

A few things Nova Scotia can do right now for the coast

By Jennifer Graham

Given half a chance, I'd rather praise and encourage than cast the first stone. However, my recent field trips to some of Nova Scotia's coasts have left me increasingly alarmed by the threats facing our coasts, and impatient at the pace at which they are being addressed.

Our shorelines are littered with the legacy of ill-thought out development. On my travels I saw boulder barriers across beaches to protect summer cottage access roads from the inevitable damage from winter storms. Over time, beaches separated from their sediment sources by shoreline protection infrastructure are washed out and cannot rebuild themselves. I also noticed accelerated erosion, sedimentation and shoreline slumping caused by clear cutting and building right down to the waters edge.

Recognizing that there is ultimately no substitute for comprehensive coastal planning, here are three things that government can do right now that will lead to immediate and tangible gains in coastal protection.

Protect more beaches. Nova Scotia's Beaches Act is intended to conserve and protect the province's beaches. The appeal of living next to a beach is irresistible to many, and Nova Scotia's remaining beaches are especially vulnerable to development.. We can use the Beaches Act to protect ecologically significant beach systems and adjacent sand dunes, salt marshes, and coastal waters. The last time a beach was added to the protected beach network was in 1993, so creating new protected beaches is long overdue. There are many ideal candidates, such as pristine Back Beach on Port Mouton Island in Queens County.

Coordinate implementation of existing legislation. The coast is where federal government jurisdiction over coastal waters intersects with provincial and municipal responsibilities on shore. Yet instead of a surplus of protection for the coasts, there are often astonishing gaps. Frequently each responsible level of government emphasizes how little they can do to prevent unwise development because of inconsistent application by other departments.. "We have to issue this permit" claims one agency "because that other department already granted such and such a permit."

Instead of passing around the blame, the responsible agencies should be focusing on what they can do immediately. For example, identifying sensitive coastal habitats, flood plains, and other low-lying areas in each municipality and collaborating to ensure that development is not allowed to proceed in these locations will ultimately save government and property owners' money. Halifax Regional Municipality and the Municipality of the Region of Queens are starting to do this – but they can't do it alone – coordination with, and active support from, responsible provincial and federal departments is urgently needed.

Support community efforts to protect the coast. Most Nova Scotians hold the coast close to their hearts. My travels around the province reveal numerous local efforts to bring about change. A great example is the St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship

Association who with support from Department of Natural Resources has raised nearly enough to purchase Micou's Island in St. Margaret's Bay. They've almost reached their goal and they also need funds and a commitment from government to help them manage this pristine gem over the long term as a public park. This project, like other community efforts to protect the coast is a gift to all Nova Scotia.

Let's support community efforts from which we will all benefit. After all, the cost of bad coastal development is not just borne by individual landowners, municipalities or the province. We are all paying for escalating maintenance and repair costs when private properties and public infrastructure are damaged. The World Bank estimates that worldwide losses from climate change and extreme weather events has skyrocketed from US \$71 Billion in the 1960s to US \$608.5 Billion in the 1990s. In 2003, Hurricane Juan cost over \$100 million in environmental and material damages in HRM alone.

We are also all paying for the loss of essential ecological services that undisturbed coastal systems provide. Services such as flood and erosion control, pollution filtration, and protection against storms. Living in a province that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change considers "extremely vulnerable" to the impacts of climate change including accelerated sea level rise and coastal erosion, we simply can't afford not to protect our coasts.

Clearly, the best long term solution is an overarching framework to guide development along the entire coast. Many other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia or Prince Edward Island have a Coastal Zone Management Policy. Nova Scotia is the hold-out province without one. This won't happen over night, but ultimately as most other jurisdictions have done, Nova Scotia will move in that direction. In the meantime, the three steps outlined above will slow the onslaught of unwise coastal development, and ensure we still have a coast left to enjoy.

Jennifer Graham is the Coastal Coordinator at the Ecology Action Centre. She enjoys traveling to see Nova Scotia's coasts in all their glory at all times of year.