restoration and protection work. Where exactly in urban spaces, do we restore nature? Or do we preserve, like certain

parks, because there's often like, a lot of other things like condos and living situations that need to be considered, but definitely, as someone who's probably from Brampton, and I'm from Toronto, so definitely knowing that like settlement, and housing is a big thing, and it really contributes to how like a lot of nature is, it's often not conserved as much as it should be. So how could an expansion of the Greenbelt even, could that help combat climate change? In your opinion?

Miranda Baksh 08:34

Well, the bigger we can get it, the better, of course, it could prevent urban sprawl from happening. So a lot of the issues I mentioned, like preventing water from going to the soil. It's a huge problem. And you mentioned climate resilience before. And I think my answer was looking at climate mitigation. But I actually just remembered something. When I really think about resilience and resilient communities, I think about food sovereignty, as well, and ones that can grow their own food and rely on their local agricultural systems, and this land that we're developing on is crucial, and it's so so good it's such great soil for growing. I have a few friends who are farmers, and they've talked about it, one of them actually has like generations worth in a farmer's almanac of information of how incredible the soil is here, and I don't think many people know that if we go way up north in Ontario, the soil we really can't grow as great quality food as we can down here, and yet, we are paving over the valuable space here. So I witnessed that, unfortunately, right in my backyard. There's just a street away and it's just all farmland and then if you look the other way, it's all buildings. And so that's where I live. It's very obvious where the land fragmentation is happening. And then just like a few intersections down the other way, there are conservation areas like Terracotta Silver Creek, and those are in the core of the Greenbelt. So it's a really interesting dynamic where I live specifically. But yes, you're right, like Brampton in general does see that expansion in general with a growing population.

Atreyu Lewis 10:13

I really love when you brought up also like before, with, with like greenhouse gasses for like, Yeah, but the hugest factor in like global temperatures, and how also proximity to different spaces, like the houses proximity to different nature sites, and how like growing your own food, like that's also so important to me. As someone, definitely there's some people in urban spaces who can't afford to do that. As a student, I've been really trying to do that a lot more with cooking and like going more local, if I can't necessarily grow things on my own, and it really is just about carbon footprint, I think, and like just really understanding your role and like emissions, and like how human actions contribute to it, but also taking into account like accessibility issues. So the greenhouse, the Greenbelt leaves gaps between cities, urban boundaries, and as a white belt, because of how they appear on maps. So many cases, areas are seen as land open for development, and environmentalists really think it should be protected. So white belt lands are so important because they're so ecologically connected. And they act as a huge buffer, and it really contributes to the region's resilience with climate, but also the Greenbelt can be it can face a lot of threats too at the regional level, government level, I guess, in your opinion, from what you've seen in some conservation sites. What do you think some of the biggest threats are for the Greenbelt?

Miranda Baksh 11:25

So absolutely, I'd say right now, just in the work I'm doing at the community climate Council, within my work at Environmental Defense, I have to mention the 413 as being one of the biggest threats right now that will develop be developed on Greenbelt land, many of which grows, you know, goes through a lot of my friends backyards, and they're actually considering moving and things like that. So it's really not just impacting biodiversity, but it's impacting people as well. So I would definitely talk about that, and then urban sprawl in general, and you know, this can be attributed to non environmental reasons as well. If we think about like, the entire structure of our world right now thinking about being a young person and how unaffordable housing is, it's obviously going to force people out and make leaving very appealing, and so there's just so many other socio political things and driving factors that are attributed to the greenbelt and its vulnerability right now.

Atreyu Lewis 12:22

I love you saying that about prices, because literally, you can't live in places like Toronto anymore, unless if you're making like 2000, 3000 a month, it's insane. Like, it's usually 2000 for like a decent one bedroom in the city, like right in downtown. That's why a lot of people I know and just in general, are like really moving outwards, they're moving to smaller places, or they're moving to other places like Montreal, where they're still urban, but rents are just cheaper, because of, really the landscape and how the landscape is very different. Montreal is next to a river, but it's really more of like its own little island, there is Mont Royal which does have a lot of conservation stuff. But definitely like places like Toronto, which is close to Lake Ontario. It has kind of more of like specific Greenbelt areas with like a lot of river sites, a lot of forests like a go on for a long time, and just very, it's also a big site of tourism. Toronto is very popular. And that's why it's become so much more expensive. And thank you for sharing that also with the highway, like the proposals and the things that are happening there. There's also a lot of other proposals that are going on like and they also it also affects farmland, forests, wetlands, specifically costs even like 50% more to build on Greenbelt sites than to intensify already urban areas, infrastructure infrastructure that would pave over farmland, it just it contributes to poor air quality generates more greenhouse gasses, even building things like airports, it eliminates so many more hectares of a soil land. It contributes to further like, other development issues, and like just the dumping of contaminated soil with like pesticide use or other things of farming and like putting it in food and water, and it's just really, there's a lot of effects due to urban sprawl and proximity, human proximity to nature. So I guess you've mentioned this already, but could you maybe define, in your opinion, what is urban sprawl?

Miranda Baksh 14:21

I define it as growth beyond the Metropolitan core, and growth horizontally instead of vertically, and so when we think about that, I usually often think about homes with backyards and lots of neighborhoods just in suburban areas. So just picture your classic suburbia scene, that is urban sprawl where people are growing across and over a large span of land instead of vertically in buildings like condominiums and apartments, where you can fit hundreds of families in the same amount of surface area that you could fit one or two homes. in suburban neighborhoods,

Atreyu Lewis 15:03

Yeah, thank you for sharing i've, i've always been trying to find out more about urban sprawl in general. And I like how you put it, it's more horizontal, rather than like focusing on condos in like a more Metro Center. For me, like when I looked at houses that were built like, like 100 years ago, or just like more Victorian houses, or even houses that were built in the 60s, or it's like, I always think that maybe those are a bit more because the way the condos are built with the glass, and like the way the construction takes, like two to three years, and it's actually it really leads to gentrification, and all these other things. But definitely, I can see that as well, and also just the more like sprawl into other smaller areas, places like Georgina, Ontario, or like Parry Sound, or like, I guess these other places that have more, they're just more like nature protected, but they're, now they're facing a lot more like moving out, a lot of people do want to live more like that type of area. Not much is urban, because urban can be pretty hectic, for a lot of people to live in definitely. I definitely want to live like more somewhere in BC myself, but I can see how that definitely happens. So I guess that's one of the impacts of urban sprawl in general, on climate change to green belt.

Miranda Baksh 16:18

in order to sprawl, you have to get rid of land. And that's unfortunate. And if it's forested land, we think about biodiversity loss. If it's farmland, we can think about reduced food security, as I mentioned. Next, we can think about the nature of base value that land provides us such as lack of flooding, maintaining our weather, and providing habitat for wildlife, all of those things are gone when you pave it over and when urban sprawl happens. So it really is so closely linked to the threats that there have been on that the Greenbelt faces.

Atreyu Lewis 16:56

Mm hmm. Absolutely. I think for like, the Greenbelt, there's a lot of, there's just, there's just a lot of like urban sprawl that's happening. And I think expansion, in my opinion, is like a really great way to solve it, a really great way to like, really lay down the law, like, Okay, this is where you can live. But you can't go into these specific areas too much, because it really does have a lot of Greenbelt land. One thing that concerns me the most is the Niagara Escarpment. There's so much tourism and Niagara Falls, there's so many people who are moving to St. Catharines, from moving down there who want to, like get involved with the wineries and they want to, they want to do those tourist stuff, but it really is a big part of the Greenbelt. And the Oak Ridges Moraine, like that kind of goes more horizontal past Toronto, like kind of more of the Eastern GTA that there's a lot of movement there, too, a lot of urban settlement, which I think is a bit problematic as well. But I guess throughout the series, like I just briefly mentioned, the white belt regions are really, they're very important to the Greenbelt, a lot of people don't know about them. So from what we explained, white belt is very, it's where, yeah, there's a gap between the cities or boundaries, of how they appear. Can you maybe give a brief like, why they are important and like to conserve, from what we've just briefly talked about?

Miranda Baksh 18:18

Definitely, yeah. And I think I would be considered to be living in the White belt I'm pretty sure. So yeah, they're just really important to understand that, hey, there, this is land that has potentially already been developed, right. But there are reasons why we should not develop it further and why it should be really mindful as to why preserving the limited green space that is left is so important for the communities that are there. Not just for the community standpoint, but also for the environment and larger climate context of course. Yeah and I think, you know, there's something else that you touched upon where you talked about the reason it's so important to protect it. And while I agree, and I think it's great that the Greenbelt tells developers, hey, you can't build here, I think now with what we're seeing, we need protection on the protections. So by that, I mean, I think we need policies in place to actually make sure that the government follows certain policies that are in place. Because clearly, it isn't enough just to tell developers, hey, you can't develop here because of things like MZO's can be put out where it's like, hey, no longer do we need to consult with the public on whether this is a good idea or not, or hey, we can bypass these policies and all of the steps we would have to take typically, you know, it kind of puts into question, well, how powerful is the greenbelt then? So I think that we even need stronger policies to protect what we're trying to protect, if that makes sense.

Atreyu Lewis 19:45

I totally agree with that. I think the Greenbelt like definitely does protect a lot from urban sprawl. It's also the benefits of just taking care of it like even on an individual level. Like appreciating the sites you go to really understanding the biodiversity, the ecosystems in specific and then the Greenbelt just provides a lot of safeguarding for vital resources like clean air water, reducing flood risks. And just like a general providing a green space, I think green spaces have been a huge part of the pandemic, as well. Everyone, like it was safest to go outside and to get touch with that and that's something we've also talked about in this series, how the pandemic has impacted our understanding of nature. And it's been like a real grounding tool for some people to just like, go for walks, or go for hikes, wherever they are, even if they're in an urban space, they can go to a park. And it's just like, it really makes a difference. Like, I've learned a lot more about like, air like quality and water quality and like different than I learned like way before, like the pandemic, I've definitely have a bit more knowledge in those areas. For sure. It's definitely like there's a lot of risks with not conserving it. But there are definitely ways to get involved in protection. Even, i'm not specifically in climate science i'm more like climate justice. But definitely as someone like with your experience, maybe how could people like possibly get involved in taking care of the Greenbelt?

Miranda Baksh 21:09

Yeah, I love that question. And I love what you said, like the Greenbelt is truly a magical place. I think that it's so easy to look at a map and see this two dimensional, you know, where is it located. But I really recommend that people get out there and hike the trails, go into the Greenbelt, really go under that forest canopy and look at what you're surrounded by. It's so beautiful. And I'm so grateful to have had an opportunity with Credit Valley conservation where, for my job, I was able to hike the trails, at a park, for example, called Silver Creek Conservation Area. And I was able to hike it for hours on end, day after day. And it isn't until you're in a forest every single day that you notice these incredible species.

And the smallest little changes from you know, I guess in the fall time where all of these mushrooms would appear, you'd see some that are bright neon orange. And then the next day, there's a whole bunch of bright blue ones. And then there would be a little newt or salamander swimming in the water, just so many species that you really would think wow, like this is not Ontario. It's just such a gorgeous place. And so just from that perspective, I think it's so important to protect it. Because ultimately, once it's paved over, that's it. Right? It takes so many years for that to ever return. I would even argue that it can't return in our lifetime. It's just taken so many years of evolution for that to happen. And it's just a really incredible thing that once it's gone, it's truly irreplaceable. So just thinking about it as the land it is and respecting the land the way it is. And all of the things that the land has transformed and gone through is just in itself, something extremely valuable that I think that we shouldn't take for granted. From another standpoint, aside from getting connected to the land and advocating for it, you can always reach out to your city councilors, which is something that we do at the CCC. We've tried to talk to our counselors about it specific to that 413 delegate at your city council. It's free. So if you just Google what is your council getting together to talk about issues, see if the 413 is on the agenda? And if not see if there's a Greenbelt issue or another environmental issue. And it's free to participate. You know, you just present your case as to why you think that a certain law or policy or discussion should be passed or not passed and share why. I think people just need to show up. And even if you say something for one minute, that's fine. Just show up your presence, especially if you're a youth listening to this, your voice matters so so much in those rooms. Next, I would say signing petitions. So of course, Environmental Defense, Grow the Greenbelt, Ontario nature, so many other organizations have petitions where you can sign to protect the Greenbelt, or to oppose the 413. So that's another form of advocacy that you can take. But first and foremost, I would definitely recommend hiking the land just getting out there.

Atreyu Lewis 24:04

For sure. Definitely, as someone who's more like, who doesn't really go to the Greenbelt much anymore, I am more in Montreal now. Definitely. When I was back in Toronto, I'm so like, always like I need to get to the Don Valley river. I need to get to those like different trails because definitely for me, days when I can't go to a gym where it's like really hard to do that type of exercise. Even just walking, really walking and hiking. Things I've wanted to do a lot more like I love Mont Royal here, but that mountain is crazy. Like it is so hard to like hike up in that one day. Where I find that a lot of other Greenbelt trails, they're way easier to hike to access. And also like there's a lot of urban river valleys within the Greenbelt. It provides many services including like protecting freshwater flooding, it can cool the air even up to like 11 degrees Celsius during heat waves like I found it in my research to Foundation, the park people, conservation authorities, they really encourage citizens to protect urban river valleys by participating in River Valley stewardship work like volunteer positions at different justice organizations, climate science organizations, like shoreline restoration planning, planting native plants, removing invasive species, creating pollinator gardens, those are some of the bigger ones. But definitely just getting involved, like you said, just really understanding it and like looking around and like being a part of that process. And just like walking through those trails can make the biggest difference. And yeah, like definitely contacting your local MPs, like your counselors, so vital to really asserting your own voice. But also, I've found that being nonpartisan is a huge thing. Really like understanding what nonpartisan information is, this can come from, like any climate science organization, climate justice organization, suit actually provides a lot of nonpartisan information. When the election happened, we had a

huge list of like what each party was presenting and like a nonpartisan format. And that was a really great way for me personally, when I voted for the first time to really understand and to vote, just nonpartisan. And so understand that the climate crisis is a nonpartisan issue. And climate change is a nonpartisan topic. It's something that has to be you have to include climate science, as well as like different plans to combat against climate change

Miranda Baksh 26:21

You just really brought a thought to my mind of the 413. It's just so devastating. You're right, that it's become a politicized issue, because it sounds like a no brainer. Should we protect the Greenbelt? Yes. Should we follow the law that protects these places? Yes. It just makes sense from a climate standpoint, and even just a value standpoint, but unfortunately, it's become so politicized. And I think a lot of parties have actually put it on their platform for this upcoming election. So it's really interesting. But yes, if you aren't, if you're a little more shy, and you don't really want to go out to speak to city councilors, and that kind of thing, something else you can do is actually order a lawn sign that says stop the 413 on it. I don't know if you've seen any in Toronto, but they're definitely around an order for free on environmental defense's website and just put it on your lawn. It just really helps to advocate in a nonverbal way.

Atreyu Lewis 27:12

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Yeah, I'm not from Toronto anymore. I've gone there pretty frequently. But I've seen signs like that in Montreal too for other elections or things that are happening. Yeah. So I guess just to finish off, I have one last question to ask. So as someone who is like really involved in climate justice, land stewardship, specifically, I've been doing a lot of research and like conversations with indigenous land stewards. There are also a lot of people who are BIPOC, or who are non Indigenous who understand land conservation stewardship. So I guess from your experience with like climate councils, and like, other amazing work, where should someone go, if they want to learn about land stewardship work?

Miranda Baksh 27:51

I would recommend the conservation authorities. And that's again, because that's where my background is coming from, really, as someone in conservation, and I just think that they always have the most interesting workshops and tree planting opportunities, restoration projects, you could pull out invasives, maintain trails, you can be even a part of the youth councils there. So like Credit Valley, and TRCA have their own youth councils that you could be a part of. And yeah, there's just so many opportunities, they're always looking for volunteers, so definitely look them up, or whatever watershed or Conservation Authority, you're a part of look into it. I'm sure that they'll have opportunities, also within your municipality. So for me, it would be the Region of Peel. Or when I think about the city, I think about the City of Brampton, they often have stewardship opportunities where you can get out and get involved. in Brampton. Specifically, there's something called PAL, People Against littering. If you're interested in picking up litter locally to help the biodiversity and habitat of these spaces, you can always help them and pick up some litter that's always fun, or Bike Brampton is another organization where you can bike around the city, and just make sure

that it's sustainable. And while you're around there, you'll get to know the local trails. So there are tons of groups, I could just keep on listing them. But just to start off, in particular to restoration, that's where I would start for sure,

Atreyu Lewis 29:17

For sure, definitely just like really understanding like climate change and like the climate science behind it, as well as really like getting into more of that volunteer work with just like those different organizations who have it information available for people who are in environmental studies, or even not. I'm someone who's in History and Indigenous Studies. And I was surprisingly, you made me think of when you talked about like litter picking up and stuff. I used to do that as a kid I remember I would do that like for my elementary school. And I remember like doing signs about, like, save the polar bears and stuff. Even though like back then like even 10 years ago, there wasn't a lot of collective mobilization, like at different levels. I think for like regional grassroots, grassroots stuff was really hard to access back then. But now I think with social media, it's really a lot easier to get into grassroots stuff and to really understand environmental like, not politicize, like politicize environmental issues. But yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. Is there anything else you want to add or say before we end off?

Miranda Baksh 30:18

Many spaces in our backyard are valuable, not just for ourselves but for climate and for future generations. But as you mentioned for mental wellness and especially through the pandemic we've been through, just recommend people to get outside and connect with nature. It's a lot more magical than you may think and even the most mundane species around us have incredible historical value and hold so much knowledge and yeah, just sort of recommend for people to get outside and advocate for the land.

Atreyu Lewis 30:46

Thank you Miranda for taking the time to share your insightful perspectives with us. This episode has shown just how crucial the Greenbelt is in the fight against Climate Change. 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 website or Instagram, 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 . O R G and find us under the same name on Instagram. To learn more about the Greenbelt, visit the Greenbelt Foundation online.