

Creating land trusts require compromise

Birds I View



The productive dogberry crops are attracting a variety of late winter birds like this female or immature pine grosbeak. [photo: Bill Montevercchi]

Bill Montevercchi

Our best option to help “God guard thee Newfoundland” is by setting aside some representative and unique lands, rivers, lakes, and ocean sites for perpetuity. Nothing is more sacred or lasting.

Safeguarding sites from development create special trusts between us and our land and waterways. In doing so, we reaffirm our connectedness with the earth and reap the benefits of flood protection, clean water and pollutant-free air. Protected areas help preserve the earth and ocean’s wildlife, flora and biodiversity and provide vitally important natural barometers of environmental change.

In Newfoundland and Labrador we are blessed with a magnificent expansive natural environment. We appreciate it, we use it, we wonder at, and we take it for granted. The unnecessary demolition of Sandy Pond to build a toxic waste basin at Vale smelter in Long Harbour demonstrated just how quickly we will sell off special places when convenient to do so.

It is often said that we have so much wilderness we needn’t worry about setting any of it aside. Yet it’s the converse of this misperception that should motivate us, that is - we fortunately still have the opportunity to protect some natural wonders from encroachment.

Making these societal commitments does not necessarily exclude human activity involving hunting, hiking, fishing and bird-watching. In some instances however, as on the Funk Island Ecological Reserve, visitation is not allowed owing to the sensitivity of the massive seabird populations nesting there.

Protecting an area always involves compromise. The Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act [WERA] provides potent legislation to set aside natural areas from infringement. The legislative process ensures that all stakeholders with varying interests and perspectives are given fair consideration before deciding to move ahead or not with formal protection. It's not meant to be an easy process.

Mining prospectors and developers commonly resist reserve establishment and at times forestry interests and local residents do as well. This is not unusual. The best case scenarios are those brought forward by local residents who recognize and value some special environment in their domain and want it set aside from disturbance.

Most provinces are ahead of us in the land they have reserved. Our ocean protection is appalling. Our history and culture have been nurtured by Atlantic fisheries, yet we embarrassingly continue to exploit ocean with little aim other than extracting as much fish and oil as possible.

To protect portions of the varied ecoregions of our province, the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council [WERAC] has been working with the Parks and Natural Areas division to develop a province-wide systems plan of representative protected areas. It's a major commitment that will require hard work, public consultation and compromise. It's an opportunity we must pursue. Establishing a province-wide system of ecologically representative protected areas will aid developers in selecting appropriate sites for projects, such as wind energy installations.

Creating land trusts

At times private land-owners set aside their property to create land trusts for the public good. The Bidgood family's donation for a magnificent park in the Goulds is a gift of societal philanthropy in the finest sense.

So why is so much local conflict being stirred up in communities along the Salmonier River where the Nature Conservancy of Canada is working to establish land trusts? Much of it is due to the organization's approach that overlooked consultation with local residents. Without a process of open dialogue to lay the groundwork for effective conservation action, conflict is inevitable.

Local residents have long been sustainably hunting, fishing, trapping and wood-cutting on the property in question with the owner's permission. Content with the status quo, they raised a very vocal though myopic resistance to the land trust focusing on the single matter not

permitted – tree cutting. Had discussions occurred beforehand these contentions might have been ameliorated.

The conflict will likely to be short-lived because it can be resolved constructively in everyone's best interests. Wood can be cut on adjacent sites, and local residents can continue their activities on the land and assert their ongoing roles as guardians of the river valley.

The establishment of many of our most magnificent provincial reserves, including Gros Morne National Park, the Baccalieu and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Seabird Reserves, were met with intense local resistance. Yet that is far from the situation today, owing to compromises with the concerns of local residents, these areas enjoy a level of stewardship and protection well beyond what any government regulation could ensure.

This surely can and will be so for the residents in near Salmonier River. Their efforts will give their children and grandchildren and each of us a timeless environmental gift free from the overreach of malls, condos, casinos and golf courses. And the people of the Salmonier area will carry our deep and lasting gratitude.

Grim images of eagles

Lately we have seen some grim images of eagles dead in open-sea aquaculture sites, carrying a leg hold trap and dying a slow death in a coyote snare (see <http://ntv.ca/eagle-snared-by-animal-trap-in-clarenville/>). These deaths raise concerns about the need to frequently check set traps and snares to help prevent non-target animal from injury and death. Signage about snares and traps in an area can warn hunters and hikers especially those with dogs. Warning signs are particularly important near populated area and hiking trails.

Birds in our area

Emaciated dovekies have showing up along the east and south coasts, possibly due to wind driven turbulent seas that prevented access to prey. One tiny auk was rescued from the road near Red Head Cove by Delf Marie Hohman and released in the river to make its way seaward.

The Straight Shore of Bonavista Bay is a winter hotspot for birds. In early February, Bill Bryden captured striking images of white gyrfalcon in Deadman's Bay. Dogberry crops in Lumsden have been luring bohemian and cedar waxwings, robins, and in among them a rarely sighted thrush – a fieldfare likely from Greenland or Iceland. Bruce Porter reported good-sized flocks of robins in Lewisporte.

Substantial flocks of pine grosbeaks have been seen feeding on dogberries in Lumsden [Roger Williams], Portugal Cove [Janet Montevercchi] and elsewhere.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>

Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h].

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