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Two voices in the wilderness

Greens, paper industry put aside differences to protect huge tract of Nova Scotia forest

By JODI DELONG

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Fish River, which meanders between lakes in eastern Nova Scotia, lies within the new wilderness area. (IRWIN BARRETT)

THE GOOD NEWS announcement may have slipped by almost unnoticed in the press frenzy surrounding the first throne speech from Nova Scotia's new government. After more than a decade of negotiations, compromises, and some unique give-and-take, the province designated the Ship Harbour Long Lake Wilderness Area, a 15,000-hectare wilderness between the communities of Ship Harbour and Musquodoboit Harbour on the province's Eastern Shore.

The site, which is within the borders of Halifax Regional Municipality, is "one of the last best places left in Nova Scotia," in the words of the Ecology Action Centre's wilderness co-ordinator, Raymond Flourde.

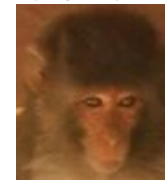
The newly designated wilderness area is rich in ecological diversity. There are more than 50 lakes, numerous streams and other waterways, marshes, old forest areas and regenerated sections of typical Acadian Forest plants. Fourteen at-risk species of plants and animals are found in the wilderness, with the most well-known being the mainland moose.

With the announcement of this new wilderness site, Nova Scotia has 8.7 per cent of its land under some sort of protected status. The NDP government of Premier Darrell Dexter affirmed in its throne speech that it intends to increase that figure to at least 12 per cent by 2015, building on a promise made by the former PC government under Rodney MacDonald. Ship Harbour Long Lake is the largest protected area

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Autumn settles in on Moose Cove Lake. (irwin barrett)



Kermit deGooyer of the Ecology Action Centre, left, and Jack Kyte of Neenah Paper worked closely together on the Ship Harbour Long Lake wilderness area. (RAYMOND PLOURDE)



Canoes await paddlers on the shore of Moose Cove Lake. (IRWIN BARRETT)

to be designated since the original 31 wilderness spaces were declared in 1998.

Two other wilderness areas are very near Ship Harbour Long Lake. To the west is White Lake, 4,540 hectares of interconnected lakes and coniferous forests. To the east is Tangier Grand Lake, a sprawling 16,000-hectare expanse with limited road access.

Together, the three protected areas form a wilderness corridor the size of Kejimikujik National Park that links backcountry lakes to the ocean.

Why was it important to protect this area? Most wilderness areas in HRM are fragmented by settlement, logging and other development, and Ship Harbour Long Lake was the largest entire piece of wilderness left.

Kermit deGooyer is a wilderness campaigner who in Plourde's estimate was responsible for galvanizing action to preserve the wilderness.

DeGooyer acknowledges that he has been committed to protecting the space for years. "Look at a satellite map of Nova Scotia and the areas that haven't been clearcut really stand out because they're diminishing in number," he says. "The area is breathtaking in how expansive and wild it is. You get the feeling, when you're out there, of being in genuine wilderness where few have ever been. It had to be protected."

The road to protecting Ship Harbour Long Lake was long and at times quite bumpy. Efforts to have the area established as a candidate for protection began in 1998, and have endured numerous changes in government, ministers and civil servants, to say nothing of changes in the forest industry players, since that time.

But the story of protecting the area is remarkable in that diverse interests — environmentalists and forest industry representatives — were able to work together and negotiate an agreement in principle, which they then brought to government.

Kim Thompson is a founding member of Eastern Shore Forest Watch, a non-profit organization established in 1998 to facilitate protection of Ship Harbour Long Lake.

Thompson co-chairs the association with Barb Markovitz, and says, "Sustaining interest and momentum over 11 years has been a tough job. Ours is a volunteer organization and we didn't have the funds to widely educate ourselves and the public about the importance of conserving these lands for the future."

Despite such challenges, momentum grew as people came to recognize the value of saving Ship Harbour Long Lake. Support for designating the area came in from many different groups, including students at Eastern Shore District High School who engaged in a campaign. "They wrote letters, phoned their MLAs and the ministers involved in the process, and really helped keep the project on the radar," says Thompson.

"It was hard slogging back in the beginning," agrees deGooyer.

"Eastern Shore Forest Watch and the EAC conceived the idea of protecting the area, but the government of the day was not receptive, even though this was just after the Wilderness Act had been passed and the first 31 areas had been designated."

Roughly two-thirds of the now-protected area was held in a lease by Neenah Paper, formerly Kimberly Clark, which owned the Abercrombie Point kraft pulp mill in Pictou County. (Northern Pulp Nova Scotia Corporation acquired the mill in 2008.)

In the face of strong opposition from environmental groups and other parties, Neenah backed down on intentions to cut the woodlands for a few years, until demand for wood reached a point where the company felt it essential to harvest some of their holdings.

Something changed when the players — including Neenah Paper, the EAC, Forest Watch, and Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society — decided they could find common ground and negotiate an agreement that would satisfy all interests.

"Decisions to set land aside are a challenge when a company requires raw materials as a business," says Jack Kyte, who worked in communications for Neenah until he retired in 2008. "The company recognized (Ship Harbour Long Lake's) worth, but how to remove that land from use and not lose jobs and revenue?" Kyte adds, "Everyone at the negotiation table recognized everyone else's needs and wanted to work together. Stakeholders on the other side of the table tried to find land that Neenah could use. It was an extraordinary process."

After many meetings and discussions, the various parties came to an agreement in 2007. Neenah would harvest timber in some marginal stands prior to designation, and would leave the rest untouched in exchange for an equivalent level of usable fibre in other lands.

The MacDonald government was surprised by the co-operation between the various players, but also was pleased at the agreement, says Plourde.

"A few boundaries were changed to accommodate some mining interests," says Plourde, "and the area actually gained about 500 acres in the process."

There were still consultations and public meetings to be held, but the area was officially designated on Sept. 15.

Wilderness protection doesn't preclude use by Nova Scotians.

"People are welcome to hike, canoe, camp, hunt and fish," says deGooyer. "The idea isn't to keep people out but to prevent clearcutting and other damaging practices."

Without wilderness protection the area would be pocked by clearcuts. Several roads going through the area have been excluded from protection, because they are used by cottagers and other recreational users in accessing their lands and trails beyond the wilderness area.

What's next on the docket for protected spaces in Nova Scotia?

Plourde, deGooyer and others in the coalition are keen to see two more areas designated as soon as possible. The Five Bridges Lake is an area on the Chebucto peninsula that includes both unprotected Crown lands and lands owned by HRM. In Cumberland County, a proposed Chignecto wilderness area borders part of Chignecto Bay and also encompasses the Chignecto game sanctuary.

Plourde hopes subsequent negotiations between diverse interests will be as successful as the talks that ultimately led to successful designation for Ship Harbour Long Lake.

"The way all parties co-operated to reach a common agreement points the way for others to follow," he says.

"The right balance can be struck between competing interests to protect the best of what is left. Where there's a will, there's a way."

Freelancer Jodi DeLong writes a weekly gardening column in The Sunday Herald. An event celebrating the wilderness area's establishment will be held at 11 a.m. on Oct. 19 at Alderney Landing theatre.



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