

## **Keeping coast clear - Plan needed to protect habitats, regulate development**

“Welcome to Nova Scotia, Canada’s Seacoast” proclaims Tourism Nova Scotia’s official website. And visitors do feel welcome here; they come from around the world to enjoy beaches, tides, scenic hikes, and ocean based-activities such as birding, sea kayaking and whale watching. A large part of the appeal to visitors is that our coastal communities still have working wharves, and fishing boats, and people not only living by the ocean, but from the ocean. Yet Nova Scotia is facing a coastal conservation and public access crisis that may turn us into a coastal province with no coastal habitat.

The coast is not just another pretty place. The coastal zone is the highly productive transition zone between the land and the sea. Estuaries, tidal rivers, wetlands, mudflats, beaches, and rocky headlands all provide habitat and food to piping plovers, willets, herons, Atlantic salmon, American eels, mummichogs, deer, bats and many more marine and terrestrial species. They also provide valuable ecological functions such as protection against pollution, storm surges, and coastal erosion.

The coastal zone has been good to Nova Scotians, and when visitors tell us how lucky we are to live here, we smile inwardly and rejoice in our good fortune in enjoying access to the many undisturbed coastal areas that are the legacy of this province. Many of us have a favourite beach or other special spot which we visit regularly.

But the growing popularity of the coast is now severely threatening the ecological integrity of our coastal habitats and the sustainability of our coastal communities. Nova Scotia is experiencing a wave of coastal development in the form of coastal sprawl (unregulated residential and commercial development), road construction, and new coastal industries such as aquaculture, quarries and oil and gas activities.

Private ownership of coastal lands is not new. Most coastal lands in Nova Scotia have been privately owned for a very long time. The difference is that in the past most coastal lands were left undisturbed. Local residents were ensured easy access to beaches and harbours for their livelihoods and recreation. This connection is being eroded as large swaths of Nova Scotia’s coasts are being subdivided and sold to new owners who build their homes on sensitive coastal habitat and often do not respect traditional coastal access and activities.

The reason for this phenomenon is that undeveloped coastal lands here are relatively cheap compared with many places in North America and Europe. As well, the pace of coastal development in Nova Scotia is further intensified by the lack of any provincial legislative or policy framework regulating coastal development. In this regard, Nova Scotia is falling behind neighbouring provinces. Both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have coastal protection policies based on identifying important and sensitive coastal habitats and establishing regulations governing the kinds of activities that can occur on or near these habitats.

Ironically, though we are citizens of a coastal province, Nova Scotia residents have very little opportunity to participate in public discussions about the fate of our coastal areas. Most of the intense coastal development is being rushed through with little or no public consultation. For example, the provincial Department of Natural Resources is considering a zoning plan for Kingsburg Beach in Lunenburg County that would allow development to occur in the designated beach area. Kingsburg Beach is one of

93 protected beaches in Nova Scotia and many residents fear that allowing development on one protected beach will open the door for development on protected beaches around the province. To date, there has been no broad public involvement in the development of this plan.

Concerned and alarmed by what is happening in their communities, many Nova Scotians are starting to talk with one another about coastal development. A grassroots movement of concerned community groups is taking shape around the province as citizen groups demand a real voice in what happens in their communities and along the coast.

Protecting our coast will require specific policy initiatives such as strengthening the provisions of the Beaches and Environment Acts, and improving the land use planning capacities at the municipal level. It will also require a commitment from the Nova Scotia government to develop a provincial coastal protection policy and accompanying legislation and regulations. Most importantly, controlling unregulated coastal development requires the provincial government to engage the public in meaningful discussion about what we want our coast and coastal communities to look like.

Given that less than 5% of coastal land in Nova Scotia is publicly owned, it is vitally important that steps be taken to protect sensitive and important coastal habitats, regulate development, and ensure access. If we do not act soon to protect our own coastline, Nova Scotians will be forced to travel to Labrador or New Zealand to gaze admiringly at undisturbed beaches and dip their toes in the ocean, turning wistfully to the friendly local residents and saying, "Nice view you got here; must be nice to live in a place like this."

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