

# Protecting the Coasts: A Call for a Provincial Strategy

By Jennifer Graham



*Too close to the edge. A desire to live by the ocean leads to new housing development that are vulnerable to storm damage and climate change impacts. Photo: Jonathan Graham*

## Fighting for the coast

“There’s something wrong when you have to fight like this just to keep your friggin’ harbour.” These poignant words by fisherman Eugene Broome adorn the front of a postcard prepared by the Friends of Port Mouton Bay as part of their campaign against a 70 hectare salmon fish farm in Port Mouton Bay. Their struggle illustrates the tremendous need for Nova Scotia to develop and implement a provincial coastal strategy as a framework for decision making in coastal areas, such as Port Mouton Bay.

The recently proclaimed provincial Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act states that the health of the economy, the environment, and the health of the people of the province are interconnected. Why then does the government seemingly ignore citizens groups resisting environmentally destructive, unsustainable, and ultimately economically unviable projects in coastal areas?

Groups like the Friends of Port Mouton Bay embody the stated intent of the Sustainable Prosperity Act by fighting to protect the sensitive coastal and marine

environment that is the basis for the area’s economy. This is just one of the few coastal issues making headlines in Nova Scotia, and these local heroes but one example of how much people care about the coast.

## Loving the coasts

Our coasts inspire a range of feelings and perspectives. Some of us highlight the importance of coastal infrastructure such as wharves and shipping facilities to the province’s economy. Others marvel at the astounding biological productivity and the ecological services provided by coastal wetlands, barrier beaches, headlands, intertidal flats and coastal barrens. Few can deny the allure and mystique of undeveloped, wild coastlines. Some point out the rising value of coastal real estate and tourism to Nova Scotia’s economy; and still others sound the alarm that the most endangered species in the country are coastal dwellers.

Each of these perspectives is true. Nova Scotia’s coasts are our greatest asset. Yet like any undervalued and under-protected treasure, it is at risk of disappearing from right under our noses.

## Understanding the current reality

Nova Scotia is one of the few jurisdictions in North America without an overarching coastal management strategy. Consequently, there is no provincial policy or legislation that protects coastal areas from unwise development or that regulates the type of activities that can take place in

## Recommended Nova Scotia Coastal Strategy 101

- Coastal mapping: Detailed, up-to-date and easily accessible coastal maps that identify sensitive and/or significant coastal features are the basis for sound coastal management. Decision makers need information make informed choices about the wisdom of certain projects. Coastal mapping also includes coastal waters and aquatic assets
- Stepping back: Setbacks are essentially “no build zones” a certain distance from the water’s edge. Setbacks are important because ocean coasts shift over time due to natural processes like erosion and ac-

cretion. Setbacks give the coast room to move. They also protect developments from the impact of the sea, including storm surges and floods. A wide setback, especially when it includes a vegetated buffer zone, also protects coastal waters from the impacts of development including runoff from lawns and roads, and chemical or organic contamination. Many scientists agree that the width of coastal setbacks should depend on the type of coastlines and the annual rate of erosion.

- Public access: Nova Scotians and visitors alike feel a deep connection with the

ocean. Current patterns of intensifying coastal development frequently block access to traditional coastal access points. This has implication for local recreation and livelihood activities, as well as the tourism industry. Yet indiscriminate public access to the coast can have negative impacts on wildlife and their habitat. Dunes for example are prone to erosion and blowouts after being repeatedly trampled by beach goers. Appropriate public access to the coast is key. There are times of year when some species need peace and quiet to successfully reproduce.

<b>THE COASTAL POLICY MAZE</b>	
<b>Government Department</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<b>Federal</b> Department of Fisheries and Oceans  Environment Canada  Environmental Assessments Transport Canada	Integrated coastal management Water (from low water mark) Fish passage and habitat National Parks and Historic Sites Species at risk (migratory birds and marine species) Wildlife and their habitat Federal wetlands Fresh water resources and their management  Navigable waters
<b>Provincial</b> Dept. of Natural Resources  Dept. of Environment and Labour  Dept. of Agriculture and Fisheries  Tourism, Culture and Heritage Service NS and Municipal Relations  Dept. of Energy Transportation and Public Works Dept. of Education	Provincial parks and Protected beaches Shoreline alterations and infrastructure Species at risk (flora, fauna, nesting sites) Water, watersheds, and wastewater Wilderness protected areas Freshwater and coastal wetlands Off highway vehicle operations (ATV's) Inland fisheries and waters Aquaculture Fish habitat Marshland conservation Promotes coastal tourism products Manages coastal tourism assets Regulation of land use Implementing Municipal Government Act Climate change Tidal power and wind energy Public infrastructure Special Places
<b>Municipal</b> Individual Municipalities	Land use planning

coastal areas. As a result, the coasts are literally falling between the cracks.

Currently, all three levels of government - federal, provincial, and municipal - have some responsibility for an aspect of coastal management. There are a maze of regulations and policies that impact the coast, which are outlined in the accompanying table. Yet every analysis of Nova Scotia's coastal policy shows the need for a comprehensive coastal policy framework. The publications page of the Coastal Coalition of Nova Scotia website <http://ccns.chebucto.org/index.htm> features many reports and backgrounders on coastal issues in Nova Scotia.

**Suffering the consequences**

Poorly regulated and largely unplanned development has resulted in the loss of coastal biodiversity and ecologically significant habitats, a sharp decline in coastal water quality as evidenced by growing number of beach closures and areas closed to shellfish harvesting, and a reduction in the overall stability and resiliency of the coast in certain parts of the province. It has also led to construction of homes, roads and other infrastructure that are extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change such as sea level rise, increased flooding, accelerated erosion and storm surges.

**The way forward**

To prevent further destruction and mitigate the consequence of poor planning, the province needs to stand up and deliver a provincial coastal strategy that includes a package of measures to guide decision making on the coast.

Presently, much of the leadership on coastal issues in Nova Scotia is coming from the grassroots. They are sounding the alarm about unwise coastal development, researching issues and alternatives, and dedicating thousands of hours and oodles of money into protecting coastal areas. They do this in the vacuum caused by absence of a coherent coastal policy framework. When, as it inevitably must, Nova Scotia implements a coastal strategy and better municipal land use planning, local municipalities and communities must be involved in developing and implementing these plans.

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- Working Waterfronts: Nova Scotia's coast is dotted with fishing and shipping infrastructure including harbour and wharves. These are integral to the economic survival of many coastal communities. New types of coastal activities like recreational boating sometimes conflict with traditional activities. A working waterfront policy, such as the one recently adopted in Maine allows for new tourism and recreational infrastructure, while continue to prioritize access and infrastructure for traditional users.
- Water quality. The cumulative impacts of urban and agricultural run off, untreated

sewage, malfunctioning septic systems, sedimentation, and other land based pollution is having serious consequences for water quality in coastal waters. Watershed management and land use are vital to protecting coastal waters, as is the clean up and re-opening contaminated shellfish harvesting areas in Chezzecook, the Annapolis Basin and St. Margaret's Bay through provincial, municipal, community partnerships.