

Taking a stand for the coast

By Jennifer Graham

A SUMMER evening, two friends, a digital camera, a car, muggy in Halifax and sure to be cooler along the coast ... ah, the coast. Aren't we all drawn to the sea either to cool off or by a more primal desire to return to natal waters? It wasn't purely a summer cruise – we set out on our shoreline tour deliberately looking for examples of the kinds of thoughtless coastal developments that are springing up all over the province.

We didn't have to look very far. Our little jaunt around St. Margaret's Bay revealed: innumerable infilled wetlands, shameless shoreline structures, eroding bouldered beaches, humongous waterfront homes with huge ecological footprints, coastal blasting, frighteningly fragmented habitats, stinky sewage outflows, private roads that were once public, really pricey real estate, numerous no-trespassing signs ...

Our summer spirits were dampened by what we saw. So many of these new developments are being built with no consideration of their cumulative impacts on our coastal lands and waters. Has anyone (apart from the ever-vigilant St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association and other local environmental groups and citizens) considered the carrying capacity of their stretch of coast and how coastal areas can cope with disruption on natural ecosystem processes and functions?

Rampant and unplanned coastal development is not only a grave ecological risk, but also has serious economic consequences. Many coastal properties are at risk from accelerated coastal erosion, storm surges and flooding. In many parts of North America, insurance companies are starting to recognize just how vulnerable these properties are by hiking insurance premiums for coastal properties or refusing to insure them altogether.

The message about the increasing risks of coastal living does not seem to be sinking in in Nova Scotia. Whenever we go anywhere, my friends are getting accustomed to me exclaiming, "Oh my God! Did they really build that close to the ocean? What are they thinking? That place will be wiped out with the next hurricane. Who let them do that?"

Who indeed?

The coastal devastation happening around Nova Scotia is only a symptom of an alarming lack of leadership around coastal issues. This is reflected in the absence of any kind of overarching coastal policy to guide development and land use in our coastal areas. A lack of provincial direction does not absolve other levels of government or businesses and individuals. In Nova Scotia, all land-use planning is a municipal responsibility and less than 50 per cent of municipalities have any kind of planning strategy, let alone one that prevents development in vulnerable coastal areas.

And lest you think that coastal planning is anti-development, the strongest examples of good coastal planning and restrictive zoning come from the United States, a

bastion of individual freedoms. In New England, citizens can and do get much more involved in determining what their coasts will look like.

A lack of coastal planning at all levels is compounded by weak implementation of existing laws and a lack of leaders willing to stand up for the coast. In a recent glaring example, the Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour issued a permit to build a road through a large coastal wetland in Queens County to create road access for a housing lot. How can our province have a policy that recognizes wetlands as critical ecosystems and yet have the guardians of that policy permit construction on low-lying, regularly flooded, ecologically sensitive lands located a stone's throw from the sea? This is indeed the poster child for inappropriate coastal development.

A little further down the coast, a federal-provincial panel is reviewing the potential impacts of a quarry on the coastline and the surrounding community. The proposed White Point quarry is yet another example of large-scale coastal development being considered without the benefit of an overall framework or plan. Will allowing one company to carve out chunks of Nova Scotia coastline for export to the U.S. set a precedent for further coastal mining? Do these companies pick Nova Scotia only because of our high-quality rocks or because of the notable lack of coastal regulations?

Regardless of what the review panel recommends, there is an opportunity for the province to show leadership in halting this quarry. We need a provincial coastal policy framework similar to that of other jurisdictions. We also need better municipal land-use planning. Mostly, right now, we need leadership willing to step up and make these things happen. In doing so, we will be acting as good stewards of Canada's Ocean Playground and ensuring that those who can't afford coastal property will be able to go to the beach, the salt marsh or offshore island. Who will stand up for the coast?

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